

Where Do I Go From Here? Part 2

Chris Hope, Master CFI

Last month we wondered what new skills we might learn to keep us challenged in flight. I offered the opinion that my first recommendation to a new pilot, looking for new challenges, was to fly a long cross country. The beauty of airplanes is that we get to look down on many different landscapes, and it doesn't take that much time to get there. And a long cross country allows us to fly into all sorts of airports that we are not accustomed to – big and small, towered and untowered, grass and paved. Find something new and go have fun.

We also talked last month about adding a Category or Class rating, or a Type rating or endorsement. This month I want to talk about qualifying for a whole new license – a commercial or instrument license. What does it take for a private pilot to move up to these ratings? What new rights do you get? And what limitations still remain? Back to our favorite bed-side book, FAR Part 61.

Let's back up a touch and review the privileges and restrictions provided by a private license versus a student license. Two big privileges came with that successful checkride. First of all, you could land at any public airport in the country without asking an instructor. New York, NY (KJFK), Chicago IL (KORD), or Tightsqueeze MO (55MO), all are open to you. Second, you can take as many passengers with you as can fit within your weight and balance limits. But there is one big restriction, of course.

You can not fly for hire. You can not ask your passengers to pay you; you cannot ask for payment for pulling banners, carrying cargo, or hauling parachutists. And for the most part, this means that whether or not you actually receive payment, if anyone is paying anyone else for your flying, you cannot do it.

There are a couple of exceptions to this rule, and they are explained in detail in Part 61.113. And, it is possible to donate flights to a non-profit organization. There are some restrictions, detailed in Part 91.146, and probably the most notable one is that "a private pilot acting as pilot in command has at least 500 hours of flight time."

So, after paying for flying for a while, many private pilots wonder what they need to do to make some money at the flying game, and the commercial rating starts to call. And what does that entail?

Basically, the commercial rating requires some experience. Although it is not stated anywhere, the demands upon a commercial pilot are such that we assume that flying has become almost second nature to the job at hand. When flying for hire, someone is paying us to do something useful involving an aircraft, not merely flying from one point to another. Whether we are carrying passengers, hauling cargo, towing gliders or spraying fields, commercial pilots are expected to be

able to accomplish the work at hand as well as fly the plane.

Looking at the knowledge requirements for a private license (FAR Part 61.105) and for a commercial license (FAR Part 61.125) there is not a lot of difference. And the list of flight proficiency items does not seem much different (FAR Part 61.107 versus Part 61.127). The big difference in the proficiency items is found in the Practical Test Standards for the commercial rating:

www.faa.gov/training_testing/testing/airmen/test_standards/pilot/media/FAA-S-8081-12B.pdf

The new items which are the most challenging (and fun) are accuracy landings, steep turns (50 - 60° bank), chandelles, lazy eights, and eights on pylons. Every thing else was tested on the private exam.

So, mostly the commercial rating is going to require another written exam (and there will not be much covered that was not covered on the private exam) and lots of flying time. How much? 250 hours, including cross country time, instrument time, and complex aircraft time.

What do you get to do when you obtain a commercial license? Well, you can finally get paid for some of your flying. But you will still have some restrictions. You can now get paid for hauling parachutists and towing banners and gliders. And you can conduct sight-seeing flights that take off and land at the same airport and do not stray more than 25 miles away.

The regulation concerning privileges and limitations (FAR 61.133) is vague. There are limitations placed upon those commercial pilots who do not hold an instrument rating. And there is a statement (para. a-1-ii) stating that you must act “in accordance with this part and the applicable parts of this chapter that apply to the operation.” This is a reference to flying passengers for hire on a non-scheduled basis, which is otherwise known as Part 135 operations. But although holding a commercial license does not permit you to fly passengers from point A to point B for hire, you will need the commercial license to become eligible to do so under Part 135.

So let's look at an instrument rating. What does this rating give you? A lot of flexibility and a lot of peace of mind. After flying VFR cross country flights for a while, you learn about the vagaries of weather forecasting. You learn to be leery when planning a cross country flight a month in advance, with a flight out on one day, and returning several days later. You learn about the worries that go along with “will I be able to do this?” You learn about flying above a cloud deck and worrying about whether or not there will be a hole in the clouds when you need to descend. And you learn about the hazards of scud running. An instrument rating, and the confidence and skills that go along with that, make a lot of those worries lessen.

The requirements for an instrument rating are detailed in FAR Part

61.65. The primary experience requirements are:

- ▶ 50 hours of cross country time
- ▶ 40 hours of actual or simulated instrument time and 15 of these hours must be with a instrument flight instructor (CFI-I)

The 40 hours includes cross country time, with specific leg lengths, of course, and there are the usual miscellaneous FAA requirements.

This rating is not only for the pilot who intends to fly in the most gruesome of weather. It is also for the pilot who recognizes the convenience of climbing above a cloud layer after takeoff, and then flying in visual flight conditions for the remainder of the flight. Or for the pilot who is flying above the summer scattered-to-broken deck and would like do descend through the clouds for a landing. Sometimes it means the difference between slogging through the summer bumpies at 2,500 feet, and flying above them at 8,000 feet.

There is a large difference, however, in the best way to obtain an instrument rating versus a commercial rating. While the commercial rating is primarily experience, and can be comfortably accomplished over an extended period of time, the instrument rating is heavily weighted toward learning new skills. And like learning the skills that were required for the private license, learning and practicing the new skills in a more condensed time period results in

better retention and a shorter overall learning time.

There is one down side to the instrument rating versus the commercial rating. There are no currency requirements for the commercial rating beyond the landings that are required for a private license. However, the FAA and all instrument-rated pilots recognize that the skills learned for instrument flying quickly erode if they are not practiced. So, the FAA, under FAR 61.57(c) requires, every six months, six instrument approaches, holding patterns, and course tracking.

So, which way should you go? Does the instrument license come next, or the commercial license? There is no perfect answer. It depends on your own reason for flying as well as the old budget thing. If you desire to make a living flying aircraft, you are going to need a commercial license. If you will fly only for your personal enjoyment, a commercial rating is fun and challenging, but not a requirement. If your budget is such that your flying is going to be spread over a longer period, a commercial rating might be preferable to an instrument rating.

On the other hand, if you intend to pursue a career in aviation, you will need an instrument rating. In fact, if you obtain a commercial rating first, it will be stamped "VFR operations only" and you will be severely restricted in your ability to fly for hire at night.

Or, as we discussed last month, maybe a more enjoyable and rewarding challenge for you is the addition of an endorsement, for a new class or category rating. Regardless of which way you turn, there are always exciting new fields to conquer in aviation. Explore and have fun.

Questions or comments on this topic or any other piloting topic? Drop me a line- thehopes-chris@kc.rr.com

*Don't just practice until you get right.
Practice until you don't get it wrong*

Chris Hope has taught fledgling and experienced pilots for nearly 40 years, mostly in the Kansas City area. Chris holds flight instructor certificates for single engine land and sea airplanes and multi-engine land planes, as well as for instrument training. He holds ground instructor certificates for advanced and instrument training. Chris is an FAA Gold Seal Instructor and a Master Certified Flight Instructor. Chris serves as a member of the FaaSTeam in the Kansas City area. Check his website: www.ChrisHopeFAAFlightInstructor.com