

Self-loading cargo

When you learnt to fly, there was nothing better than the days when the instructor either got out of the aeroplane on the taxiway, or sent you off to the training area or around the countryside on your own. And quite a few of us spend most of our flying time on our own or with other pilots. But what do you need to think about differently when you carry self-loading cargo, also known as passengers? And especially, what about someone who's never flown in anything small and who thinks a light aircraft is one with only one aisle?

The briefing

The CASR Part 91 MOS lists the items you have to include in a passenger briefing. It's geared towards large passenger aircraft, hence it includes items such as seat backs, tray tables and emergency slides, and it's all about safety. But in the little bugsmasher, especially with a first-time passenger, once you've finished talking about safety you also want to make them feel comfortable.

For our simple little aircraft, the passenger briefing should start before you get to the aeroplane. Items you can mention before you leave the building include:

- Stay with me;
- No running on the tarmac;
- No smoking;
- Keep your eyes out for the dangerous things such as propellers;
- Don't be distracted, such as by having your head in your phone.

Also, if you need to carry life jackets or rafts, brief the pax on their use before you get to the aeroplane, since there's no room in a 4-seater to do the flight attendants' "This goes over your head, this goes around your waist, pull this tight" disco dance.

Once in the aircraft, we need to cover:

- How to do up and undo the seatbelts (if they're like in an airliner and not a car, point that out), and when to wear them;
- The exits, and how to lock and unlock the doors;
- Where to put any luggage;
- Any rules you want to impose about phones (CASR Part 91.C.8 states that the pilot in command can determine that it is or isn't safe to use them);
- No smoking;
- For the front-seat passenger – not to touch the controls, which includes the pedals;
- Not to interrupt you – staying silent on take-off and landing, and if you're talking or listening on the radio;
- Comfort – air vents, sick bags (I always like to reassure passengers that sick bags are like umbrellas – as long as we have them we won't need them), and to let you know if they're feeling uncomfortable;
- What to do if something goes wrong.

On the last point, I teach students not to use phrases like "emergency exits" or "in the event of an emergency." If it's a passenger's first time in a light aircraft, don't make them any more scared than

they already are. “If anything goes wrong” or “If we have to get out quickly” is less alarming. Keep the language nice and soothing.

Performance

At some stage during your training in a 4-seater, you probably did a load check to get the feel of flying the aeroplane when it was heavier. Factors to consider include the initial acceleration to climb speed. Rotate gently and keep the nose low enough to allow you to reach that speed. That may mean rotating to a slightly lower attitude than when you’re on your own. Climb performance will obviously be reduced, but there’s nothing you can do about that. Just maintain a proper climb speed and be patient!

On approach, you might need a bit more power, and if you flare too high or pull the power off too quickly on landing, you may find yourself being dumped on the ground harder than you’d like. Reduce the power to idle gently.

In the air

There are two things you can do much more easily to an inexperienced passenger than to a seasoned pilot: scare them, and make them sick. (What can you add to that list? Discuss over beer at the bar.) Northam Aero Club is not inhabited by pilots who’d do stunts like flying down a valley or over someone’s house at 100 feet, so we don’t really need to discuss that, but there are other things that might look okay to you but would scare the wits out of a passenger. As an example, if you’re not set up properly by 300 feet on final with passengers in the back, go round. Sideslipping and zigzagging or all those other silly things that people do to lose height in “glide approach, spot landing” competitions are fair enough if you’ve had an engine failure and you look like overshooting the paddock, and your butt is on the line. But for a normal approach, going round if it’s not right is not only good airmanship, but it also means your passengers are more likely to fly with you again.

Another way you may scare a passenger is to practice an emergency such as a forced landing. That shouldn’t be a problem because it’s illegal to practise emergencies with passengers on board. That particular piece of wisdom is now in CASR Part 91.725.

And on the subject of stunts, think about how you land a jet. You don’t hold off...hold off...hold off like in a 172, mainly because you chew up too much runway. You put it on the ground; we all know what a normal big jet landing feels like. If you land a light aircraft properly with a first-time light aircraft passenger on board, it will be the smoothest landing they’ve ever felt, which makes you, dear reader, a legend in their eyes!

When it comes to comfort, a couple of items come to mind. You won’t do it on a 40 degree day or a rough day. And if you’re bouncing around a bit, be conscious of how the pax are faring. From all his time flying kids around over Northam, Ashley Smith will tell you, “It’s all right if they’re arcing up and making noise. You only get worried when they’re all quiet. Or worse still, when they’re arcing up then they go quiet!”

Remember too, any time you’ve sat in the back of a 4- or 6-seater, a bit further than normal from the CoG, it feels different, not just in turbulence but also in turns. When you’re turning, be gentle on your back-seat pax. And the best way to stop them getting sick (apart from not flying when it’s a washing machine) is to use the pedals, not as footrests, but to keep the ball in the middle.

And we have a club member who is now allowed to put all the above worldly wisdom to use. I was remiss to not include it in my last article, but Matt Sewell passed his RPL test on March 26th.