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Elrey Jeppesen

and His Quest for Safer Flying

Breaking the Chain

Setting and Respecting Your Personal
Minimums Checklist

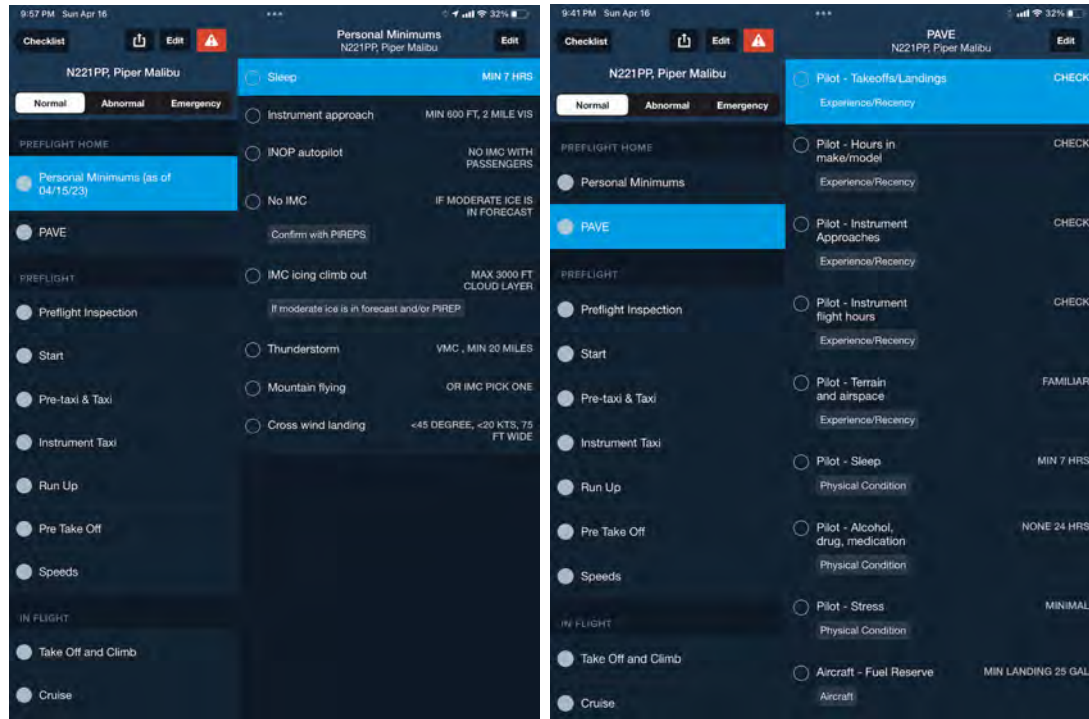
Co-Ownership:

Structuring the Agreement

Breaking the Chain

Setting and Respecting Your Personal Minimums Checklist

by Ferenc (Frici) Csatlos



Setting your personal minimums in advance and respecting them when you are flying and flight planning are crucial pieces of safe aviation. Even as experienced pilots/flight instructors, we are not immune to feeling the external pressure to complete a mission, which can impact decision making in the heat of the moment. My goal is that after reading this post-flight debrief, you will develop, adhere to and incorporate your “Personal Minimums Checklist” into your preflight procedure every time you fly.

I am going to share a chain of events during a recent flight experience. While it did not lead to an incident, it could have, and sticking to my

personal minimums would have been the safer choice. Last year, I agreed to complete an initial training in an early Malibu with a Continental (TSIO-520-BE) engine. Owning one myself and being extremely familiar with the model, a game plan was set for the weekend of training:

- Thursday: Fly commercial to Orlando, Fla., and rest up for the training.
- Friday: Drive to Vero Beach, Fla., pick up the plane and start training, make our way back to my home base in Iowa.
- Saturday, Sunday (and Monday, if needed): Complete the initial training.

I teach my students to develop consistent and repeatable processes including flight planning and briefing. Incorporating good aeronautical decision making (ADM) for each phase of our flying regime is invaluable. While I never felt uncomfortable during these events and the training environment was safe, there are several lessons I want to share with the MMOPA community in the spirit of continuously improving safety.

EVENT 1: THE LEAD UP

A hurricane closed the Orlando airport, rerouting my arriving flight to Miami, and delaying my arrival by several hours. After six hours of sleep,

I drove to Vero Beach, Fla., to meet my client and pick up the Malibu. While that was below my standard amount of rest, I felt normal, and did not feel fatigued.

EVENT 2: THE PREFLIGHT

During the runup, the autopilot began flickering, then all the lights went out. After going through some basic checklists to no avail, we taxied back to the FBO. After several hours of troubleshooting, the A&P mechanic determined that the KFC 150 computer, the “brain” of the autopilot, was dead. We had NO auto pilot and NO flight director. The meteorological conditions were VMC, the kinds of operating equipment list (KOEL) permitted flight with these items INOP, so my client and I concluded that the first leg of the planned flight could still safely be completed, and

hand flying the plane would be a great learning opportunity, as he could familiarize himself with the handling characteristics of the Piper PA-46. Fortunately, my home base mechanic had a new KFC 150 computer in stock, so the autopilot could be fixed ahead of the remainder of the initial training. Our cross-country flight had a total flight time of about six hours. We were wheels up at 6 p.m., and our first leg lasted about four hours, stopping for fuel in Tennessee.

