

Breathes there the pilot who's never received a less-than-accurate weather briefing? You can do your bit to help solve the problem by

Acquiring the Pirep Habit

by ALBERT O. SNOW / AOPA 385631

■ A majority of small aircraft are unable to outdistance or climb above bad weather, the ability of the pilot notwithstanding. Since most general aviation flights are conducted under visual flight rules, pilot reports of good weather, good VFR, smooth air, are just as important as reports of bad weather or reduced visibilities. Low-level pireps and their contribution to accurate weather briefings should be of special interest to general aviation pilots.

From the world over, 3,000 to 5,000 pireps funnel into the National Meteorological Center each day. Spread over 24 hours, this isn't many, especially since a very large percentage is supplied by jets flying well above the significant weather. Low-level pireps are consistently in short supply.

Widely spaced weather reports describe general weather conditions over a vast area. This is commonly called the synoptic situation. But purely local conditions, influenced by varying elevations, types of terrain, and bodies of water, frequently dominate areas between weather stations. Pireps provide up-to-date information on these pockets of very changeable weather.

It is in this realm that student pilots could prove invaluable. Students soloing in the practice area, on cross-country training flights, or simply lazing about in uncluttered traffic patterns could supply a virtual avalanche of low-level pireps. Only one pirep per flight from each student could provide briefers with the lifeblood of better briefings.

The first step in acquiring the pirep habit is to overcome "mike fright." Mike fright is a psychosomatic disease that afflicts most student pilots and causes them to reach out for the microphone as though it were a live cobra. Students want to sound like smooth, experienced professionals, and not like students. Predictably, they fail to use the radio unless it is absolutely necessary, or unless the communication is a very familiar one, as in asking for the active runway.

Mike fright and its consequent restrictions of the resources available to the student can be overcome by transmitting at least one pirep per flight. You build up to it slowly. First, monitor the frequency. Listen to the original callup, the ground-to-air briefings, the manner of delivering pireps. Notice that while proper radio phraseology is desirable, it is by no means obligatory. Proper radio-

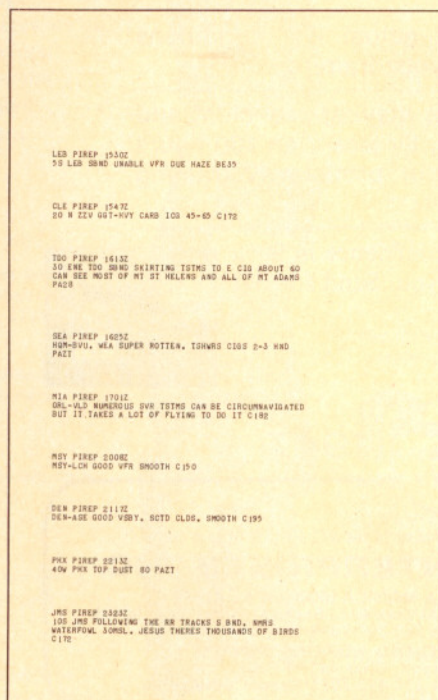
telephone technique will improve as fear of the microphone and the voice on the other end diminishes.

The essence of a pirep program is to tell the technician on the ground exactly what you see or feel, in the words that best describe it. The significance will not be lost upon him. He has had other reports, other pireps, other information besides yours. And your information, though it may seem insignificant, will fit right into the picture.

Here are two examples of actual pireps provided by pilots who wanted to let the briefers know that the air was turbulent. That's all—just turbulent—and they were not particularly interested in the standard table-of-turbulence criteria:

OVER ELKINS IN TRAFFIC PATTERN. ROUGHER THAN AUNT TILLIE'S STUCCO BATHTUB. C-182.
OVER MLC AT TWO THOUSAND. IF THIS THING HAD HORNS I'D ENTER IT IN A RODEO. PA-28.

Both pilots managed to get their messages across. Needless to say, most pireps are neither as humorous nor as dramatic as these, but if you keep them short, simple and to the point, the message will always come through.



The following is a fair sampling of routine pireps received every day. Notice that they add a worthwhile dimension to the weather picture:

15 NORTHWEST SALISBURY. UNABLE VFR AT TWO THOUSAND DUE POOR VISIBILITY. C-150.

BETWEEN NEW ORLEANS AND LAKE CHARLES. GOOD VFR ALL ALTITUDES TO NINE THOUSAND. C-172.

IN PATTERN AT TORONTO. FOG OR STRATUS IN TREES ON APPROACH END RUNWAY 10. C-210.

WEATHER HQM TO OLM SUPER ROTTEN. THUNDERSHOWERS. CEILINGS TWO TO THREE HUNDRED AGL. BE-35.

Simple words. Simple descriptions. But they all add substantial knowledge to the conditions affecting the briefer's area of responsibility.

Precise reports of weather conditions are not expected—at least not at first. That all comes with time and practice. Your pireps can and should provide statements of general situations, however.

Give your approximate position, make your report, and sign off with the make and model of your aircraft. And to simplify the process, the word "pirep" suggests a fair format:

- **P**—Position. Locate yourself. Give your position, or "in the vicinity of," or the approximate position of the phenomenon you are reporting.

- **I**—Inclement weather, or the lack thereof. Rain or showers. Thunderstorms. Hazy or clear, or big buildups. Good or bad VFR—e.g., "Can see the mountains to the west." What you see is what you report.

- **R**—Rough, very rough, super rough. Or just plain smooth—air like glass. (Remember when reporting on turbulence to give your altitude.)

