

Last edition we learned about pressure and winds. This time we are talking about a different kind of pressure – pressure to make the flight.

We all know that most of the time the weather is either so poor that there is no way you will venture out in to it or the weather is good and there isn't a doubt you will fly. We are going to talk about the in between times. Those times where you are starting wonder.....

We start out as students and trust our flight instructor to make sound judgments as to when we should fly. Usually our first encounter with a go/no go decision is during our cross country training when our instructor asks us if we are going to fly the planned flight. Even then inside we know the instructor will not let us make a foolish mistake.

Our next encounter with the go/no go decision is usually on our Private Pilot check ride. After passing the ground segment we are told to look at the weather one more time and come back and let the DPE or FAA examiner know if we are going to fly. There is internal pressure to get the check ride done and conflicting emotions because you know you will be performing emergency procedures and don't want to make a poor decision.

When we become a CFI we make the decision to fly or not fly based on our student's abilities and may not fly even though the weather is ok for a licensed pilot but not the student. Our concern here is putting the student in a position where they will not be learning anything or worse, creating a fear of flying.

At these stages even if we fly when we shouldn't, we may fail a check ride, or do the student a disservice, but we will not be placing ourselves or others in harms way.

Then it is in to the "real world" of flying. We are now getting paid to fly (as opposed to teach) and the weather standards and the pressure to fly are greater.

Most of us start our Commercial helicopter flying doing photo flights. Photo flights aren't too bad because if the weather is bad, the pictures won't be very good either so you probably wouldn't fly. If the wind is high, the aircraft will be moving around too much to get a

good shot. There are different concerns in doing a photo flight but I will leave that for another article.

Ferrying an aircraft from one location or another is where the go/no go decision making is taken to the next level. Someone is paying to send you to a location, paying for your meals and your hotels along the way. They also want the helicopter to the desired location right away. There is no revenue being generated in transit (base costs may be covered if a student is also involved). You are outside the school environment and are expected to fly if the weather is ok. Well that is the rub! What is ok? What wind can you handle? You probably haven't flown in high winds because all of your other flights have been during training where there are school maximums and SFAR 73 rules to follow. Now it is up to you. Flight planning and weather interpretation are paramount now as you are flying cross country over unfamiliar areas and over mountain passes with no weather available over large portions of your route.

As your career moves on you may be flying out in the gulf moving personnel and equipment to and from the rigs. Here the pressure is ratcheted up to a new and higher level. Out there you will have crews who have been working on the rig for a week who want to go home for shift change and you are the way home. You really don't want to radio in and tell your boss that you can't get the job done. You will be told things like "the other pilot would do it" or "the other guy would have been here already", or "we do that all the time". Customers and employers will push to get the job done.

In all of these circumstances from student to professional helicopter pilot, you have to draw on your past experiences and know your limits. Both your experiences and limits change and evolve over time. We know for quite a while we will be stretching our abilities. As students we learned to be able to control the helicopter in 15 KT winds and fly when the visibility was 6 miles instead of 10. When we do fly in conditions we haven't faced before, we should have a reason we are willing to do so. The reason should be based on our improved abilities and experience not on a need to do the flight. Our personal limits should move in small increments as we gain confidence in our abilities.

Making a final decision and sticking to it is where being PIC and having sound aeronautical decision making abilities come in to play. You are the final authority as to the operation of the aircraft, plain and simple. The decision to fly is yours and yours alone. You have to be confident that you are making the right decision. If you don't have conviction in your decision and don't have a plan, you shouldn't be flying. You should set personal limits that you adhere to. Set these personal limits ahead of time, without any planned flights. This way the decision is made intellectually, not in the heat of battle. You should decide about winds, what speeds can you fly in and control the aircraft? Consider wind gusts also. Visibility, what can you fly in? Not legally what can you fly in but what are you willing to fly in? Your limits should probably be higher than the legal limits. You need to know the answers to these types of questions before hand. Setting your personal limits ahead of time makes the decision to go/no go easier.

Not everyone will always agree with your opinion. Some people may be mad, threaten or be disappointed you have made the decision not to go. It is better to not fly and be safe than to be influenced in to a bad decision that you or your next of kin regret later.