

FAASTeam Safety Tip

by Max Trescott, author and 2008 National CFI of the Year

Purge “Probably” From Your Flying Vocabulary

Just as a drug-sniffing dog alerts in the presence of an illegal substance, you should be alert anytime the word “probably” pops into your head when flying. Probably means that you’ve done an informal assessment of the likelihood of an event occurring and have assigned a probability to it. The term implies that you believe that things will most likely work out but that there’s some reasonable doubt in your mind. Because humans are in general optimistic, there’s also a good chance that you’ve overestimated the probability of success, as do the approximately 300 pilots a year who suffer fatal accidents.

If you ever think that your course of action will “probably work out,” you need to choose a new option that you *know* will work out. Even if you feel there’s a 99-percent probability that things will work out, that shouldn’t be sufficient justification for you to continue with a course of action. Would you play Russian roulette with a gun that had 100 chambers and just one bullet in it? I hope not.

Pilots can also be lured into a false sense of security if they’ve performed a risky behavior successfully in the past. One CFII, known locally by his colleagues as “Luke Skywalker,” had a reputation for always being able to make it into his local airport—which didn’t have an instrument approach—regardless of how bad the weather was. Having succeeded perhaps a hundred times, he may have felt justified in believing that he could always make his system work. The last time he tried, however, it didn’t work and he became a statistic.

In the San Francisco Bay area, about one-half of all VMC-into-IMC accidents occur in the Livermore Valley, probably because a marine layer of clouds frequently obscures the mountains that rise from sea level to about 4,000 feet. A common way to traverse this area is through the Altamont and Sunol mountain passes. I tell pilots that if they ever approach these passes and, based on visibility, think “they can probably make it through,” they need to make a 180° turn and land at an alternate airport. Undoubtedly, every pilot who crashed in this area thought that he or she would “probably” make it through—otherwise the pilot wouldn’t have continued.

You should always assess risk and prepare a Plan A, Plan B, and Plan C before you take off. That way, the first time the word “probably” flashes through your mind, you can instantly begin to execute Plan B or Plan C. Fully thinking out these plans before you leave the ground leads to better decisions. Waiting until you *know* things are not going to work out is the wrong time to improvise a seat-of-the-pants decision.

The FAASTeam has asked Max Trescott, the 2008 National CFI of the Year, to write a series of safety tips. Max, a San Francisco area-based Master CFI, specializes in teaching in and publishing training materials for glass cockpit aircraft. You can read more of his work at www.maxtrescott.com and www.g1000book.com or e-mail him at info@sjflight.com.