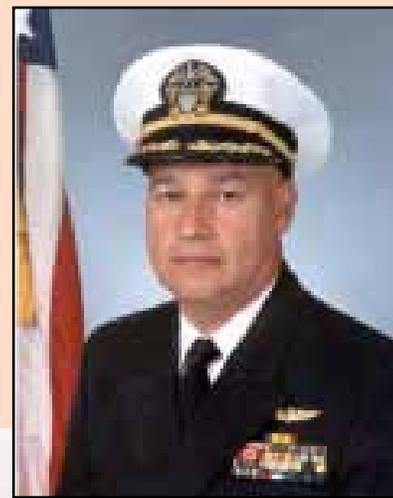


Safety First

By: Felix Tormes, M.D.

ROUTINE HOP



14 MARCH 2009. A routine solo IFR round-robin hop from PNS to MOB to maintain proficiency and instrument skills and exercise 38V.

The wx is soft IFR, overcast but with a high ceiling at 1,200, tops 4,000. Perfect. Flying among cumulus clouds and over an undercast imparts a dream-like quality to flying, and this will be a short hop to savor. With over 1700 hours in this Mooney, settling into the left seat feels comfortable and familiar.

All the sine qua nons complied with, wx self-briefed, preflight and check lists completed, the Continental reverberates into action after a week-long nap, eager to do its thing. Clearance delivers its homily, we taxi to the run up area and then on to the runway for departure with a 10 knot crosswind. Surface winds are from the SW, mentally noted in case of an unplanned landing today. Run up and all gages are nominal, and the aircraft is configured properly for departure. "Cleared for takeoff" always sounds like music, and we edge up on the upwind side of Pensacola's 150 foot wide RW 17. Centerline take offs are reserved for flight checks with fussy CFIs. Another favored aviation vignette unfolds; a long unobstructed runway seemingly extending for miles, and for the next 10 seconds, you own it.

On the roll, fuel flow is verified at 21-22 gph and engine analyzer shows steady columns. The turbo kicks in with a satisfying boost and the bird takes to the sky, climbing into its element, no longer a clumsy land cruiser.

Climbing continues smoothly to 500 feet, and we are primed to turn towards Pensacola Bay for a water landing if the motor tanks. Looking for a thousand feet, we remind ourselves that below that altitude, prior armchair cogitation has dictated no turn greater than 30 degrees, no turn back to the airport, just expect to get wet. We are absorbed into the light-chopped overcast, watching rivulets condense on the wind screen and run down the side window, then fix on the gages. The brief venture into the clag does not last long. The cockpit gradually lightens up and we savor another aviation delight, popping through a solid deck into dazzling sunshine and a deep azure sky. Backing off on power, we level at 4.4. A quick hand off to departure and we report level at 4.5, the hundred foot delta a modicum of insurance against an encounter with a compulsive VFR aviator parked at exactly 4,500 feet.

We skim over the dense undercast over southern Alabama, hoping it will

last another fifty nautical miles, but alas, the layers thin out and dissipate over the brown/green hue of Mobile Bay. Navigating now direct GIKEY for the WAAS approach to RWY 14 at MOB, it's clear this will be no real instrument approach, as the aerodrome is severe VFR, but still, George can use the practice. With the coupled approach dialed into the Garmin, I still marvel as how the aircraft tracks solidly on the magenta lines to BAYAS, then CAYAT, leaving me only configuration and power to manage. Glide slope is alive, and the gear clunks down into place. We are cleared to land, having been issued another temporary ownership of asphalt. The craft settles on the runway firmly, as if to say, you are back among the mortals now, the dream is over.

Nil illigitimae carborundum