

# How the IMC rating

*Claims made to EASA that the IMC rating does nothing for safety can be given the lie a thousand times over. By Pat Malone*

I owe my life to the IMC rating. As a 90-hour pilot coming home to Biggin Hill from Le Touquet I ran into a front that was almost 100 miles ahead of where it was forecast to be – which, I later discovered, is within the bounds of forecasting accuracy. I was being forced ever lower by rain and mist, the cars coming towards me on the M25 all had their headlights on, and I realised I would not clear the ridge above Sevenoaks. Even 24 years on, I can still feel the fear... I had no option but to climb into the gloom. Every time I looked at the artificial horizon it seemed to be on one stop or the other. I diverted to Manston in solid IMC for a radar approach – it wasn't pretty, I bounced the landing and couldn't stop shaking for an hour. My passenger Michael Robotham survived to become a best-selling author, so you can chalk two lives up to the IMC rating on one day.

Some time later I was able to discuss the flight with AOPA's then chief executive Ron Campbell, and he grinned so widely that his pipe almost vanished into his moustache. This was exactly what the IMCR was created for, he said. Prompted by deaths due to scud-running, Ron and Peter Skinner had proposed the rating to the AOPA Instructors Committee, written the syllabus and persuaded the CAA to adopt it in the face of quite vocal opposition from those who said it would encourage the poorly-qualified to attempt too much. The doubters have been proved wrong, again and again and again.

Ron finished his homily by telling me I was an idiot for not having landed at Lydd or Headcorn when things were starting to get difficult and gave me sound advice as to my future conduct. I've enjoyed the last 24 years of life. I'm grateful to Ron and Peter Skinner, to AOPA and the CAA for creating this lifesaving rating, and to the late Cyril Knight at King-Air for forcing me to take the IMC course against my better judgement. I have proselytised the rating ever since, and I have met scores of people with similar cause to be thankful for the IMC. I am utterly bewildered by that tiny British group who have told EASA that claims that the IMC rating improves safety are not supported by "the facts." Here are some facts – and the fight to save the IMC rating needs more like them. If you have a story like these, email it to me at [info@richmondaviation.co.uk](mailto:info@richmondaviation.co.uk). Some of these stories come from AOPA members, most from readers of Loop magazine, some from pilots who are simply concerned for their own safety and that of tomorrow's pilots. Opponents of the IMC rating please note – these people are not just "upset at losing privileges", as some of you claim, they are angry that their lives are going to be put at risk for no good reason. Privileges don't come into it. I'm sorry we can't publish all these letters in their entirety but here's a representative selection:

## David Smith

I need to be quite clear about this; if I did not have the IMC rating, I would not be here to write this. About seven years ago, when I was still flying club aircraft, I took a Cessna 152 out for what was to be a brief flight to maintain my currency. Fortunately, I filled it with fuel before departing. The forecast suggested a window of OK weather in what was not a good day. When the weather cleared, the CFI gave his blessing. I headed north for ten minutes into clear blue skies, did a 180 to return and noted that there was a mass of cloud coming in over Plymouth. Not a problem, the aircraft had an ADF and I could practice an NDB approach. I requested the approach and was told to report beacon outbound. As I completed the base turn I descended into cloud and continued to minima. Plymouth then gave a cloudbase of 400' and I decided to go around. Back up in the hold at 3000' I was still in cloud whilst I decided what to do. The weather was marginally better at St. Mawgan and I knew that they had Precision Approach Radar to help get me down. St. Mawgan were very helpful and vectored me all the way and the rest of the flight was relatively uneventful apart from the serious crosswind. This was because of the very strong south westerly winds. However, my log book tells me that I was airborne for 1 hour 45 minutes, and I was in cloud for over 1 hour 15 minutes. The details of this incident are clear to me because I subsequently wrote an article for the Plymouth flying school newsletter entitled 'The IMC rating – why bother?' My advice for all pilots in the UK is that unless you are absolutely certain that the weather will allow your entire flight to be in VMC,

## Surviving the unexpected

I have a PPL with twin rating and IMC rating. A friend with an ATPL flew with me often as safety pilot and I was able to practice instrument flying, including approaches.

On January 25th 2001 I had arranged to meet with my friend to fly from Conington to Aberdeen in Scotland. I agreed to drop off two more friends at Inverness. The weather for the trip looked very good. It was cold, bright and with no precipitation expected. We took off into clear blue sky and watched the east coast unfold beneath us. Our course took us up to St Abbs VOR and then more or less direct to Inverness. The sun was still shining and the sky clear as we passed Edinburgh and we were talking to Scottish FIR. As we approached the Grampian Mountains we noticed there appeared to be a curtain of what we thought was light rain, but as there had been no significant weather reports and we were by now talking to the Kinloss controller we decided to carry on. The controller had reported 10k vis and light winds for Inverness. We were suddenly engulfed in strong winds and severe turbulence with up and downdraughts in the region of 3000 feet per minute. The screens froze and I noticed I was having to constantly increase the angle of attack to maintain altitude as we picked up ice. I was flying solely on instruments, watching airspeed and angle of bank as we were tossed around in the turbulence. My friend requested a descent from the controller in order to attempt to find warmer air and we were cleared to 4000 feet from 6000 feet. By this time the airspeed was dangerously low and as we came out of the cloud I could see only through a small area of the screen which had cleared. During the descent my friend had become unconscious, having hit his head on the airframe in the turbulence, although I didn't realise this until we were on the ground. I was too focused on flying the aeroplane, something my instructors had drilled into me – when

