

Building Better Pilots Through Better Flight Reviews

By Dan Doepker (IHST and USHST member)

For a private helicopter pilot, there is an important difference between being current and being proficient. “Currency” is the legal requirements a pilot must meet in order to take a specific flight. “Proficiency” is the level of actual control and situational awareness that a pilot has over the aircraft. While the FAA uses laws to enforce currency requirements, it places a lot of responsibility on the individual pilots and operators to decide if a pilot is proficient or not.

Proper Flight Reviews

The FAA mandates that all pilots have a flight review every 24 calendar months. This regulation is the only retraining requirement for a private operator. For a pilot who flies consistently week after week, a two-year gap is a long time. In other commercial aviation operations, we expect that pilots will have a check ride at least every year and often times they have more experience, better equipment and are more proficient than a typical private helicopter pilot.

According to United States Helicopter Safety Team (www.USHST.org) statistics, the highest percentage of civil helicopter accidents (18.5%) involves personal/private flights by private pilots. To improve helicopter safety, we need to target these high-risk pilots and increase their proficiency, and the best way to accomplish this is through an improved flight review.

A New Guide

Until recently, there was little guidance to offer Certified Flight Instructors (CFIs) on how to conduct a proper flight review for a helicopter pilot. In response, the USHST has created a document that can be found on its website (on the Safety Guides page: Conducting A Helicopter Flight Review”) which guides both the applicant and the CFI through a suggested flight review process.

To successfully complete these proficiency reviews and ensure that CFIs are utilizing every opportunity to drastically improve the safety of the industry we live and work in, certain topics should be emphasized.

Three Focuses

First, every flight review should focus on what is killing pilots. Items such as loss of control, controlled flight into terrain, wire strikes and poor situational awareness are topics to emphasize on all flight reviews. As pilots, we get one hour of mandatory ground training and not a minute of that should be wasted. However, additional time may be required for a pilot to be proficient. Both the applicant and the CFI must not underestimate the need for critical information to be conveyed during the ground session of the flight review.

Next, the CFI must utilize appropriate scenarios allowing the pilot to practice good aeronautical decision making, single pilot resource management and risk mitigation. These could come in the form of a case study on the ground that carries over into the flight, use of realistic scenarios the pilot may face, or the use of abnormal scenarios the pilot may face in the future. These scenarios should be tailored towards what the pilot will spend the next 24 calendar months doing. For example, if a pilot is going to be primarily taking off and landing from his or her own home, that should be included in the flight review. It is important to consider the realistic outcomes of each decision. Often, external pressures cause pilots to skip steps or not fully consider the outcome of their decisions, and for that reason, it is critical to consider these in any scenario.

Finally, the CFI must remember that the point of a flight review is not only to ensure that the pilot “demonstrates safe exercise of the privileges of the pilot’s certificate,” but also to ensure they walk away from the experience having learned something. Being a proficient pilot is about constantly striving to learn more and improving your skills.

Your Responsibility

My aviation mentors have firmly instilled in me the belief that I am in control of my destiny. I make decisions every day, on every flight, during every minute that will prevent accidents. Without this belief, I could not climb into a helicopter or welcome my family, friends or customers for a flight. Without this sense of responsibility, how can we expect all pilots to take their flight review seriously?

It is critical that we minimize the need for luck to play a part in successful outcomes and ensure that more of the outcome is based on solid training and knowledge. With so many possible dangers on each flight, the training and preparation we give on flight reviews will keep passengers safe and help to “build” better pilots who are thoroughly proficient.

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