



General Aviation

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Front cover:
Mooney Ovations
Photo: Mooney

Chairman's message

Navigational skills and pilot training

For the fifth time in successive years, your AOPA Chief Executive and AOPA Chairman set off from White Waltham in unexpectedly fine weather on the Royal Institute of Navigation competition, TopNav 2007. Martin and I were one of twenty-two crews and aircraft that took part last weekend (as I write) in a navigational exercise that took in 8 waypoints specified by either two VOR bearings or a VOR bearing and DME distance. The trip length was about 200 nm and it took us about two and a half hours. Identifying landmarks at each waypoint are photographed to provide evidence of a successful conclusion to each leg. Each crew is allowed no more than twenty minutes after receipt of the waypoint details before taking off, so the bulk of the navigational work, which includes plotting the next waypoint, determining the track, estimating the drift and speed correction from the last known wind, and obtaining the heading and ETA, must be done in the air en-route. A GPS could be used, but is actually not a great deal of help; it is the basic navigational skills as taught in the PPL which one has to rely on.

It will be some time before the three judges work their way through 22 plogs, so dreams of a podium finish are a little premature. Handicaps are applied that depend on the radio navigation aids fitted to the aircraft and overall crew experience, the latter probably being the crunch in our case. This event, combined with my involvement on the administration side of the AOPA Flight Instructor Refresher Seminar a couple of days later, helped crystallise some thoughts on navigational skills, the steady increase in airspace infringements, and pilot training.

The above seminar attracted almost 50 instructors, with approximately half of them also flying commercially, and a more experienced and professional bunch of people you could scarcely expect to meet. There is recognition of the fact that, unless a pilot chooses to train for a CPL, an IMC Rating or the AOPA RadNav course, and bearing in mind that dual checks rarely cover anything significant on navigation, what the instructor imparts during the PPL training has to last a lifetime. The widespread use of the now very user friendly GPS equipment has tended to supplant basic navigational skill with electronics, rather like mental arithmetic was supplanted by use of the pocket calculator. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but what it hasn't done is what you would think it would do, namely reduce airspace infringements. The advent of the GPS is probably the reason for the significant drop-off over the past 10 years in IMC ratings issued as a proportion of PPLs – rather worrying as a GPS is not a lot of help if you fly into cloud inadvertently and become disorientated.

The airspace of the future is going to be more challenging than it is now, and is likely to demand higher skill levels from private pilots, particularly on cross-country flights. Real time traffic information will become available through ADS-B within maybe a decade at an equipment price affordable to many GA aircraft owners, but there will be associated training issues too.

All this seems to run counter to the philosophy behind proposals, if news on the grapevine is to be believed, for an EASA backed restricted licence for which a pilot need have only three or so hours of navigational training. Not unlike the French *brevet de base* (perhaps unsurprisingly for those familiar with European politics) the pilot would only be allowed to fly, or get lost in, an area no more than about 30 nm from the training aerodrome. It is easy to envisage infringements increasing, especially around London with 10 training airfields on the edge of the London CTR, and all of GA would come under the NATS/CAA spotlight. Aside from navigation, accident statistics are a concern, too, and it would be a step in the wrong direction to see our UK SEP accident rates worsen to those of the airports flyers, such as gliders, microlights and gyroplanes (see CAP763 Aviation Safety Review 2005), or to those of French GA which, from IAOPA fatal accident statistics for 2000, are an eye-watering five times worse than those of the UK. We all want to see GA flourish, but is knocking a few hours off the PPL training requirements the way to do it? The UK NPPL has not attracted huge numbers of *ab initio* pilots into GA; its most useful function has been to keep pilots flying who would not have been able to under the more stringent medical standards of the JAR licence.

This would be a difficult issue for AOPA UK to deal with if it begins to gel as there would be possibly many conflicting views and motives from the large number of interested aviation associations and bodies. Consultation with our membership, pilots, instructors, flying clubs and schools alike, would become vital, but, in the meantime, any current thoughts to george@aopa.co.uk would be welcome.



George Done