you are in trouble first focus on flying the aeroplane then look to sort the problem. I decided to make a forced landing on a flat mountain top at Lochnagar, close to Balmoral. As the aeroplane landed in the deep snow and ice the wheels dug in and we came to an abrupt stop. The engine and windows all went but we were down, and a quick check said we were all alive. We vacated the aircraft intending to stay with it until rescued but the wind took it down the side of the mountain to its final resting place. We had seen that there was something like 70mm of clear ice on top of the wing. We were eventually detected by a Nimrod aircraft from Kinloss and a Sea King helicopter launched to recover us, but on approaching the area it was being sucked down into the mountains by the downdraughts and so returned to base. Later another Sea King with a mountain rescue team on board made it to us and we were recovered after four hours on the mountain. We were taken to Aberdeen Royal Infirmary where we were treated for our injuries. It was only after all this and when I had returned home I began to think about just how important that training my friend had given me had been. Without the knowledge to keep flying on instruments we would probably have entered an un-recoverable spin with the weight of ice on the aeroplane and ended up at the bottom of the loch as had so many pilots before us.

I would urge all new pilots to undertake IMC training. The rule of turning back 180 degrees is fine sometimes but in our situation it would not have helped. The AAIB report put the accident down to extreme severe weather conditions. The crash was covered in the national press, and later we participated in a reconstruction for the BBC program 999.

I hope this clearly shows the value of the IMC rating and how invaluable it can be to pilots who for financial, time or other reasons cannot undertake a full IR. **Stephen Broughton**



# IMC saves lives

then you need an IMC rating (or better) and a suitably equipped aircraft. This is the advice that was given to me when I first learnt to fly and I pass it on to you now. The IMC rating is not just about getting back down again; gaining and maintaining it has a wealth of other benefits in terms of expanding understanding and capability. It allows you to fly like a professional pilot and make use of many of the services that are available. What happens if they take the IMC rating away? Well, next time I get caught out by the weather I'll just stay within the law and calmly fly straight into the ground. I think not!

## Anthony Kedros

I am seriously upset by the prospect of losing the IMCR due to the misunderstandings as to what the rating actually is and to the apparent misrepresentation of it by the FCL-008 group to EASA. Over the last twenty years I have logged 1,900 hours of which 124 have been flown on instruments. I am sure that my life has been saved, or accidents prevented, more than once by the skills learnt and practiced thanks to this excellent and uniquely British rating. The proposed en route alternative is, in my view, a cynical and potentially fatal red herring. The PPL IR is an excellent tool for those who wish to fly in controlled airspace (in a suitable aircraft) but its purpose is quite

different from the IMCR. The two should not be confused.

## Ian Sutherland

When flying over the mountains into Switzerland, good VFR, we hit a light mist that covered the whole windscreen with ice and stopped all external reference. My IMC hit in, straight and level, took the 180 turn and after a nervous half hour we cleared back to VFR. I have no doubt that without the simple training the position could have become much more serious. We must save the IMC rating. I am one of the older private pilots, gaining my PPL in 1959 after three years' RAF University Air Squadron flying. And I still maintain it and use it and my IMC rating. I never got into instructing or any further progression but the IMC is an essential part of my safety consciousness nowadays. I think no PPL should be allowed to progress to long distance flying without this experience. Keep the IMC and save lives.

## Steve Mills

On a trip to the Isle of Wight, on the return we found that while the weather had mentioned isolated storm cells which I had expected to be able to see and avoid, we were caught up in a major belt of thunderstorms. Ironically and by sheer coincidence my IMC examiner was 20 minutes ahead of me in the same weather on

the same route. The weather was poor ahead and rapidly worsening behind us, with airports such as Oxford being closed because of the weather. We soon found ourselves riding a bucking bronco in pitch black with sheet lightning all around. We had no choice but to press on since it was worse behind and to the sides. Relying on a radar service from Brize Norton, and using the Sat Nav to stay clear of cities and towns, we picked our way across open country towards East Midlands. Finally there was a brief break in the clouds and we were able to touch down safely at Nottingham Tollerton, our home base. This was not a flight that I felt at all proud of – quite the reverse, as I felt stupid to have somehow managed to carefully check the forecasts and still get caught up in such awful weather. However the IMC training paid off and although I could see nothing at all, I was able to calmly fly through the bad weather and get safely home while steering away from populated areas in case the aircraft was brought down by a lightning strike.

