CRM FOR SINGLE-CREW IFR?
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Some months ago, myself and a pilot colleague, whom I shall call “Jim” were bound for Southend on an IFR flight from Norwich—or Norwich International as we now must say. We both exercise PPL-IR privileges and, although Jim’s IR is more recent than mine, both of us had many hours on the complex single being flown. However, this was one of the rare times we were flying together. The enroute weather was generally VFR with a thin broken deck at 1500 feet forecast for EGMC. Since I was in the right-hand seat on this leg, I handled radio.

Nearing CLN, London gave us the standard arrival via Tripo. With a light westerly wind, it would be straight in on the ILS. Seven miles out, the airport could be glimpsed through the thin, broken layer. Piece ‘o cake! Jim kept up a healthy rate of descent and, once localiser established, I switched to Tower frequency and reported 4 DME as instructed. A C-152 that had been plying the circuit was on short final as we became fully visual. He was cleared to land, and we expected to follow routinely once he vacated. But the landing Cessna bounced, pranged its nose-wheel and didn’t vacate. Because there was heavy VFR traffic, Tower told us to go around and take up the hold at 3000 over the SND. Simple, eh? … well not quite.

My colleague, Jim, hadn’t been into Southend for some years and wasn’t familiar with the procedure— which is basically a climb on runway heading, then back to the beacon for a *left-hand* hold. We went up through the cloud, returned to the SND but he turned the wrong way at the beacon. I woke up, pointed this out forcefully, and we then did some spaghetti-shaped manoeuvres to get back into the protected area. Jim continued to fly while I shared my thoughts with him. I think he had expected me, because I knew Southend well, to take the controls even though this was not an emergency. For my part, I had expected him to “fly the aeroplane” whatever the circumstances.

The hold was a mess, but eventually we were cleared for the procedural ILS, which Jim accomplished without further complications. Although I didn’t read out the pre-landing checklist, he remembered to lower the gear and the flight ended with a gentle chirp as the main wheels touched smoothly.

What, you may ask, is wrong with the above? Nothing, some would say. Other readers might feel that I should immediately have taken control, announced the same, and got on with it. What indeed was wrong? For one thing, there was no clear agreement on the division of responsibilities prior to the conduct of the flight. Neither was a briefing given on the approach plate nor was systematic use was made of checklists.

Most seriously, there were moments on the go around when neither of us was really sure about who was flying the aircraft; in effect, on who was PIC at the crucial moment! Had the weather improbably deteriorated to 250 overcast, 1000 metres and a howling crosswind above 2500 feet, the flight might have come to a sticky end.

By contract, had line pilots been flying as a two-crew operation, the division of responsibilities would have been a matter of routine. Even had the pilots never flown with each other before, an “I call this, you do hat” operation would have ensued with hardly a word spoken— well in theory at least.

In fact, the story contains a serious lesson about IR training that has absolutely nothing to do with shouting, “I have the controls”. Private GA pilots are trained for single crew ops. It is perfectly acceptable to go ‘round the houses with a CAAFU examiner without there being any verbal exchange other than the pre-flight and takeoff briefings and the ‘any ice’ mantra. The philosophy is obvious enough—a single crew operation requires the PIC to fly IFR unaided. This view contains a dual fallacy: namely, that PPL-IR holders always fly single crew ops and, secondly, that crew resource management (CRM) is irrelevant to the single pilot.

First, many PPLIRs do fly informally in two-crew situations. Take the case of Ian and Nigel down the road, co-founders of Godzilla Software, who now make buckets of money and fly all over Europe in a very classy rig. Neither has ever thought of doing a Flight Safety clinic on CRM, nor have their different IR examiners ever thought to ask since each turn up alone on the day. Their idea of a sterile flight deck in descent is to break out the Dettol.

Or consider poor old Fred who flies IFR in his ageing Cherokee, accompanied by his good wife, Gladys, a woman not known to suffer discomfort silently. It has never occurred to Fred that, prior to an instrument approach, it would be good airmanship to run through the captain’s briefing with Gladys irrespective of whether she understands a single word of it or even interrupts her barracking for 10 seconds to listen.

Finally, let me add a plug for Europe. It so happens that this cautionary tale would be thought most improbable at my home base in The Netherlands . There, the challenge-response drill is routine. Every instrument- rated pilot, regardless of whether he or she flies a 172 or a 747, is expected to work with the examiner as a team. CAAFU take heed! Your RLD colleagues may well be nudging ahead of you here. CRM *is* relevant to the initial and recurrent training of single-crew pilots. Let us hope the point will not be missed as the new JAA-style IR test and annual renewal is phased in.