

## **My First Experience as a Safety Pilot**

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Like most pilots, I am always looking for opportunities to experience another facet of aviation. Another element that I can share with others or lock away in that 10% of the brain hopelessly devoted to airplane nonsense. So, when the offer came up to act as a Safety Pilot I jumped at the opportunity to assist a fellow aviator for my first time this winter; and I sure am glad that I did.

My understanding of the Safety Pilot role was pretty elementary; make sure we don't hit anything, go where we aren't supposed to go, or get ourselves into a situation that the "blind" pilot doesn't see coming. Or, in other words, make sure we stay safe and legal. Easy enough!

The PIC and I had a bit of an informal discussion while the A/C warmed up in which I bluntly asked, "what would you like me to do here"? This ended up being the best question I could have asked. Having never performed this role, I was in no place to act as the experienced professional assuming I knew how to care for whatever was ahead. I wanted to know what the Left Seater expected of me so that I knew when I should speak up, when I should correct him or even, if need be, take the controls to ensure continued safety.

We started the flight with an overview of the procedures he was going to work on. Some VOR approaches to GDM, holds around the VOR and then an ILS approach to runway 2 at EEN. Three things I have never even seen, never mind tried. As a VFR pilot, I have lived happily in my blue sky world of trips for ice cream, breakfast and sightseeing; where personal minimums don't come into play because the weather is too good to care. I was thrilled to finally see what goes on when you fly under the hood.

As far as A/C attitude, I was advised to just ensure the plane never entered an attitude that I would consider unsafe. This comment allowed me to relax and concentrate on my experience without having to assume what another pilot would consider safe and reasonable. By putting these parameters in the context of what I found to be appropriate, the PIC created an environment where I felt comfortable speaking up. It was this partnership that I believe makes this type of flying beneficial to both of us.

Then the fun began. The hood came down shortly after liftoff and with the VOR dialed in we were on our way. Communication was open and free as we discussed cloud layers, altitudes and local traffic. He talked through each procedure as he performed them. Including altitude and airspeed requirements, headings and descent rates. This allowed me to help him watch his own parameters while keeping an eye in the sky for other birds. We discussed approach plates, timing and the importance of not using the GPS indicators so that you know how this should feel and look without relying upon the magic line on the screen. He described what the end result should look like in relation to the airfield so that I could relate reality while he stayed blind. We discussed the need for radio communication and airfield advisories when in and around GDM. As well as what we should do if we had any challenges while in flight.

It was fascinating to see. It made me think about the relatively casual way in which I fly with my own passengers. I started to think about altitude and heading control and how precise my instrument scan was (or wasn't) while airborne. It occurred to me that simply aiming for Wachusett or Monadnock wasn't what you might call a precision approach when getting somewhere. The flight was eye opening.

I could tell the process was exhausting. Moving and scanning from altimeter to airspeed indicator, to DG and the VOR receiver all the while keeping your wits about where you are, were and should be. Throttle adjustments, trim settings, To/From indicators and clocks kept him busy for the better part of the hour. And when the hood came off and he wiped his forehead I could see he was pleased with a lot of what he had accomplished that day. Frankly though, so was I. While my role was minimal, it went along way to instill in me what type of pilot I need to become to advance myself in aviation.

I have since flown as a Safety Pilot a few more times and I continue to get more comfortable with the role with every passing flight. I have also started tightening up my own flying where I now look for altitudes to hold rather than a window to stay in. I seek out points on a compass rather than mountains in the distance as my heading indicators and my 6-pack scan has become a bit more regimented than it may have been before. I have also started my own instrument course study guide so that while my focus remains on what is going on outside the plane, I can start to understand what things should look like on the inside as well.

Aviation is about a continued process of learning. I have always jumped at new experiences in the hope they are fun. What I didn't realize about this experience though was just how much I would learn along the way.