Since then I have had flights where, for example, under the control of Farnborough I've been asked to climb into cloud to avoid other traffic that was crossing my path, and again the IMC paid off - they gave me a radar service and there was no problem. There are many days when we suffer low cloud and GA aircraft are crammed into the small space below the cloud, whereas with IMC one can readily climb above the cloud where the weather is sunny and there are hardly any other aircraft to be seen. I am a cautious pilot who believes safety first, second and third and I never go out looking for trouble. However I'm confident that my



aviationpictures.com



IMC training adds a whole dimension of additional safety elements to my flying. If I could not have my IMC then I think I would need to sell my share and give up.

#### **James Anderson**

On my PPL cross country I was caught out by deteriorating weather and came close to killing myself. I realised then that I needed additional skills to stay safe in the UK's changeable weather. A year after my PPL I did my IMC rating. It is a wonderful rating that does exactly what it says - staying safe when IMC conditions close in. It has precious little to do with IR ratings and flying airways and CAT III landings. In 20 years of flying I have been in IMC conditions relatively rarely, but have been very grateful for the skills and knowledge to fly safely. The IMC rating brings people back to add to their skills. Why on Earth would anyone want to obstruct that?

#### **Graham Webster**

There have been a number of occasions when my IMC has been perhaps life-saving. Typical is the clear day, but with cloud base at 2000 feet, when I flew a short hop from Exeter to Eaglescott to do some grass circuits. As I left to return to Exeter at 1,500 feet, I found that the cloud was lower and I entered it at 1000 feet in a rate one turn. I was surprised and disorientated. My IMC training allowed me to remain calm, concentrate on the instruments, level and climb for a few seconds, then to recommence my turn onto course. When in 2006 I flew to Amsterdam, during that wonderful summer, and left the Cessna on the airfield for 3 days. By the time I returned, the good summer had come to an end and I had to engage a flying instructor with an IR to sit in the passenger seat back to Exeter in case I needed to enter cloud. Total cost £500, and what if there had not been an instructor available? Until my IMC can be used on the continent, I will not be doing that again!

#### **John McHugh**

My reason for obtaining the IMC rating was the difficulty I had in returning from Plymouth early in my flying days. I have used the skills and privileges of the rating on many occasions taking friends on many trips. Had we been restricted by imperfect weather it is unlikely that these people would have wanted to continue going on holidays with me and had my flying been limited to trips in the local area I would never have achieved the confidence to undertake trips to such places as Spain and Morocco. On occasions it has been a lifesaver when I have had to use instrument approaches to land. I have done the IR theory examinations and I'm considering the practical course. The theory, however, requires a great deal of spare time and the practical requires quite a lot of money. The IR seems to me to be aimed more at a commercial level of flying. A European wide IMC I think would be a more practical, safer and economically viable option.

#### **Peter Curley**

As a result of misjudgement of the weather, I elected to fly back to my base when cloud was low, believing it was such that I would be able to maintain VFR. The cloud got lower and the ground higher and when I decided to do a 180 turn I found the cloud had lowered and filled in behind me. Fortunately I had an IMC rating which I had not renewed for a couple of years, but thankfully the training had not lapsed and I was able to climb in IMC to clear the hills and continue the 20 miles to my base descending

on ADF to break clear of cloud in sight of the field. It was my error which caused the situation, the outcome of which, had I not had the IMC training, could have been bad.

#### **Bryan Cheek**

I feel quite strongly that the IMC should stay and ideally should be usable throughout Europe. I have been flying since 1977 and gained an IMC in 1979 (the old 10-hour one with a VDF let-down, not anywhere near enough). I must say that while with an IMC rating flying in cloud was still a serious business, I found that flying in poor vis was never a problem again, even as a low hours PPL. I have been a flying instructor for 25 years teaching at weekends with the day job as a builder. I hold only a CPL with no IR, I teach IMC and feel that to get a student up to a good standard in a single requires 30 plus hours. I tell my people that I want them to be able to do an ILS to maybe 300ft - the recommended minima is 500 - just because they may get caught out. I also want them to be able to think ahead, plan a good cross-country and shoot a good approach. I say that if they do it with me it may take a few more hours but they will be capable at the end. I use the IMC myself, not in terrible weather but after 30 years of flying you can rarely go from A to B without finding a cloud somewhere and if you can sort things out it makes for less delays and you are much less hassle to ATC if you go IFR with no fuss and fit into the system at small regional airports.

#### **Gordon MacKenzie**

As an IMC holder I have used it many times to fly above cloud rather than 'scud running'. My intention is usually to descend through a suitable hole in the cloud near my destination. However, I always have an alternative airport with approach facilities selected and carry up to date charts for it just in case. In my opinion, going out of sight of the surface without the ability to carry out an instrument approach is unsafe.

The IMC exists in the UK for good reason. This is a typical example of trying to 'fix something which ain't broke'. Standardisation should be welcomed when it brings benefits and removes red tape. It should not be used to remove privileges people already have.