EVENT 3: THE SECOND LEG

After refueling and doing a weather check, we debated whether to call it a night, or continue on for the second leg, which was less than two hours of flight time. Weather looked good, on departure IMC for 10 to 15 minutes, then VFR on top for the remainder of the flight. Destination forecast was a thin overcast layer, bases at 1500ft, requiring an instrument approach (remember, no autopilot, no flight director). A front was moving in from northeast Arkansas, so if we departed soon, we would stay in front of it (at least 30 miles away). Otherwise, we would need to wait it out and continue our journey Saturday afternoon. I was only two hours from home, and a bit of GET-THERE-ITIS also kicked in, thinking it would be nice to get home, sleep in my own bed and see the family. My client was prepared and eager to train in real IMC conditions with his plane, and we decided to complete the second leg. I was extremely familiar with the avionics (my Malibu has the same configuration) so I was comfortable launching into IMC without an autopilot. We completed the second leg uneventfully, and over the following three days, we finished the remainder of the training.

Now - that was a great success story, right? Well yes, in that absolutely nothing bad actually happened. However, there were several small decisions in a chain that could have easily compounded and led to a less than ideal situation. Let’s go back and

highlight a few points during that day where there was an opportunity for me to break that chain of events, avoid a potential accident or incident, and be an overall safer aviator.

Key Takeaway #1 Adhere to your Personal Minimums Checklist

If you don’t already have them, develop, respect and update your personal minimums checklist on a regular basis. Incorporate your personal minimums checklist and ADM into your flight planning procedure. If you use an electronic checklist like Foreflight or Garmin Pilot, you can easily edit your existing checklist. Use your personal minimums checklist during your flight planning activities and if conditions are below your minimums, do not give in to the temptation to skip or ignore it.

Below is an example of my personal minimums checklist flying single-pilot, single-engine piston airplanes.

- Sleep minimum seven hours (broke this minimum: my rerouted arrival flight got in late and I slept only six hours)
- 600ft ceiling, two-mile visibility for instrument approaches (met this minimum: destination weather was higher than personal minimum)
- INOP Autopilot, no IMC flying with passengers (bent this minimum: we had two capable pilots and no passengers)
- No IMC flying if moderate icing forecasted and/or reported by PIREP (met this minimum: did not have any PIREP and no forecasted icing)
- Max 3000ft cloud layer for IMC climb-out in icing conditions (met this minimum: no icing conditions existed)
- Avoid all thunderstorms (met this minimum: no severe weather)
- Mountain flying or IMC, pick ONE (met this minimum: no mountain flying)

PERSONAL MINIMUMS CHECKLIST

Think...

PILOT
AIRCRAFT
ENVIRONMENT
EXTERNAL
PRESSURES

Pilot: _____

Date Revised: _____

Reviewed with: _____
(if applicable)

- Cross wind landing: <20 kts up to 45-degree crosswind component, <15 kts greater than 45 degree cross wind component and minimum runway width 75ft. (met this minimum: calm winds at destination)

In this situation, I either broke or modified two of my personal minimums and did it “in the moment.” Rather than respecting my cooler, calmer self who developed these limits in the absence of external pressures, I convinced myself that it was OK this time. Don’t be that pilot.

Key takeaway #2: Break the Chain of Events


Part of good ADM is to recognize the event(s) and do something about it - take action! In this situation, delaying the first training by a few hours in order to be fully rested would have been a good decision. Even though I felt normal at the start

of the day, tiredness could have easily set in later, setting me up for slower reaction times. We could have also started our initial training on site in Vero Beach, Fla., while waiting for the autopilot computer to be repaired, reducing the distance we flew without automation. Lastly, we could have overnighted in Tennessee, and taken that last leg home the following day, rather than continuing on late into the evening. These alternate actions would have made for a less stressful trip overall, and undoubtedly one with fewer risk factors.

Key takeaway #3, ADM

Let’s go back now and do a quick refresher on ADM. Two acronyms I incorporated into my preflight checklist are: PAVE (Pilot, Airplane, enVironment, External Pressure) and IM SAFE (Illness, Medication, Stress, Alcohol, Fatigue, Emotions). During

preflight planning, evaluate yourself and your plan using each category. Each pre-established minimum is important, but don’t forget to look at them as a whole as well. If you are at the edge of several of your minimums, it is definitely worth erring on the side of caution and raising your minimums for that trip.¹

All aviators, of all experience levels, can be at risk of falling into the trap of ignoring their own personal minimums “just this once” or “in this certain circumstance”, which is definitely not a best practice. Set your minimums when you’re not in the middle of a dynamic situation in order to prevent yourself from making poor decisions in times of stress and uncertainty. A personal minimums checklist is a great tool, and it works, but only if you use it. The MMOPA Safety Committee is making great progress on several safety initiatives, including ADM and CRM. Working together, let’s commit to reducing the number of accidents and incidents by incorporating good ADM and respecting our personal minimums every flight. 

Footnotes:

¹Personal Minimums Worksheet: <https://bit.ly/personal-minimums>



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