

VECTOR

Pointing to Safer Aviation

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Pushing the Limits

Three people were killed recently when a light aircraft slammed into the Canterbury foothills in poor weather. The investigations into the accident are not complete, but weather was definitely a factor.

While CAA accident investigators were disturbed by the nature of this tragedy, they were also disappointed to hear of other VFR pilots who were operating on the same day in conditions below VFR meteorological minima and flying below 500 feet agl. In short, they were probably breaking the law — and risking their lives. Was it by good luck rather than good management that similar accidents were avoided?

Pressing on in marginal weather is frequently a factor in fatal accidents.

We would like to remind pilots that the decision to turn back, divert, or make a precautionary landing must be made as early as possible when things start to look doubtful — that is before you are forced below 500 feet agl or forced to operate with less than five kilometres (just under three nautical miles) visibility. To continue below these limits when safer options are available means that you will not only be breaking the law, but also will be taking considerable risks. By pressing on, you are further reducing the options and manoeuvring space available to safely end the flight. Don't think you can outwit the physics of turning when a hill looms in front of you!

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A decision to divert or carry out a precautionary landing should be based on the weather conditions that are being encountered at that point and time — not on the hope that conditions ahead are forecast to improve or on a report that the weather at your destination is okay. During a flight you should



frequently assess whether the conditions ahead are remaining above the legal minima (or your own personal minima if these are higher). If things are worsening, this assessment will need to be made more frequently and include the area around and behind the aircraft in case a turn-back or diversion is called for. As cloud base and visibility decrease, navigation and terrain clearance will require more of your attention, leaving less ‘brain power’ for making an unhurried and sensible decision. Don't leave the decision too late. Give yourself more time and the aircraft greater manoeuvrability by slowing down and

configuring for bad weather.

The pressure to get to a destination can be great — as can be the pressures exerted by passengers. It is essential that these pressures are resisted and that the decision on whether or not to continue is based solely on safety — the inconvenience and extra cost involved in turning back should not cloud this decision. Avoid the ego trap of thinking that you have sufficient flying experience and local knowledge to warrant ‘pushing on that little bit further to see what conditions ahead are like’ — it is not worth the risk.

If things are really turning to ‘custard’ don't hesitate to use the precautionary landing option — it is much better to

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contact the ground in a controlled manner at landing speed (with maybe minor damage and injuries, or possibly just embarrassment and inconvenience) than at a higher speed when you have lost control of the situation (this is almost invariably fatal).

Points to Consider

- Get route and destination weather before every flight. During your pre-flight preparation consider the possibility of diverting.
- Submitting a flight plan is strongly recommended. (Note that SARWATCH is an alerting service only, and does not include weather information). Remember that weather information is always available from Flight Information.
- Continually assess the actual (and any reported) weather ahead.
- Respect the VFR met minima and minimum height limitations, and make a positive decision to not fly below them.
- If you really are caught out, slow down and configure for bad-weather

flying. This should be a strong clue that you ought to be looking for a suitable place to land, maybe a paddock, beach, or quiet road.

- If the weather necessitates that you fly through features such as gorges and saddles at low level, where traffic is 'funnelled', then have passengers keep an eye out for power lines and other aircraft to minimise the risk of a collision.
- If you have not practised the bad-weather configuration for a while, or think a refresher on precautionary landings would be a good idea, then arrange for it now. Instructors — are you sure that your students are really competent in these areas, and have they been given guidance on decision-making in flight? If not, sort it out.

Adhering to the advice given above will reduce the chances of finding yourself in a situation with no way out. Remember, be alert to any changes in the weather, and if in doubt turn back early, divert, or land. ■

Always have an 'out'.

Aviation Safety Coordinator Courses

Reminder!

Don't forget the Aviation Safety Coordinator training courses that are to be held in Christchurch 18 to 19 March and in Auckland 25 to 26 March.

An Aviation Safety Coordinator runs the safety programme in an organisation. Does your organisation have a properly administered and active safety programme? (See the last issue of *Vector* for further details on the 'what and why' of an aviation safety programme.)

If you are involved in commuter services, general aviation scenic operations, flight training or sport aviation, this course is relevant for your organisation.

Apply now for an enrolment form!

For further information and enrolment forms contact:

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