#### **Peter Brause**

I have held a PPL for 18 years, for 16 of which I have had the privilege of using my IMC rating along with a night rating. I now despair with the thought of possibly losing that rating, when it has been so very useful for me in the past on many occasions. While it was never intended to be an IR, the IMC has enabled me to get home safely and legally on the many days where VMC would have been impossible. Due to the climate in the UK it would be a very sad day if we PPL/IMC pilots were to lose our rating. Please don't take this privilege from us.

#### **Steven Bailey**

I started an IMC rating about six months after I got my PPL(A), because I realised when I started to learn to fly how crucial it could be to safety, particularly in the UK. Shortly after completing my IMC skills test I unexpectedly hit zero visibility over the Thames estuary on the way back from France. The forecast had been okay, but I did a diversion into Southend in IMC with a radar vectored ILS approach and broke cloud just under 800 feet AGL. I sat it out for a few hours then flew to Elstree when the cloud lifted. This option would have been

unavailable without my IMC training and I would have had to turn back to the south coast. Since then, I have used my instrument training on many occasions to fly through cloud under radar control, either up to gain better visibility or down for an approach to land. Nevertheless, despite the VFR rules being different in some countries in mainland Europe to the UK (for example, flying VFR above cloud and out of sight of the surface is permissible in France) an 'en-route' IR would be worthless to me. I don't want intentionally to try to fly long distances in IMC, nor do I want to fly in airways (and I don't expect the commercial jets will welcome me there, strolling along at 110 kts, either). I do need to be able to do instrument approaches to land in IMC when the need arises.

#### **Roger Pannell**

Having obtained my PPL/A in 1995, it did not take me long to realise that an IMC rating was an essential requirement for aviation safety. I remember to this day the flight in late 1995 that gave me this realisation. I was flying from Southend to Bristol Filton for a meeting. The cloud was a thin layer of stratus with a base at Southend was around 1500' with the weather forecasted to improve to the east. My route took me a couple of miles north of the Membury mast. By the time I reached the Membury area, the cloud pushed me down to around 1300'. Although acutely aware of the 1200' mast, I passed it without seeing it.

This flight would have been so much safer and comfortable if I could have navigated through the clear sky on top of the cloud layer. Since

obtaining my IMC rating in early 1996, I have used it mainly for short transits through clouds to clearer skies on top. About 30% of my flights will involve such transits. In the 13 years I have held the rating, I have had to use it twice for a real instrument landing. Both times have been when the actual weather at the destination was different from the forecast. The first time was on a two hour flight from Southend to Plymouth. Despite the forecast, Plymouth was fog bound on arrival, so I had to divert to Exeter for an ILS approach. The second occasion was on a two-hour flight from Eaglescott (Devon) to Clacton. On arrival at Clacton, it was fog bound so I had to divert to Southend for an instrument approach. Removing the privileges of this rating from UK pilots will be a bad step for aviation safety. Weather forecasts will always be that - forecasts. The UK weather is very changeable and difficult to predict accurately and aviation forecasts and VOLMET are not given for smaller airfields. The IMC rating gives the pilot another tool in his armoury that is very useful when meeting bad weather. I am not sure I would wish to continue flying without the security of the IMC safety net.

#### **Shaun**

With 270 hours in my log book, I have to sincerely state that the IMC rating was the most productive, informative and useful training course I have ever completed in my brief flying 'career'. In fact, this rating is so



beneficial it should be made a compulsory 'bolt-on' for all PPL holders to undergo within two years of completing their PPL. This rating has enabled me on many occasions to confidently cope with the ever-changing weather conditions of the UK and to enable me to safely conduct my flight using all the instruments and radar services available to me. The IMC needs defending and protecting.

#### **Pip Kent**

I obtained my IMC rating sometime in 1988 as an insurance against the variable weather in GB where, as we well know, conditions can change rapidly against forecast and within relatively small areas. I do believe that this rating improved my ability as a pilot even in VFR navigation, helping me with the use of my various navigation instruments (and maps!) to keep clear of places I should be clear of and with a better situation awareness.

My flying has always been for pleasure and I never set out on a flight deliberately into IMC conditions. However I did on occasion bump into clouds that had not been forecast on my route! I have also used the rating to climb through fairly thin cloud cover to fly on top. Now, even though I have allowed my rating to lapse, I am confident that I have not totally lost the important skill of the instrument scan. Even so, I still would not take off to fly in dubious weather conditions. There is no doubt in my mind that the IMC rating is a valuable aid to flight safety and should be retained.

#### **Ian Hollingsworth**

I would like to express my concerns as to the intention to remove the IMC rating as part of EASA harmonisation. My understanding is that one of the absolute prime tenets of flying is safety, and to remove the IMC rating for UK pilots flying in UK airspace is a serious retrograde step. To justify its removal by simply using the argument of European harmonisation is simply unreasonable and will jeopardise pilots and restrict flights. The fact that this rating is not recognised outside the UK is no reason to remove it and the bureaucratic view of 'neat paperwork' does not save lives. Would the UK push to remove other safety rating for other countries' pilots? So why are we not taking an absolutely intransigent position on securing the safety of our own pilots?