- **E**—Estimate of visibility. This takes a little practice. Using a sectional, measure the distance from your airport to a prominent landmark that can be seen from the pattern, or the distance between two landmarks in the practice area. Note their appearance at different altitudes and your ability to estimate visibility will improve rapidly.

- **P**—Plane. The type of aircraft you are flying. This is of special interest when your report includes a report of smooth or turbulent air. What might seem to be a severe jolt to the pilot of

a small aircraft might barely be noticed by the pilot of a 747.

Now let's talk a bit about radio frequencies. There are many flight service frequencies, and although most of them are available at most flight service stations, each FSS has a set of preferred frequencies. These preferred frequencies ensure reception at varying altitudes and at the same time cut down on the noise and confusion at stations with overlapping reception distances.

Choosing the proper frequency can present a problem to the beginner. It is not really difficult, however, and can be done on the ground.

The "Flight Watch" frequency, 122.0, for Enroute Flight Advisory Service, should be the first considered. Originally known as "EWAS" (Enroute Weather Advisory Service), the service is available at specific FSSs and covers quite a large geographical area. Flight Watch works in both directions: it provides weather information for the type, route, and altitude of your intended flight, and collects and disseminates pireps from pilots who contact it.

When using the service to transmit a pirep, name the controlling station, followed by the words "Flight Watch," e.g., "Washington Flight Watch, this is Cessna 1234 Juliet, over." If you're not sure whether your local FSS has the service, check Part 3 of the Airman's Information Manual. If the frequency 122.0 is listed, then you're in business. Of course, it might be much simpler to dial in the frequency on the radio and try calling them. If there's no answer, there's probably no service as far as Flight Watch goes.

In the event that your area has no Flight Watch, one of the standard FSS frequencies should be used. These frequencies are listed in Part 3 of the AIM and are also indicated on the sectional charts. The AIM listing is usually a one-line entry giving the name of the facility with a string of frequencies behind it. The last frequency listed is usually the one preferred for activating flight plans, for obtaining special frequencies, and for other routine air-to-ground communications. This is also the frequency you should use when filing a pirep.

Preferred flight service frequencies are indicated on the sectional chart by the use of plain and shadowed boxes. The unshaded boxes indicate that the FSS is limited to the specific frequencies shown in conjunction with the box. A frequency with a line through it indicates that all the standard FSS frequencies except that particular one are available. A shadowed box indicates that all the standard FSS frequencies are available.

When contacting a flight service station on one of the standard frequencies, give the name of the controlling station followed by the word "radio," your aircraft identification, and *the frequency on which you are listening*, e.g., "Washington Radio, this is Cessna 1234 Juliet,

listening on frequency one one two point six, over."

Depending on the situation, and depending on previous pireps received concerning a particular area, the specialist might ask you about conditions that you may have overlooked, or that you may have thought of as insignificant. But this is not always the case, so when in doubt, report. What may be a mere nuisance at low altitudes could be quite significant just a few thousand feet higher. In the pireps that follow, widespread dust and sandstorms were occurring over large areas of the Southwest. Minuscule debris, while not particularly disturbing at the lower altitudes, was carried aloft by strong updrafts, tending to concentrate and remain at specific altitudes:

SEVEN TO TWENTY MILES WEST OF ROSWELL. GONE IFR IN DUST AND SMOKE. HAD TO TURN ON COCKPIT LIGHTS. C-414.

FMN TO COS. MODERATE TO SEVERE TURBULENCE AT ELEV-EN THOUSAND. SPOTTED A TUM- BLEWEED AT TEN THOUSAND. C-172.

JUST WEST OF NEEDLES. BROWN RIME ICING. LIGHT TURBULENCE. WINDSHIELD COATED WITH FRO- ZEN MUD. ALTITUDE TEN THOU- SAND. C-310.

Frequently pireps serve to indicate

the intensity of a given phenomenon— or, perhaps, the presence of a storm which hadn't been reported. The follow- ing pirep revealed the presence of a thunderstorm that had only been sus- pected, and the pilot had been routed right through it:

RICHMOND TO ANDREWS. SEVERE TURBULENCE FIVE TO ELEV-EN THOUSAND. LIGHTNING DANCING ACROSS WINGS OF AIRCRAFT. VERY HEAVY RAIN. C-210.

Or how about this:

OVER PROVIDENCE. WEATHER THROUGHOUT AREA APPEARS TO BE BELOW REPORTED VALUES. CHEROKEE 140.

Our feathered friends have been a hazard to aviation since the days of Orville and Wilbur. Part 1 of AIM in- cludes warnings on migratory routes and patterns, and bird sanctuaries are also indicated on sectional charts. But these aids are not enough; birds are frequently where they are not supposed to be. And since bird strikes remain high on the National Transportation Safety Board's list of underpublicized hazards, pilots sighting large concen- trations of birds and migrating flocks should report the sighting, as in the following pirep:

FOLLOWING THE RAILROAD TRACKS SOUTHBOUND FROM IRK.

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NUMEROUS WATERFOWL AT THREE THOUSAND MSL. THERE'S THOUSANDS OF BIRDS. C-150.

In summary, select a frequency while on the ground, take off, monitor the frequency for a short while, decide what you are going to report, and then contact the specialist. Having contacted Flight Watch or a standard FSS frequency, inform the technician that you have a pirep for him. He will notify you when he is ready to copy. Speak slowly and naturally. Report what you see and, in the case of smooth or tur- bulent air, what you feel. Use the language that comes naturally to you and yet adequately describes the situa- tion.

Remember, "mike fright" is but a fleeting thing, and a pirep per flight can help speed it along. Just acquire the pirep habit. □