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SAFETY FIRST

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PILOT SKILLS AND THE COMPUTER-BASED ACHILLES' HEEL

My turn at the FPA helm, which ended last July, provided several opportunities to conduct long cross-country flights. In addition, since retiring from active medical practice, more disposable time has presented itself for additional time in the cockpit.

The most recent flight out of my aerial neighborhood was to Smyrna, TN to assist a hangar buddy needing a hop to pick up his MU-2. The flight was IFR both ways. The G 500 which I retrofitted in the Mooney has made IFR flight and, specifically, IFR approaches seem less taxing and more comforting. I hesitate to say "safer" because, so far, there is no statistical evidence that glass is better than steam, all other factors being equal, in GA aircraft conducting Part 91 ops. The recent accident 24 NOV involving a Rockwell AC-690A which flew into a mountain departing Phoenix at night is the type of accident which ostensibly should not occur in this day and age with easily obtainable terrain data in an inexpensive GPS portable unit. And certainly one would expect a panel-mounted unit with visual and aural alerts in an aircraft of this class. So these accidents still happen, but, subjectively, having a panel with traffic, terrain, weather, stored approaches and synthetic vision does provide one with the sense that risk factors should be significantly mitigated by the proper use of this equipment. I can't help but think that, in time, the true value of technologically advanced aircraft will become evident in collated data reports, such as the Nall Report published by AOPA's Air Safety Institute.

I have a friend with whom I periodically fly approaches, trading seats in each

others' similar airplanes as safety pilot. This has proven to be the most effective way for me to maintain IFR currency, and on virtually every flight I have picked up a pearl to improve my performance. There is no substitute for recency of experience to maintain proficiency, and the stats on the last Nall report do verify that.

Even with a well-equipped airplane however, there are potential pitfalls. For example, although weather display has been remarkably helpful in instrument conditions, my return flight from Smyrna to Pensacola was on an IFR day when the screen was nearly saturated with green and yellow. Sixty miles north of PNS, the controller advised me of moderate to heavy precipitation at my 1 o'clock, ten miles, while my display showed... nothing in a 2 minute old scan. ATC offered a vector which I took, but I still flew into an area of heavy rain which I later noted took some paint off the aircraft. Discussing this incident with my avionics shop disclosed that they had had a number of recent similar complaints. In fact, a Garmin Software Service Bulletin #1120 applicable to the GDL 69 Wx receiver had been issued to address the problem. Returning from Mobile for that fix, the synthetic vision disappeared mysteriously, necessitating a return flight to BFM.

So it appears that our great state-of-the-art avionics are subject to failure just like any computer. Yet another responsibility for us as pilots to personally remain current and a concomitant encumbrance to keep the electrons in our boxes well fed and chirpy.

Nil illigiti carborundum