#### **Paul Headland**

I took the IMC rating a few years ago in order to improve my flying skills and give myself an extra safety margin for flying in the very fickle British weather. It has proved to be invaluable on many occasions. I try to keep in practice with ILS approaches when flying with other aircraft group members, as these could prevent the risk of a serious incident. My IMC rated friends agree with these views, and remain in practice themselves. The removal of this rating could have a serious effect on the safety of flying in the UK. I am sure that no one would willingly want to jeopardise the safety of flight in British conditions by removing this excellent qualification.

#### **Peter Keeling**

Regarding getting out of poor situations – having and using the IMC rating means rarely getting into one. I have a better understanding of weather, I never get lost, and unexpected bad weather does not increase cockpit workload in the same way it might for a strictly VFR pilot. Having the option of ILS/NDB/RNAV approaches when the weather gets bad is all part of the kind of flying I do, day or night. Should the IMC rating be removed from my license I would either cease flying for business, eventually stop flying altogether or fly illegally. It makes no sense to only teach someone only half of the skills to fly. Flying in cloud, landing on instruments and dealing with generally poor (typically UK) weather is and should be very much part of light aviation, provided you have the practice, skills and equipment to do it safely. I strongly believe that the IMC rating should be extended to cover all European states. We don't need to fly in airways or Class A — let's keep the IMC rating and let's extend it to all of Europe, for safety's sake.

#### **John Cope**

The IMC Rating ain't broke so why do EASA want to fix it with an EU-wide 'sub IR' rating which won't be worth the paper it's written on if it doesn't prepare and allow the pilot to land in conditions below VFR minima? Rather than reinventing the wheel, EASA could do far worse than introduce an EU-wide International Meteorological Conditions rating, abbreviated 'IMC rating' and based on the UK IMC rating! Obviously this can't happen because it's not invented by all those very clever people at EASA who couldn't possibly be seen to be in favour of a safety rating used by a small number of pilots on an even smaller little island somewhere just north of Calais! Undertaking the knowledge and skills-based training that the IMC rating demands, in my opinion, makes for better pilots and safer

skies. The thought of the IMC rating being removed from my licence I would find very sad indeed. I might even be minded to take the matter to 'those very clever people' at the European Court of Human Rights!

#### **Andrew Mumford**

My relatively limited experience (450 hrs) of flying in the UK has made me realise that our changeable weather conditions in the UK are such that the basic PPL can only be regarded as just that - a basic qualification which really just enables solo flight a short distance from the home airfield, and without the skills taught in the IMC rating, makes long distance flying positively dangerous in all but the finest of weather conditions. I am amazed that we in the UK seem to lead Europe in having such a qualification, and I can only ascribe that to our rather perverse weather conditions - although France is only a few miles away to the south. Although any prudent pilot will check on weather before departure, it has been known to change in flight, and although I have never actually needed to use my ability to make an instrument approach, having the ability to do so if all else fails gives one an enormous feeling of confidence when conditions do deteriorate. It is my firmly held view that the IMC rating makes my flying safer - indeed, I would argue that flight in the UK is unsafe without it. I would also like to point out that, were the qualification to be removed, thus potentially making GA flight less safe, action could be taken under EU Human Rights Legislation.

#### **Andy Blatch**

I gained my pilots licence six years ago. After 100 hours I gained my IMC rating and have flown over 500 hours since. I am very pleased that I have an IMC rating as I can fly more than if I was VFR; the rating has made me a better pilot and more confident. I would be very annoyed with EASA if they removed my rating after all my hard work gaining it.

#### **Brian Payne**

I wish to voice my total opposition to the abolition of the IMC rating. This rating has contributed substantially to safer flying in the UK. I obtained the rating 13 years ago and without doubt it has made me a safer, more proficient pilot. It has given me more confidence to take on longer cross country flights without worrying too much if the weather closes in. On several occasions I have returned to my home airfield in marginal VFR but with the confidence and ability to use and interpret nav aids. In particular one winter's afternoon returning in low winter sun when forward visibility was poor I was able to return safely and confidently by sole reference to instruments, something I could not have done without the IMC rating. This rating has enhanced my flying skills, taught me how to fly with more precision and accuracy and greatly improved my safe operation of aircraft. It would certainly be a backward step to abolish this valuable rating which is a great aid to flight safety.

#### **Keith R Taylor**

I recall returning from Ireland to Blackbushe. Weather good on departure and at destination, but as I approached Wales and the mountains, the cloud was billowy, base at 1500-2000 probably 7/8. I was able to climb to about 6000 over the tops in good vis and continue with confidence. Although the conditions had deteriorated at home, it was not sufficient to

Keith Wilson



#### **Howard Rutherford**

The facility in our pretty dubious UK weather to climb to sector safe and then do a controlled cloud break to landing is so obviously a good thing that I am amazed there is any dispute - it is a total no-brainer. I remember a very hairy flight in northern France where I could not climb and fly IMC and I ended up dodging masts etc. in the murk wishing I was anywhere else but in the plane - a climb into IMC would have been ideal but was not allowed. Actually 20 miles further on all was sun and happiness again. Not great flight planning I accept to get myself into the position but it is easily done as I was flying I believed into improving conditions but I feel it illustrates the point.

