

SVFR-1©

There has been quite a thread about the lack of safety associated with SVFR (special visual flight rules) The Luddite approach to safety says that you should never do something that compromises safety.

The logic of this if applied to every day life would mean that no one would ever strike a match, go out in the rain, drive a car, or fly an airplane. Just living is a safety compromise. We must learn to live in and perform in the world as it is. To select one portion of that world and contend that it does not apply is but closing your eyes to reality.

I deliberately teach SVFR. Before the FARs prohibited student SVFR I taught it. After the FARs prohibited student SVFR I teach it. I am often disturbed by those who preach the evils of SVFR and the exposure to danger that exist in such flight. I, very deliberately, have taught all my students the procedures of SVFR both as to flying and radio. I feel, to do otherwise is an abrogation of my instructional responsibility as much as would be not teaching stall recovery.

I have given many checkouts in which, on inquiry, the pilots have never flown in SVFR and have no knowledge as to how the procedure works. They fly in an effort to totally avoid SVFR, under the impression that it is both unnecessary and dangerous. In terms of the utility of owning an airplane, I wonder what is the proportion of VFR, to MVFR, and to IFR weather. Here, in the S.F. Bay Area, the pilot unable to handle SVFR sure stays home a lot.

My contention is that a pilot who does not know and fully utilize the rules of flying when the situation requires, is not a competent pilot. I am not advocating that we should all go pleasure flying in SVFR conditions. I am saying that SVFR is a not uncommon condition that can, by adherence to the rules, be made relatively much safer by specific instructional flights much as is done with cross-country flying. I fly SVFR for instructional purposes and not for fun.

The student has been conditioned by reading, experience, and previous instruction to view weather and its associated conditions as pilot killers. Even IFR instruction is apt be very limited in 'actual' exposure. It has long been my contention that most students begin and learn to fly during the time of the year most likely to inhibit their growth and development as a pilot. The first storm of the winter eats a disproportionate number of airplanes whose pilots have never learned how to deal with unexpected marginal weather. There, nearly half of the article was used to justify the remainder.

The time for a deliberate training SVFR flight are always selected based upon forecast improving conditons. This is a basic rule for all weather flying. Several variations can be used. A low level departure with an overhead arrival. Low level flight to and from an nearby airport, or just a departure and return to the home field. It is important that the student become familiar with the radio procedures for both going and coming. The airspace restrictions placed upon ATC and clearance restrictions on the pilot are never truly understood without an actual exposure to the variable situations.

Prior to the flight the radio procedures should be written in full and then again in short-hand. Then a blank form is made ready for taking the actual clearance. Between airport flights may require four different clearance procedures.

A complete weather briefing is obtained. Prior to aircraft entry you visually decide if your planned direction of departure is going to work. If not, make an alternate plan of departure. Your drive to the airport told you a bit about at least one direction. Inside the controlled airspace you can always return if you have not reported clear of VFR.

Once you have reported clear of the controlled airspace or VFR you are on your own to meet the visibility and cloud clearance minimums for your altitude. Depending on the transition area you can remain within 1200' or 700' of the ground as long as you have one mile flight visibility. At any altitude above these you must meet the VFR minimums of 3-mile visibility and 1000' above, 500' below, and 2000' lateral cloud clearance. If unable to maintain the VFR requirements you must either get down to the Class G airspace or declare an emergency. This sounds very glib and easy to do in writing. In real situations it requires considerable local knowledge and decision making skill. If ever there is a flying skill requiring 'learning by doing' it is SVFR.

The greatest intangible of SVFR is the delay caused by other traffic. IFR flights have preference. You will be held on the ground or told to remain clear, usually at a specific VFR point, while IFR flights arrive and depart. ATC will try to slip you out between IFR flights if they can. It is best if you request departures and arrivals that avoid IFR routes. To make ATC's positioning your SVFR flight into the mix it is important that you are able to understand and comply with ATC instructions. If you don't and can't, say so immediately. The more you expedite your arrival the better it helps everyone.

The essential, non-dispensable element in SVFR is that the pilot NEVER lose situational awareness. You must know where you are and where every obstacle, identifiable check point is in relation to your position. No compromise. For this reason most pilots must only do SVFR at their home airports. Every VFR home field arrival and departure should be used as a situational learning opportunity. If you don't know where you are you have no business being in the air. The lower the visibility the more important it is that you know where you are.