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ACN: 1546076 (1 of 1)

Time / Day

Date : 201805
Local Time Of Day : 1201-1800

Place

Locale Reference.Airport : ZZZ.Airport
State Reference : US
Altitude.MSL.Single Value : 5000

Environment

Flight Conditions : IMC
Weather Elements / Visibility : Turbulence
Light : Daylight
Ceiling.Single Value : 3500

Aircraft

Reference : X
ATC / Advisory.TRACON : ZZZ
Aircraft Operator : Personal
Make Model Name : PA-32 Cherokee Six/Lance/Saratoga/6X
Crew Size.Number Of Crew : 1
Operating Under FAR Part : Part 91
Flight Plan : IFR
Mission : Personal
Flight Phase : Descent
Route In Use : Vectors
Airspace.Class E : ZZZ

Person

Location Of Person.Aircraft : X
Location In Aircraft : Flight Deck
Reporter Organization : Personal
Function.Flight Crew : Pilot Flying
Qualification.Flight Crew : Private
Qualification.Flight Crew : Instrument
Experience.Flight Crew.Total : 340
Experience.Flight Crew.Last 90 Days : 10
Experience.Flight Crew.Type : 19
ASRS Report Number.Accession Number : 1546076
Human Factors : Communication Breakdown
Communication Breakdown.Party1 : Flight Crew
Communication Breakdown.Party2 : ATC

Events

Anomaly.ATC Issue : All Types
Anomaly.Deviation - Altitude : Excursion From Assigned Altitude
Anomaly.Deviation / Discrepancy - Procedural : Clearance
Anomaly.Inflight Event / Encounter : CFTT / CFIT
Detector.Person : Air Traffic Control
Miss Distance.Vertical : 600

When Detected : In-flight
Result.Flight Crew : Took Evasive Action
Result.Air Traffic Control : Issued Advisory / Alert

Assessments

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

Narrative: 1

I recently shot an approach into ZZZ. The conditions were overcast, tops at 5000 - 5500, bases around 3500 so I did not expect there to be any issues as the weather was well above the minimums. ATC was vectoring me for the ILS. I had an instrument rated copilot so I was happy to have a second set of hands to work the radios and a second set of eyes to ensure we were safe.

I was on a northbound heading at 5000 feet parallel to the ILS. ATC gave me a descent to 4000 feet. As I started the descent, they gave me a turn to the left, about 70 degrees. "Vectors for sequencing." Passing [approximately] 4300 feet on my way down ATC called to us to "climb immediately, minimum vectoring altitude in your sector is 5000 feet. Expedite climb." I looked at my copilot and he looked like he was taken aback as I was. I pushed in full power, and I told the Controller that I would comply, and I thought they had told me to descend.

Post flight postmortem. Both my copilot and I had heard the Controller tell us to descend to 4000. There was another tail number similar to mine, 1 digit different in the last 3 characters, and the Controller was using abbreviated call signs. It is possible I picked up a descend clearance for the other aircraft, but if that was the case, both of us would have misheard the Controller, and they did not catch the error when we read back the descend clearance. Had we turned to the right to intercept the approach course, this altitude did not seem unreasonable. We were outside of the FAF which has a crossing altitude of 3800 feet. Turning to the left, however, put me uncomfortably close to obstacles as high as 3700 feet to my 9 o'clock, and climbing terrain fairly far away straight ahead of us. I knew where we were, but I was concentrating more on being bounced around in the clouds and following instructions than I was on double checking ATC and looking at my chart for obstructions. I am glad the Controller caught the mistake, because I am not sure I would have.

If I accidentally picked up the clearance for another aircraft, my suggestion would be for ATC to not use abbreviated clearances when similar call signs are on frequency. If ATC gave me the descent in error, a prevention measure would be for me to maintain solid situational awareness to prevent a controlled flight into terrain. It would be helpful for pilots to be able to know the minimum vectoring altitudes in the area.

Synopsis

PA32 pilot reported an excursion from an assigned altitude due to a similar call sign communication breakdown.

