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View

-  [New Search](#)
-  [Help](#)
-  [Contact Support](#)
-  [ASRS Database Items\(pdf\)](#)



[Back to Results Page](#)

[Filter Report Items](#)



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ACN: 2106197 (1 of 1)

Time / Day

Date : 202404
Local Time Of Day : 1201-1800

Place

Locale Reference.ATC Facility : ZZZ.ARTCC
State Reference : US
Altitude.MSL.Single Value : 6000

Environment

Flight Conditions : IMC
Weather Elements / Visibility : Rain
Weather Elements / Visibility.Visibility : 10
Light : Daylight
Ceiling.Single Value : 12000

Aircraft

Reference : X
ATC / Advisory.TRACON : ZZZ
Aircraft Operator : Personal
Make Model Name : Skyhawk 172/Cutlass 172
Crew Size.Number Of Crew : 1
Operating Under FAR Part : Part 91
Flight Plan : VFR
Mission : Personal
Flight Phase : Cruise
Route In Use : Direct
Airspace.Class E : ZZZ

Person

Location Of Person.Aircraft : X
Location In Aircraft : Flight Deck
Reporter Organization : Personal
Function.Flight Crew : Single Pilot
Function.Flight Crew : Pilot Flying
Qualification.Flight Crew : Glider
Qualification.Flight Crew : Private
Experience.Flight Crew.Total : 210
Experience.Flight Crew.Last 90 Days : 12
Experience.Flight Crew.Type : 115
ASRS Report Number.Accession Number : 2106197
Human Factors : Training / Qualification
Human Factors : Situational Awareness

Events

Anomaly.Deviation / Discrepancy - Procedural : Published Material / Policy
Anomaly.Deviation / Discrepancy - Procedural : FAR
Anomaly.Inflight Event / Encounter : Weather / Turbulence
Anomaly.Inflight Event / Encounter : VFR In IMC
Anomaly.Inflight Event / Encounter : CFTT / CFIT

Detector.Person : Flight Crew
Miss Distance.Horizontal : 1000
Miss Distance.Vertical : 300
When Detected : In-flight
Result.Flight Crew : Took Evasive Action
Result.Flight Crew : Requested ATC Assistance / Clarification
Result.Flight Crew : Diverted

Assessments

Contributing Factors / Situations : Human Factors
Contributing Factors / Situations : Weather
Primary Problem : Human Factors

Narrative: 1

Flying VFR from ZZZ to ZZZ1 First leg ZZZ to ZZZ2 due to weather briefing, and monitoring on my electronic flight bag. Second leg ZZZ2 to ZZZ3 , but assessment of weather (headwind and range) and planned limit of three hours flight time with four hours of fuel meant expected intermediate stops, as well as plan to descend and land if weather became too much. Flying due south from ZZZ2 IAS of 120kts, ground speed of 80kts due to headwinds. Had picked up flight following from ZZZ Approach. Lowering clouds and rising terrain to the east (Mountains) led to risk assessment not to push minimums. Turned west (lighter cloud, and slower rising terrain) and decided to go VFR over the top. Proceeded southwest, maintaining ground contact. Moving to next clear view of ground it closed up.. first mistake.. should have turned 180 and used tailwind to get clear of cloud and land. Having found myself in IMC (no view of ground) and NOT turned 180, took the opportunity to descend when a hole presented itself. Second mistake.. hole too small to achieve 2000 feet separation so descended through IMC in a steep banked turn leading to rapid loss of height.. when clear through the cloud found the cloud base was lower than some of the terrain so still in IMC (NOT 500 below cloud). Spoke with center and asked for vectors to airport in VFR but was below their minimums. ZZZ4 was proposed and I started to head towards it, using the quadrant max height as a guide to safety. Assessment of cloud base and the position of the airport had me assess that it was too dangerous to get in there due to height of hills and not wanting to descend into a valley, or get squeezed into one. Knowing I had 2 hours of fuel onboard, and that I was in IMC although insight of the ground, and looking at quadrant heights, I assessed that it was safer to reenter the clouds and seek sufficient ground clearance to avoid any terrain or structures. Should have [requested priority handling] at this point at the LATEST! Ascended into the clouds with concentration on the attitude indicator, making sure to make smallest corrections to keep wings level, and slow ascent so as not to get disoriented by large changes. Was fortunate that winds were constant and so not having to make any major corrections to able to keep things in tight control. I asked Center for another airport where VFR was in force and was given ZZZ5 which had (I think) 6000 overcast and plenty of visibility. Maintained altitude in cloud until cloud base lifted and was able to descend back to VFR, and approach ZZZ5 . Center stayed on after I reported airport in sight. Full pattern approach to ZZZ5 , landed, and then called center on phone to report as unable to get a response on radio. Primary cause - flight into IMC due to under assessment of how quickly the clouds were closing up.. reality is that the gaps we were seeing were probably already too small for VFR and should have turned 180 probably 10+ minutes before. Second learning.. a turning dive into a too small gap over high terrain was a poor decision when the 180 was still an option - desire was to get back to VFR compliance ASAP when realized in IMC, and the best approach would have still been the 180 as we had separation from cloud layers and horizontal visibility to maintain see and avoid even though IMC, and with flight following. Third learning, should have [requested priority handling], VFR pilot in IMC. I did not advise as my assessment was I had things under control and had contact with center. I was not worried about having to report in IMC, so likely over confident. Decision to go back into the clouds was based on belief that there was greater risk of CFIT (Controlled Flight Into Terrain) as still IMC, than to gain ground clearance. I should not have got myself in that position in the first place. I saw altitude and time as my best options, and to get back into VFR it was my fastest and safest path.

Synopsis

Pilot on VFR cross country flight inadvertently entered IMC and exited back to VFR conditions with ATC assistance.