#### **David Scrutton**

As a lapsed IMC rating holder, now NPPL, I am rather bemused that with the exciting prospect of cheap and widely available virtual terrain avionics and experimentation by air traffic services with WAAS approaches, EASA is being so short-sighted. I am convinced that sooner rather than later, light aircraft will be enabled to land automatically, or under control using virtual terrain/runway technology. Until that time comes, why not permit the status quo in the UK, where variable weather makes heavier demands on the pilot population and the safety aspects of the IMC rating have been proven?

affect IMC flight, and I was able to home in on CPT, descend through cloud and land safely. There was no pressure, the passengers were happy to be home safely after an enjoyable weekend. At my age (68) it is impractical to obtain a full IR irrespective of the cost. The full benefit of IR is only for those in long range aircraft going airways. Removal of IMC rating would in my opinion, cause a number experienced pilot currently IMC to continue flying in poor conditions and taking chances because it would now be illegal, and uninsured. I am sure that many pilots in other European countries continue flying in marginal conditions despite not having IMC or equivalent.

#### **Charles Barlow**

Weather in the UK is very difficult to predict and can change very suddenly and I can think of at least four situations in which my IMC training spared me and my aircraft from the potential hazards of sudden and unpredictable weather changes. When you, as a pilot, are faced with potentially life threatening danger, resulting from a sudden change in weather conditions, the last thing on your mind is any bureaucracy that might be waiting for you on the ground. The adrenalin kicks in and you use all the training you have and every bit of kit at your disposal to solve the problem.

#### **David Allard**

I have spent thousands of pounds in gaining, practising and renewing the IMC rating and use it regularly. It improves one's general VFR flying skills. By training to a higher skill level and being able to use all instruments and navigation aids in the aircraft not just for cross-country but to fly holds and approaches, makes one a more skilful pilot when flying VFR. I meet a number of PPLs who have not bothered to gain their IMC Rating and I'm convinced that they are missing out on a very satisfying dimension to flying. It enhances safety. If I fly cross-country and the weather is becoming more hazy or cloudy or showery, I know I can climb to the MSA and be able to make a safe instrument approach at my destination, which is usually my home airfield of Gloucester. Without an IMC Rating (or IR) I would have to descend below the MSA to remain in VMC which could be more dangerous because I am relying on seeing terrain and obstacles to avoid them.

#### **David O'Donnell**

I have about 550hrs in all types but only secured my IMC rating three years ago. I wish I had done it sooner. I have found that my flying has improved tremendously since achieving the rating. I have much more confidence in handling the aircraft and more confidence about my decision-making when the weather turns poor. Despite having the IMC I still tend to be cautious about when I fly and very much consider the IMC as a 'get you home' tool. I have exercised my privileges on several occasions. Most were after a flight in VMC (or in clear sky but not in sight of the ground) with gathering low cloud requiring a descent through cloud with an instrument approach. Flying in Scotland this is quite common, with low cloud hugging the coasts. One also becomes very conscious of MSAs! The approaches were a mixture of NDB, VOR/ILS and Radar Vectored ILS. Last summer I did an extended tour of France and Spain with colleagues. The weather in mainland Europe was wall-to-wall sunshine but we were required to exercise our IMC

ratings on the UK legs of the tour both outbound and inbound. The whole purpose of the IMC rating is to allow the pilot to get on the ground at the end of a flight! Having an en-route IR rating would not benefit me in the slightest.

#### **Andrew Turner**

I took IMC to try to improve the accuracy of my flying, further my general knowledge and airmanship, and improve my ability to make safe decisions as to when and when not to fly. Only last week on a business trip the weather closed in a little quicker than expected. I decided to divert to my alternate which was also unavailable due to poor weather. Because of my IMC training, I had sufficient fuel and the relevant plates to enable a safe landing at another airfield. I flew around 1.5 hours IMC during that flight and felt confident and competent enough to make the correct decisions in plenty of time. The weather in the UK is changeable to say the least. IMC is an important factor in keeping GA pilots safe. The instrument approaches that are allowed under IMC privileges are literally life savers. To remove this facility seems sheer madness and will, in my opinion, endanger lives. The en-route IR will do little to help a pilot get out of trouble. In fact, it may encourage some into it! What possible use is a privilege that encourages a pilot to take off VMC, knowing that the weather en-route will worsen, and then hope that the destination airfield will miraculously be VMC upon arrival? If, as will probably be the case, it is not suitable for VMC, how will a pilot with no instrument training get safely back to the ground? Please, please, think about this, EASA. Leave our IMC as it is!

