

## **Cross Country Planning**

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Springtime, and time to go somewhere. But all of that prep work is a pain. So is there a way to make that prep work easier? Yes! Here are the questions I ask myself as I plan a cross-country flight. And these same questions are worth asking for any flight. The answers will provide a logical step-by-step flight planning process.

1. What is my back up plan if weather, airplane or pilot issues make me reconsider the flight?
2. What do I know about the destination airport and any other airports I might visit?
3. What do I know about the route?
4. What do I know about the airplane?
5. What do I know about today's weather?
6. How do I feel today?

Well, the middle questions seem reasonable. And even the last question. But the first question?

First of all, we can perform these steps over several days, which will make the day of the flight become much more relaxed. Steps 1 through 4 can be done several days before the planned flight. And step 4 does not need to be accomplished for every flight if you are flying the same airplane and the same mission repeatedly. So, let's take them in order. And I will use an example a recent flight I planned from the

Kansas City area to St. Paul MN for a funeral.

**Backup plan** - Asking about the backup plan at the very beginning of the planning takes a lot of pressure off later. Do I just have to get there? If so, perhaps I should consider leaving a day early, or reserving an airline seat. Or maybe I can have a backup aircraft available. Thinking about the "Plan B" when working on "Plan A" keeps me from making a rash decision when things go wrong at the last minute. In my case, my backup plan was that I would cancel the flight and send my regards.

**Airport information** – Well, I know my departure airport - it's home But what do I need to know about the destination airport? And do I even know the destination airport? In my case, I assumed that I wanted to use St. Paul Downtown-Holman Field (KSTP). It was close to my final destination, it was more convenient than Minneapolis-St. Paul International (KMSN), and it had instrument approaches that were compatible with my avionics. A check of fuel availability and prices led to an OMYGOD however, so a check on Airvav.com of fuel availability at nearby airports lead to a pleasant discovery.

Just five miles south of KSTP is South St. Paul – Richard Fleming Field (KSGS). Instrument approaches – check. Suitable runway - check. MoGas at \$4.38 per gallon. – big check. Rental car –

check. Suits my mission. (And a delightful surprise when I arrived. This is the home of Wipaire, those nice folks who put floats on aircraft who went way out of their way to give my good service.)

After I determine my destination and any intermediate stops, I make a written note of all of the details - Unicom freq (untowered), approach control frequencies, runway info, terrain restrictions, field elevation. I want to make sure that all of those numbers are at my fingertips in flight so that I am not squinting at a sectional or scrolling through my I-pad at the last minute.

**Route** – Whether VFR or IFR, my procedure is the same. I draw lines on sectional charts. I may file an IFR flight plan if conditions dictate and I will have my waypoints entered into my trusty Garmin 430, but I still draw the line on the map. For me, much of the enjoyment of flying comes from matching points on the ground to points on the map.

At this point in the planning, the line on the map serves another important function. I start out with a straight line from departure to destination and then see what deviations I will need, and what other airspace and terrain considerations I have. In my case, I don't have the Great Lakes to consider, nor mountains to avoid. But I do note that my route takes me right through the middle of the Kansas City Class B airspace. Not just through the edge – right across the middle. I might as well plan on deviating to the east or west, because I know that I won't get a

clearance across the middle of Kansas City International Airport.

The rest of the route is pretty straightforward. I will skirt the western edge of the Des Moines Class C airspace, and my destination lies under the southern rings of the Minneapolis Class B airspace. Better write all of those frequencies down. And, since I am a big believer in ATC flight following services, this is a good time to jot down the frequencies for flight following.

I realize that there are other techniques for drawing the line on the chart – I-pad applications, AOPA flight planning, and a host of others. All of these are fine. What is NOT acceptable is “I'll just turn on the GPS and hit DIRECT when I get into the plane.”

At the same time that I am drawing my line on the map, I am beginning to build my flight log. Remember that form? This doesn't need to be real formal, but once I know the route, I record the distances and directions. Again, there are a number of methods of performing this task. I use DUATS.com, and at this point in the planning I select the “no-wind” option. This is the first time that I get a feel for the overall length of time that this trip will make, and a feel for whether or not I might be making a fuel stop enroute. On the day of the flight, I will use the actual winds aloft. But for now, I can get a feel for the time enroute and fuel requirements

While I am putting this plan together, I am also thinking about how to use the information when I am in the plane. One of the lessons all of us learn on our first cross-country flight is that we should have been more organized. I will fly this cross-country using primarily a Garmin IFR certified GPS. Its database contains every radio frequency I could ever use, and all of the airport information that I could ever want. But even so, I write down all of the pertinent info that I know I will want in an organized fashion. It is much easier to find the info, written in big numbers on my lap, than by scrolling through the various menus, or trying to slide my finger across the screen when the airplane is bouncing around. And this is doubly important if I am flying IFR and trying to keep the airplane right side up, travelling in the correct direction.

**Airplane** – Time to compute the takeoff distance, landing distance, climb performance, cruise performance, and weight and balance. Granted, I don't have the winds and temperature for the day of the flight, but I can get it pretty close. I agree that it is not necessary to compute all of these items for all flights when flying the same airplane over the same route with the same payload. But I will compute all of these items the first time I fly the plane and the route. And then I will recompute every time I do something different.

Different altitude? Better check the fuel burn and true airspeed. Different airport? Better check the takeoff performance with the

expected winds and density altitude. And if I come up with performance numbers that are close to the "runway available" or "fuel available" numbers, I will be checking this again on the day of the flight. Weight and balance? This is the time to decide that something or somebody is not going to fit. I don't wait until the day of the flight to figure out that something has to give.

All of the steps so far have been accomplished well in advance of the day of the flight. Nothing to do now except keep an eye on the long-range forecasts and see what the weather man might bring.

**Weather** - On the days leading up to the flight day, there are a myriad of sources of weather information, and I use them all. But on flight day, I will either call an FAA weather briefer at the Flight Service Station, or I will use DUATS.com or a similar website. I know that an FAA-sanctioned service guarantees me that I will get weather information that is geared to me as a pilot. Plus, I will get all of the Notices To Airmen that might affect my trip.

If you feel intimidated by calling an FAA briefer, here are some suggestions that might make the process a bit easier. After identifying the state of your departure to the electronic voice, realize that you are talking to a real person who just wants to help you get the info you desire. Ask questions when you don't understand, and feel free to ask the briefer to repeat anything you miss. Additionally, some pilots find it helpful to get the briefing

downloaded from one of the briefing websites, and actually follow along with the briefer. His briefing is going to be in very close to the same format as the electronic version.

And finally, “**How do I feel today?**” – Do I really feel that I am on the top of my game today? Well rested? No head colds or other aches and pains? What is my current non-flying stress level? Long day at the office? Problems with clients or kids? Fortunately, at the very beginning of the process I devised a plan for this

eventuality, as well for the possibility that the weather might be bad or that I might have aircraft problems. If I cannot make the trip, I know that the folks at the other end would rather know hear my voice, telling them that I cancelled, then reading of my demise because I “just had to get there”.

Fly Safe.

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

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