Should we be making this flight?

A guide to Aeronautical Decision Making

By Michael C. Emich

Aeronautical decision-making is a dynamic, ongoing process that starts long before a pilot's arrival at the launch site and ends only when the balloon is safely put away after landing. Balloon pilots, unlike other air sports, must consider many other factors that can affect our decision making process such as ground crews, chase vehicles, landowners etc.

One of the most difficult decisions we as balloon pilots should ask ourselves is, "Should we be making this flight?"

PERSONAL PREPAREDNESS. What factors should go into making the decision to fly or not to fly? Are you an airworthy pilot? Ask yourself whether you are physically fit, have had plenty of sleep, any recent illness, or are taking any over the counter medication or prescription medicines. A tougher question for many is: how is your mental fitness? Do you have a good flight attitude? Is everything going smoothly in your personal and professional life? Have you had a Biennial Flight Review? How is your FAA Currency?

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AIRCRAFT. Is your aircraft airworthy? Does it have a current Annual Inspection? If it's an experimental aircraft, doe sit have a current conditional inspection? Have any field repairs been done by yourself or a friend that were not signed off by your repairman?

WEATHER. Have you checked weather? How reliable is your weather source? The Weather Channel, online Weather service, Flight Service Station? Are any TFRs in place? Have you looked at the AOPA website?

What are your personal weather minimums? What surface winds can you handle (actual and forecast)? Visibility? What are the wind indicators prior to launch: trees, smoke, flags, dust, PIBALS?

GROUND CREW. If you are flying outside your normal flight area, do you have your regular crew? Do you have enough crew? Are they comfortable with launching and retrieving in the conditions you face?

FLIGHT PLANNING. Are you using a laminated map? Have you put up a PIBAL, tracked it with a sighting compass with your crew and marked it on your map prior to launch? Does your crew have a copy of the same map? Radios. Does your crew know what to do when they fail? Extra batteries? Cell Phones?

PURPOSEFULNESS. What is the reason for this flight? Whether you are making a pleasure flight, taking a family member or friend for a ride, or is this is a commercial charter, a rally, sanctioned flight, or record attempt, will affect your planning process.

DURATION OF FLIGHT. Before you take off, ask yourself how long you intend to fly. Do you know approximately how many hours of fuel you have onboard with the current ambient temp and load you are carrying?

ROLE MODEL. Do you base your flight decisions on what another pilot does? Do you have a pilot Role Model? Is this an experienced person? Does this person have a good safety record? Serve as a flight instructor? Is it a person who takes chances or who flies conservatively?

SUNRISE/SUNSET. How long you can fly after sunrise depends on the part of the country you are flying in. At some times of the year in Post Mills, VT, you can fly until noon. In Ohio, you had better be down two hours past sunrise. Do you know when local official sunrise (sunset) is?

STERILE COCKPIT. This is something trained into fixed-wing pilots, and balloonists must think of the 'sterile cockpit' concept as well, because concentration is key to making good, safe decisions on landing. Minimize any questions from passengers that are not important to a safe landing, especially when unable to find a suitable landing site or getting close to sunset.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION ON TFR's

AOPA: www.aopa.org/whatsnew/notams.htm www.aopa.org/flight planner/

FAA http://tfr.faa.gov/TFR/jsp/list.jsp

Bureau of land Management : http://airspace.blm.gov

FSS 1-800-WX-BRIEF

COPING WITH TFR's

Research and assess TFR's and other flight restrictions methodically and habitually. Make a last minute call to FSS before takeoff to check for pop-up TFR's Print the results of your research and have them with you in your AC. Never skip a briefing even on local flights.

Excerpted from a talk by Michael Emich at a safety seminar in Texas delivered in March.