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What the Examiner Sees – Passenger Briefing

by Larry Bothe, MCFI, DPE, 4/29/2012

When a CFI finishes training a student, and maybe the student does a mock checkride with another CFI, then it's time to visit the DPE. Once in a while the instructor sits in on the oral part, but the CFI rarely rides along in the flight portion. As a CFI, if you have never sat in on a checkride, you should do yourself a favor and make the time. You'll be amazed at what you learn. CFI's are often very surprised and dismayed at the response their student gives to a very straightforward scenario. If that happens to you then you need to rethink how you teach that subject. Clearly, the student didn't get it.

DPE's see many of essentially the same mistakes or shortcomings over and over again. This is the first in a series of short articles focusing on just one mistake at a time. We'll tell you the scenario/question, what the correct response should be, and then provide insight about how to teach it so your students understand, can do it properly for the examiner, and more importantly, do the right thing in their everyday flying.

For our inaugural subject, let's discuss the *passenger briefing*. This requirement is called out in the new (June 1st, 2012) Private Pilot PTS booklet, Area of Operation II, Preflight Procedures, Task B, 4: "Briefs occupants on the use of safety belts, shoulder harnesses, doors, and emergency procedures." During the FAA-required preflight briefing the DPE tells the applicant to pretend that he, the examiner, is a friend who the applicant is taking up for his very first ride in a small plane. It will be necessary for the applicant to give a thorough passenger briefing.

I rarely receive a complete briefing. Sometimes, if I get an especially bad passenger briefing, I learn that the applicant has never given one; his instructor always just blew it off on the checklist. But most often I get told to buckle my safety belt, make sure my door and window are closed, and then they stop. That's it. Oh, sometimes I get told a lot of extra stuff, like not touching anything,

looking out for traffic, how the air vents work, etc., but those things are not required. What *is* required is a thorough description of how to get out of the airplane in the event of an emergency. In a Skyhawk, for example, I'm expecting to be told that in the event of an emergency, in order to get out of the plane, you release your safety belt by pushing down on the red plunger (or lifting up on the metal cover), reach down between your legs, lift up on the bar or handle, scoot your seat all the way back, open the door by lifting up on the handle and pushing it to the rear, and get out. That's all the applicant needs to tell me; not long, not difficult. Note, however, that the very short version, "to get out of the airplane, unbuckle your safety belt, scoot the seat back, and open the door" is not acceptable. Passengers (and the examiner) must be told in some detail how to accomplish these tasks. It's not intuitive. New passengers have no frame of reference; getting out of a plane is quite different from getting out of a car.

At this point I better pause for a clarification. I have been making a pretty big deal out of what is admittedly a very small part of a checkride. I may have given the impression that I fail applicants left and right for inadequate passenger briefings. Such is not the case. In fact, I have *never* failed an applicant solely on that basis. But remember, everything your student does contributes to the examiner's overall impression of her readiness to be a certificated pilot. Don't let an easy task like a passenger briefing contribute to a negative impression.

Now we know how the examiner may pose the question, and what the correct response should be, but what's the best way to teach it? Learning is always easier if the student can relate the lesson to some life experience. I ask my student if he or she has ever traveled in an airliner. Most have. Then I ask her to recall the passenger briefing she received on that flight. A flight attendant stood up in the aisle and demonstrated while another one did the explanation over the PA system. Or maybe a video was shown, but the information was the same, you were told how to get securely buckled in, and how to get out of the plane in case of an emergency. Then I tell the student that she needs to give that same briefing to her passengers, of course tailored to type of plane being flown. Oxygen masks will not drop from the ceiling of a Skyhawk.

Another way to impress your students that a thorough passenger briefing is important is to convince them that they are actually doing it for themselves. Consider this: The engine quits, you land in a field, but it's far from perfect. You run off the end, through a fence, and into a ditch. The plane flips over, rather violently, and catches fire. You get knocked out. Wouldn't it be nice if your

passenger knew how to get out of the plane, and dragged you with her? The passenger briefing you give is so that your passenger can save you!

Is it necessary for your student to give a passenger briefing every time you get in the plane? No, of course not. But you do need to introduce and teach it at the outset of flying lessons, perhaps review it again during the cross-country phase, and for sure have the student give a passenger briefing during checkride prep. When she gets to the examiner she will tell him how to get out of the plane, as well as how to get in and buckle up. Trust me, a good impression just prior to the flight goes a long way.

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