



Murky Flying

Hasty decision making based on limited information had this pilot at the mercy of deteriorating weather, lowering cloud, and diminishing safe landing options. All with fare-paying passengers on board.

I'd been bouncing around the local area quite a bit that day. Seven short-hop flights – some as short as 12 to 15 minutes – most with fare-paying passengers, and all without incident.

The weather all morning was on the lower end of ideal, but still legal. Cloud base was broken at about 1200 ft, visibility was 10 to 15 kms, the sea we were flying over was glassy, and there was plenty of fuel on board for each journey.

So far, so good.

The day got busier. There were quick turnarounds between flights, with passengers getting off and on, bags being loaded, bags being taken off, and refuelling.

The responsibility for these fell largely to me. Which was fine, but in the increasingly short amount of time available to me between flights, it felt like something had to give. I chose possibly the worst time to skimp on properly checking the weather.

I'd done the big check of forecasts at the beginning of the day: TAFs, ARFORs, rain radars, terminal weather information, METARs and ATIS info. I felt like I had a pretty good idea of what was coming at us.

There were some showers in the wider region, but they were moving around, and isolated.

A good portion of our job as air transport pilots is managing less than ideal weather to get the job done, and sticking to schedule. So I was moving fast, not mucking around; but still on the right side of safety and the rules.

But as time got shorter between flights, I began to prioritise my forecast checks. Since I believed that most of the information on the ARFOR was not relevant to me for that day's flying, I began to concentrate only on what weather conditions were expected in the next hour or so, and around my intended routes – mainly the rain radar and ATIS.

That'd got me through the morning and I guess I felt the same trimmed-down weather checks would get me through the afternoon.

I'd been watching a rain band approach my destination airports during the morning. But without checking the 'bigger picture' information – the ARFOR and other aerodrome weather – what was coming and when it was due, did not match what was in my head.

Two passengers climbed aboard for the 12:50 flight, and after checking the rain radar, I made some quick calculations of when I thought that rain would arrive at our destination airport.

I worked out that if we left 15 minutes early we should be there in plenty of time.

We took off in conditions similar to what I'd experienced all day, and with good visibility of about 25 kms.

But about three quarters of the way into the flight, I observed a large shower pass over the city and I decided to hold.

We had lowering cloud which at times forced me to descend as low as 500 to 600 feet AMSL to stay clear of it and remain in VMC.

I explained to the passengers that we were holding while I waited to see what the weather would do. I had a stopwatch going on my phone, because I had calculated how long I could hold, fuel-wise, before trying for an alternate airfield.

Fortunately, we had light passenger loads, and I could uplift much more fuel than might otherwise be the case. We had just over two hours fuel on board (twice as much as usual for the route). That was made up of 'A to B' fuel, plus legal reserve, then another hour's worth – part of our company's specs – and finally another 15 minutes contingency.

The weather at the destination had by now got down to below VFR minima. We held, in all, for about 20 minutes. In that time I was speaking to the air traffic controller at the destination tower, and other pilots – who were still getting into the airport under IFR – getting updates on the conditions there.

At that time I was also talking to home base about alternate airports, but unfortunately they too were getting clagged in.

After about 15 minutes of holding, the tower told me the weather appeared to be clearing out to the west.

I decided to head in that direction, but it went from what had been average conditions to bucketing down in a matter of seconds.

Realising those conditions would not let us through, I decided it was time to head back to our original departure point.

But about that time the tower said the cloud over the destination airport was lifting. They would try to bring me in along some natural features, and under a special VFR clearance.

In the end, the landing went without a hitch.

But folks, I stuffed up. I departed without first checking all the latest weather information available to me. I then flew into deteriorating weather conditions enroute – conditions that I would have known about had I only taken the care to check.

That then led to other problems. While I was holding, despite circling tightly to try to stay over the water, I ended up flying below the legal height over a built-up area.

Looking back, I should have returned to the departure point as soon as the weather closed in. Instead I waited, because I wanted to complete the journey for my passengers' sake.

Not my best day of flying. But you learn.

No matter how busy you get, no matter what self-imposed pressures you feel to do a good job, it's not worth doing a once-over-lightly on those weather checks – particularly when you know that the weather is approaching minima.

I now have a more 'ritualistic' approach to the way that I check the weather, especially if it's starting to look marginal. I've learned that it doesn't take a huge change for the weather to go from marginal to unsafe.

So you need to take that time to stop, delay what you're doing, and get that holistic picture. Check on updated TAFs, updated ARFORs, also looking at ATISs and METARs from aerodromes that you're *not* intending to fly to. That's because something like the front you were expecting to arrive later in the afternoon, may already be passing through another airport. Now you can see, 'well if this is what the weather is like at that place, this is what I'm probably going to expect where I'm going'.

It's about being systematic, 'this is the way I'm going to do it, every flight, and I'm going to get that holistic picture of what's going on'.

"It's also absolutely about having the confidence and self-esteem, even given the self-imposed pressure to do a good job, to say: 'Actually I'm not going to fly this one.'"

The CAA Comments

The CAA commends this pilot for sharing their experience so that others may learn from it.

In addition to the pilot's advice, the CAA provides the following safety messages:

- » Use all resources available to prepare for a flight, including NOTAMs at www.ifis.airways.co.nz, and weather information at metflight.metra.co.nz.
- » Don't continue into bad weather – hold in clear air or divert.
- » Demonstrate safety leadership – maintain high standards at all times and encourage the same from others. ■