#### **John Goodale**

IMC training in the British Isles is without doubt a necessary adjunct to the PPL. It has saved me from some difficult moments in marginal weather conditions which occur so quickly in this country (sea frets and fast-approaching maritime frontal systems). Without doubt the disorientation caused by these events with no IMC training would probably have been very near terminal. As it is I was able to remain fairly composed and keep the aircraft under control while working out what to do next to return to VFR. All we need is a simple rating which can be protective in a fast developing situation wherever we are. The

proposal for a formal En Route Instrument Rating to enable its use in airways is technically too complex and the departure would be in VFR by definition, but who the hell can guarantee that a fret would not occur at the destination field, or even an alternate? The fact is that once in the air it is necessary to come down and no amount of theorising will help this process if it is necessary to do the let-down in conditions that are below VFR minima. The adoption of the airways scheme would increase the workload on the ATC people and who wants to mix slow moving light aircraft with the usual airway traffic? There can be NO LOGICAL REASON for dropping the IMC rating. Its removal is totally against any health and safety risk assessment. We must take the best of all the countries' ratings and maintain them not just destroy everything in the name of 'harmonisation', whatever that might mean.

#### **Manfred**

It is quite absurd to abolish this valuable rating within the UK – it would be very beneficial if Europe would adapt one. This rating gives more training to any pilot and hence makes him/her more professional and secure; gives the pilot in our climate or any for that matter more confidence and flexibility to reach destinations and fly more – consequently with more flying comes even better safety and handling; this is a logical step up from the 'round the windsock' flying. Needless to say that IMC has helped me on many occasions to complete a safe flight.

#### **Martyn Young**

I opted to get the IMC rating to make me a safer pilot - increased situational awareness must lead to greater safety. I have used the rating 'in anger' on several occasions when the weather had closed in unexpectedly, and on one occasion had to track to an airport for a weather diversion via VOR and NDB, making an ILS approach down to minimums in order to get in. Scary, and it certainly concentrated the mind, but without the rating, I'd probably still be up there! The rating has also helped me become a more accurate pilot, and I am much more intolerant of 'sloppy' flying, such as if I am off track by a few degrees, or am too high or low by more than 50 feet. If only everyone was as self-critical! Surely it's more sensible (and safer) to bring pilots from overseas up to our standards,





### The danger of 'VFR on top'

I am an air traffic controller in Aberdeen and I also fly my own C150. I have been astonished that some countries allow VFR on top with no type of instrument rating. We had a European pilot VFR-only rated stuck above cloud for two hours around Aberdeen while commercial traffic looked for holes in the cloud and eventually got a commercial helicopter vectored through a hole to bring him back down. Aircraft on the ground and in the air were delayed by at least an hour. What if the aircraft he was in was not a diesel with good endurance? I have also been flying in VMC at night with another pilot. He lost control without realizing, orbiting over the sea and no instrument training. We were descending at 2000ft/min. My IMC training made me recover with no stress while he had no idea what was happening. The IMC rating is in my eyes an absolute must in my eyes. I never intend to fly IMC but the real world is never predictable. Has it saved my life? YES, MANY TIMES. **Martyn Segar**

rather than us having to reduce our own standards to meet lower EU standards. The most sensible course of action in my opinion would be to make the IMC rating an EU-wide option, to encourage the EU to make the higher training available to every pilot who wishes to undertake it, and to encourage foreign governments to recognise the addition to safety it offers.

### Nick Carey-Harris

On one occasion when I set off from Bembridge the weather at Bristol was well within VFR limits, but some 20 miles south of Lulsgate I was asked by Bristol Radar if I could accept vectors to the localiser for 27 as the weather coming off the Bristol Channel had deteriorated severely. On being routed overhead Radstock in IMC conditions we encountered severe turbulence which made using the radio difficult. We were then held in IMC for some 10 minutes for a slot between the 'big boys'. With the training and knowledge I had due to the IMC course, I was confident enough to accept the vectors and the subsequent hold without complaint, although I daresay the radio calls I was able to make sounded a bit strained. I was able to intercept the ILS and broke cloud at 800' agl.

I can only guess at what would have happened if I did not hold an IMC. How can it be right that a qualification designed (and proven) to deal with the unique UK weather is taken away by countries which do not encounter such adverse conditions? We should demand that EASA accept trials of the IMC course and privileges outside the UK before they discard it.

### Paul Slater

I used the IMC rating on a flight with a friend from Southend to Tatenhill to see an aeroplane that he was considering purchasing. Several dates had been arranged but had to be cancelled due to poor weather. Each time, the seller and purchaser had to be available, as did the aircraft to travel up there. On the date in question, the weather was good for departure and was due to clear well before our ETA at Tatenhill. En route it was forecast to be broken/overcast at circa 1500ft so we elected to fly VMC on top with the aim of descending visually through a gap once near Tatenhill as per the forecast. This would seem to fit the EU proposed En-route IR. However, on passing Coventry it was clear that the forecast was not accurate and no breaks in the cloud were visible up ahead. Our initial reaction was to consider turning back and returning to Southend. However the great value of the IMC became clear when we called Coventry, got their weather and got clearance to make an ILS approach to safely break through the cloud, then proceed under VMC beneath cloud to our destination. Without the IMC rating this would not have been possible.

