

Let's Go Home

By 1stLt. Jennifer Kukla, USMC

The amount of training student naval flight officers have aboard NAS Pensacola is incredible. In the classroom, in the simulators, and in the air, our instructors strive to give us the best real-world training, while maintaining high standards of safety.

In the instrument-phase of primary, students learn to navigate in IFR conditions in all basic flight phases: departure, en route and approach. One of my first instrument flights happened to be with a brand new instructor pilot, and it was my first out-and-in. However, weather did not look like it was going to cooperate. Fog was on the runway and low visibility was reported. Needing 200 and ½ for takeoff, we decided to preflight, strap in, and see if things would clear up enough for takeoff. We spotted a clearing in the fog and started to taxi.

The area usually is busy with T-6s coming and going, but we were the only T-6 attempting to fly, which should have been our initial sanity-check. When we got to the run-up area, my IP said, "It looks good to me, but if you don't feel safe, we'll just cancel due to weather and try again another time."

In hindsight, there never should be any doubt in your mind about safety of flight in a training environment. After an uneventful takeoff, we climbed to altitude and had an uneventful flight out. After a great lunch, we headed home.

I began my terminal-environment preparation when we were about 100 miles from our destination. ATIS at home field called for ceilings and visibility below the required minimums for our precision approaches. So, we changed our destination to our weather alternate, which was one of our smartest decisions of the day. From the

alternate, my IP said we would continue with our vectors to final for the ILS at home field, and then we'd fly a practice approach. Because we already had changed our destination, I understood this plan to be technically legal, but just because something is legal does not make it a good idea.

We commenced our first approach, but the radar vectors didn't work out, so my instructor again requested vectors to final for an ILS. Another warning flag: How necessary are these practice approaches to training versus the safety factor? Had we requested a PAR and backed it up with the ILS, the approach would have been much safer. Where's the ORM?

On the second try for the ILS, we discovered the ATIS was correct, and the field was below mins. As we intercepted our final course, my instructor told me training had ceased, and we would work together as a team to shoot the approach. As we approached the decision height, we obviously weren't going to break out, so we executed our missed-approach instructions and headed to Mobile Downtown Airport.

We could have pushed safety more with this flight in several ways. Simply deciding not to take off with the weather the way it was would have solved the whole problem. To negate some risk once airborne, we could have changed our destination to Mobile as soon as we got ATIS, and then we could have shot multiple approaches at Mobile Downtown for the check-in-the-box.

Last, although I felt confident no other airplanes were in the sky for us to run into, I still could have spoken up and gave my input regarding safety. 

1stLt. Kukla flies with VT-4.