

Tom's Thunderstorm

Thorough planning can make an impression

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It was a hot, muggy September morning, and the Piper Warrior's interior, even with the door open, did little to circulate the air in the hangar. The hangar itself offered little shielding from the sun at the angle it was bearing down on Tom and me, and I was already beginning to sweat underneath my khakis and collared shirt.

What a day to do a systems discussion.

Tom and I had just started working together earlier that week and had not yet flown together. At first, this particular morning looked promising, but I sat Tom down at the WSI terminal to start explaining the weather side of preflight planning. The forecast predicted that thunderstorms would pop up in the vicinity within the next hour or two, but the radar showed nothing and the current reports all around had nothing but a high broken layer west of us.

That was all most of my colleagues and their students looked at. One by one, they asked us to "check the radar," felt satisfied, and went to the hangar to pull out the planes and get started on the training period. I hesitated.

I could have gotten in a long-winded discussion about instability and air mass thunderstorm development, but it was too early in his course to get into such detail; besides, I'm certain he wanted no other answer than the one that was going to see us in the air. The more advanced students I've worked with have often lost the desire to fly immediately. Patience has saved all of

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us some trouble, or lack of it has let us meet it head on. Yet Tom, like all new students, had an urgency of purpose. He was excited and was watching his instructor deliberate over a decision his peers hadn't hesitated about.

His diminishing confidence in his new instructor showed in his eyes. His instructor was scared to go flying when everyone else would. His instructor doesn't understand what everybody else does. His instructor is not as good as the other instructors.

It's a dilemma I've dealt with before. Cancel the flight, and you'd better hope that your conservatism is well justified; otherwise, you risk the possibility of the student's losing faith in the system. Why study the weather with the intensity that we professionals know he should if the effort only prevents us from flying on a perfectly good day? Of course, flying if the weather turns against us is even worse.

So there we were, sweating in the cockpit of this hangared airplane, talking about the fuel system. Periodically, another instructor and student would haul out an airplane from one of the other hangars, preflight, and taxi away. My extensive show for decision-making was beginning to look like a boy crying wolf.

A half-hour passed, then the door on the Warrior abruptly blew shut. I peered outside for the first time in several moments, and leaned forward to glance off to the west. The trees, which had scarcely been moving 10 minutes ago, were now bending over, ever more violently. The source of the gale towered to the west—a dark cumulus buildup that had come to justify my skepticism.

"That's a gust front," I said casually to Tom. I added no further explanation. We saw lightning flash a moment later.

The doors to the hangars next to us started to rumble as the motors pulled them open. Frantically, many of the same instructors who had so casually evaluated the forecast were scurrying about, shoving airplanes back into hangars as it started to rain. There was a line of them—students and instructors alike getting pummeled by the rain. And then by hail.

Tom and I watched the havoc for several minutes in silence. I heard one instructor say, "That came out of nowhere!"

Tom looked at me and said, "Good call." I smiled. Some lessons stick better than others, but I think this one will stay with him. It certainly stayed with me.