### Robert Lloyd-Evans

I have held an IMC rating for about 20 years. I have found that on long flights in the UK it is frequently impossible to fly at a safe height without entering IMC, therefore I believe that some limited instrument rating is required for recreational/business pilots who do not regularly need to fly IFR. During that period I have only had to perform three instrument approaches for real, one NDB and two ILS. Of these, two could arguably have been carried out by performing a cloudbreak away from the airfield as the surrounding terrain was fairly flat, but the third was in a hilly area where such a cloudbreak would have been suicidal, whereas the ILS approach was simple and safe. Hence I consider that some instrument landing capability should be included in a European rating. For occasional business fliers one obvious possibility is the FAA IR, although this would still be too onerous for many recreational pilots."

### Robert Mailer

I have been flying for ten years and have 300 hours. This year I did my IMC rating and have to say it's the best course I have done. It improved my flying, map work, radio, weather reading, VMC flying and of course IMC work. I found the course hard work but very rewarding. Without an IMC rating in the UK you are always taking a chance with the weather, no matter how good you are at reading the weather. I have been caught out a few times and was not very nice! If anything it should be made compulsory after you have had your PPL for 3 years – it's a life-saver.

### Stephen White

I really have to use my IMC rating as I am very much of the view that it is a safety net rather than a rating to allow frequent IMC flying. Some time ago I planned a flight from Bristol to Liverpool to visit a relative. It was to drop off Xmas parcels so was in mid December. The forecast was for a fair amount of cloud but would be VFR for the return flight. On the way back we encountered lowering cloud base, at night, so we climbed and decided to fly above the cloud and get back into Bristol via a radar-vectored ILS. Brilliant. Safer, easier, less stressful. As we all know, the forecast can quite often be different than the reality in the UK. We must keep this life-saver, which also improves your VFR flying skills, don't forget.

### Tom Hart

The consequence of abandoning the IMC rating would undoubtedly be to lower standards all round and increase risk. Last year after over 30 years flying light aircraft I began to wonder whether to hand in my pilot's licence. After talking to a friendly instructor examiner, I was persuaded that it was not too late at my age (69) to obtain an IMC rating which I achieved over last winter. After having obtained the rating I am sure that I am a better

and safer pilot than I had been for some years. My confidence and capability improved dramatically and I look forward to many more trips next year. One of the significant advantages to me of the IMC is that I know I can get home unless the weather is exceptionally bad. My home airfield (EGTE) is very well positioned and equipped for return flights from Europe. I regularly practice ILS approaches down to 600 feet AAL. Without the ability to carry out ILS approaches, the proposed 'En route IR' would be of no value to me. Very few private pilots would bother to obtain the proposed EIR as it would be of such limited value to them, and a full IR is not a practical option for most PPLs.

### Peter Walker

I trained for the IMC to improve my handling skills, accuracy of flight, and situational awareness (knowing where everyone and everything else is when you can't see them/it), acquire the skills to use the navigation facilities and build confidence to handle difficult flight conditions. It has given me all of these benefits and more. I have used it in marginal conditions both as a pilot and as a front seat passenger supporting the pilot flying – it really helps when both in the front seats have the IMC skills. The navigational element helps even in full visibility VFR.

### David Taylor

I gained my IMC rating 33 years after obtaining my PPL. Although it is not valid in Europe it has given me more knowledge and confidence to undertake flights in less than ideal conditions. It does impose a higher level of discipline on the pilot, reinforces good airmanship and provides a glimpse of the professional flying environment. I regard it as an aid to avoid trouble rather than an opportunity to go looking for IMC flying.

## And one against...

### Michael Flynn

...GA magazine continues to undermine its IMC membership by trotting out the CAA's own line of: 'The purpose of the IMC rating is to save pilots who inadvertently fly into IMC by helping them keep control of their aircraft and returning them safely to the ground.' This is in no way what the current IMCr holders want to defend. They want to retain the ability to use the IMCr for planned flights into IMC with the expectation of recovering on an IAP. Your statement above sells out the current IMCr holders who currently have the ability to launch into IMC, continue for a significant distance and then recover with an IAP as a routine flight (not an emergency)... The December GA magazine has demonstrated a considerable lack of coordination within AOPA UK, has perpetuated many half truths and showed AOPA UK to be out of touch with current regulations, their members interests and the regulatory process – while probably making the task of securing the IMCr for the long run that much more difficult.

*\*Unfortunately this attitude is encapsulated in the statement to FCL-008 that the IMCr is "almost equivalent to the IR with 20 percent of the training", which is what has frightened some Europeans into opposing it. Ultimately the result will be that we end up with a 'Russian Roulette' rating that allows flight into IMC (after the technical exams have been passed) while banning training in instrument approaches. ■*