

We're all learning about Risk Management. With the OU Risk Management checklist we can talk the talk, but do we have the discipline to walk the walk? Read the article below by David Kenny. The pilot made a good decision to get an outlook briefing the day before the planned flight – giving him plenty of time to make alternate travel arrangements if the weather didn't look good. But, did he act on the information he received?

Deadly Pressure

By David Kenny

Although using general aviation aircraft can be a great business tool, not having a Plan B could be deadly. The limitations of the pilot and aircraft must be considered when planning a business trip and take precedence over the pressure to make it to the meeting on time.

On Jan. 23, 2009, just before 7 a.m., a Cessna 205 departed Flagstaff, Ariz., taking two men to a business meeting in Yuma. The meeting had been a year in preparation, and the airplane's owner—the pilot for the flight—told his wife that it was important to his company, which had been hurt by the economic downturn. He held a private pilot certificate and claimed 1,550 hours on his most recent medical application, but he was not instrument rated.

The man in the right seat, also a private pilot, had an instrument rating and 2,500 hours of experience. Apparently, however, he rarely flew IFR; his wife told investigators that “he did not like to conduct such operations.”

The night before the flight, the pilot got an outlook briefing from the Prescott Automated Flight Service Station. He said they planned to fly VFR at 8,500 feet msl, despite the fact that the maximum elevation figures were 8,900 or above along the first part of the route. The briefer advised that ceilings in the morning were forecast to be 1,000 feet overcast, with two miles visibility in rain and mist and a chance of snow and mixed precipitation along the route. That would have been a good time to reconsider the flight.

He called again at 6:11 a.m., 30 minutes before their planned departure, and was told that VFR was not recommended. A low-pressure system was bringing moisture into the area; Flagstaff was reporting ceilings of 1,300 feet broken and 1,800 feet overcast, though visibility was 10 miles underneath. An airmet for IFR conditions and mountain obscuration was in effect from Flagstaff to Prescott, and the briefer asked whether they could go IFR instead. The pilot replied that “we may end up filing IFR if we have to.”

But they didn't file. The first officer of a departing Horizon Air flight saw a single-engine Cessna take off from Runway 21; he told investigators that he was surprised anyone would leave VFR. The Horizon flight entered the overcast at about 1,000 feet agl and remained in the clouds, with light turbulence and light rime ice, all the way to Prescott.

The Cessna flew south, apparently following Interstate 17 toward Phoenix. The aircraft made it about 10 miles before colliding with a hillside. The airplane went into the trees at 130 knots and hit the ground minus its right wing, killing both pilots. The elevation of the accident site was 6,850 feet msl—only 130 feet higher than the highway.

Self-imposed pressure to make a flight, no matter what, kills dozens of aviators and their passengers every year. If the trip is important enough to justify risking your life, it's certainly worth taking the time to develop a back-up plan. You won't get there on time unless you get there.