

FLYING CARPET / By Greg Brown

## PRUDENT PILOTS

### MAKING TOUGH TAKEOFF DECISIONS



"Being a fairly new pilot I wanted your feedback on my weather decision this morning," said my buddy Mark Harris when he phoned. "I'm driving from Flagstaff to Lake Havasu City for a meeting. The forecast predicted a 50-percent chance of snow this afternoon, so I decided not to fly. But after traveling for hours under cloudless skies, I'm wondering whether I screwed up by not flying.

"Takeoff decisions can be tough, especially when you feel pressed to make an appointment," I said. "No one's immune. Just last Saturday Jean and I planned to fly to Tucson to see visiting relatives. Like today, the morning was clear. But with a storm forecast to threaten Flagstaff by evening, I canceled. When the skies were still clear at bedtime, I kicked myself for not going. The next morning, however, we awoke to two feet of snow; had it arrived earlier, we'd have been stranded for days. So in retrospect my decision was good. I suspect yours was, too."



At Flagstaff Pulliam Airport that afternoon, flight school owner Orville Wiseman lamented a recent accident where a well-regarded pilot took off into difficult weather. The accident report suggested that during trying economic times the pilot anticipated signing a highly desired business contract at his destination meeting. The circumstances reminded me of my own most difficult takeoff decision ever.

Back then I had a consulting business in northern Indiana. Times were tough, as they are now, and thanks to heroic efforts we'd secured a lucrative business deal with a kickoff meeting at the client's Wisconsin facility. We considered going the day before, but with a perfect meeting-day forecast and a backup airplane in case of mechanical problems, I went to bed worry-free.

The next morning, however, I awoke to fog, freezing precipitation, and icing reported by airliners. We desperately needed this contract to pay our bills. My staff had been preparing for weeks, and the client had brought in key employees from around the country to participate. With fingers crossed we drove to the airport. For two eternal hours I scrutinized weather reports for hints of improvement, but despite the pressure I could never convince myself it was safe to take off. Finally I made one of the toughest phone calls of my life.

"You will never work for us again," said the angry client when I explained our situation, and indeed we didn't. In proof that time rewards good decisions, I'd long forgotten that seemingly career-ending incident until today's discussion.

Orville had a story of his own, about accumulating ice on an instrument approach to Wichita in a twin-engine Beech Baron. "After refueling, I paid to have the plane deiced. But before takeoff I looked at my wife and young children beside me—my son was a toddler then and my daughter was maybe 4—and thought, 'I'm gonna have to climb back up through that ice I just escaped. Sure, I have an appointment, but why am I doing this?' So I taxied back to the ramp. We were stuck there for two days."

The two of us considered other canceled flights, and how each was the right decision at the time. "I guess we've done OK for ourselves," said Orville, reverently. "Here we are discussing it, while others haven't been so fortunate."

Driving home I remembered another accident involving a fateful takeoff decision. "Four die in crash," my newspaper had blurted one long-ago morning. A single-engine Cessna had departed a high-elevation airport on a warm day burdened with four adults, luggage, and freshly topped fuel tanks. Although the plane got off the ground, it never escaped ground effect—it flew along a road until striking trees. I might have forgotten the story except for giving a lesson afterward at Scottsdale Airport. Taped to the reception desk at Southwest Flight Center was that morning's

article.

“Oh no! Was that your airplane that crashed?” I asked Richard Lewin, one of the owners.

“Thank goodness it wasn’t,” he replied. “But let me tell you what happened. A pilot came in last week wanting to rent a Cessna 172RG to fly up into the mountains. When I heard he was taking three passengers, I said, ‘Sorry, that airplane isn’t powerful enough to fly out of that airport with four people in summertime temperatures. You can leave one person behind, or for a few dollars more check out in our more powerful Cessna 182.’ The guy stormed out of here upset, vowing never to return. Well, guess what? Yesterday he rented a 172RG from the competition across town, and here’s what happened. Now you know why I posted the article.”

As I entered my driveway, Mark phoned again. “Hey, good news of sorts,” he said. “I just drove under some low clouds, so maybe I made the right decision after all. I’d hate to miss a good flying day for nothing.”

“To err on the cautious side is never a mistake,” I replied. “You’re doing everything right, my friend—flying often and safely because you are careful. If you think about it, prudent pilots will always miss a few flights when the weather proves better than expected. But any resulting frustration evaporates the next time we fly. Poor takeoff decisions, on the other hand, could punish our loved ones for a lifetime. Better to drive as you did today when the weather’s uncertain, and appreciate what you’re missing.”

**GREG BROWN'S** books include *Flying Carpet*, *The Savvy Flight Instructor*, and *You Can Fly!* Visit his [Web site](#).

### *TRAVEL LOG: LAKE HAVASU CITY (III)*

**Runways** 14/32

**Length:** 8,001 feet, paved

**Obstructions:** High terrain N/NE of airport

**Pattern altitude:** 1,800 feet msl

**Lights:** 24 hours

**Phone:** 928-764-3330

**Location:** 6 miles north of city