The Non-Assertive Decision Makers

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Some pilots have good habits. Others don't. After watching pilots for many years, I tried to understand what was going on in their heads and what lead to some of their flawed decisions. It started becoming evident that pilot traits fall into definite categories and later I named these categories with descriptive names that defined pilots as groups. A single pilot will often display traits from different groups and I don't intend to attempt to "*label*" a pilot, but instead provide tools pilot self-assessment.

THIS WEEK: THE NON-ASSERTIVE DECISION MAKERS.
The pilots that make up this group are good, solid pilots. They all have had adequate flight training in the past. They know rules and procedures, but they are not always confident. They are like a sports team that "*plays not to lose*" instead of "*playing to win.*"

WHAT TO LOOK FOR
Specifically, members of this group are characterized by their inability to arrive at a timely decision and/or trust that decision. They can be timid and unable to take control of the situation. Many are so unsure of themselves that even when decisions were made they have no confidence in their decision and often changed away from their first course of action several times. During observation sessions, most of these pilots flew the simulator/airplane well and did not seem to be saturated with the physical task of operating the airplane controls. They appeared to have the mental time necessary to make a decision, yet they had little or no confidence to carry the decision out. As a result of being unable to establish a firm foundation, they could not form a long term plan to get out of trouble.

WHAT I SAW
During simulator scenarios the pilots were told that the only communications that would be allowed would be through the communication headsets that were worn and that the communications that did take place were the type of communication that would normally exist between and controller and a pilot in flight. Many times the pilots who later were classified as Non-assertive Decision Makers would attempt to exit the role of pilot alone in flight and solicit instruction, tips, or hints from the observer who was now acting as the air traffic controller.

Often their communications with controllers was placed in the form of a question, as if they were seeking a confirmation that the decision they were considering was plausible. The observer / air traffic controller responded as an actual controller would. The return message was always that the pilot was the decision maker.

In The Spotlight: The scariest question posed to the Non-assertive Decision Maker from the air traffic controller was: "*what are your intentions?*" Many times these participants had not anticipated that a decision was eminent and therefore had no answer. The question "*what are your intentions?*" is the controller's equivalent of, "*what is your decision?*"

WEAKNESS WHEN IT COUNTS
Most decisions made in flight and in flight scenarios do not come with much time to deliberate. When the controller asks "*what are your intentions?*" the controller is actually saying, "*your time to make a decision has now run out - what do you plan to do now.*" The inability to recognize or anticipate that a decision must be made put these participants under a great deal of pressure and sometimes hesitation of speech, slurred words, and illogical actions followed.

AS PILOT IN COMMAND
When asked "*what are your intentions?*" in a critical situation, these group members acted surprised that the controller was asking them to make a decision. My concern was that this trait was a negative carry over from their previous instrument training. They acted as if their past instructors had made all the decisions for them during training flights. They did not fully comprehend what is entailed in the phrase "*pilot in command.*" Even though their safety was at risk, they did not want to assume responsibility for decisions. They could not or would not take control of the situation for fear that they would make the wrong decision.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES
It should be understood that the roles of air traffic controller and pilot in flight are well defined. The pilot's title in this circumstance is "*pilot in command.*" The Federal Aviation Regulations are clear that the final decision in any circumstance is with the pilot. When a controller "*assigns*" an instruction, course, altitude, or route to a pilot, it is left to the pilot to accept or reject that assignment -- it may not always seem that way, but it's true. Pilots and controllers do work together, but a controller cannot tell a pilot to fly to a particular airport, or even to fly a particular course to an airport. The reason that the power is with the pilot is logical. It is the pilot whose life is ultimately at stake and

therefore it is the pilot who is ultimately responsible. Think of it as right of way.

ASKING FOR, NEEDING, HELP
The Non-Assertive Decision Makers did not always respect this pilot/controller relationship. Often they expected the controller to provide guidance and abdicated their ultimate decision authority. The Non-assertive Decision Makers did talk during the session much more than the Information Managers did, but most of the conversation had the ultimate goal to either solicit suggestions from the controller or to confirm a decision they were unsure of.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS
The following are example quotes from the Non-assertive Decision Makers:

"*We make a missed approach here, right?*" (notice the word "*we*" when he was the only one in the airplane/simulator)
"*What course of action would you suggest?*"
"*Do we land or Go-Around?*" (This comment was made after an hour of flying in the clouds, electrical failures, turbulence, diversion to an unplanned alternate, and a very rough approach to a position under the clouds. After all this he was still unsure whether or not he should land)
"*I want to go to St. Louis, no Ft. Campbell, no Nashville.*" (This comment was made after the pilot had asked where the nearest VFR/fair weather conditions were located. The scenario called for widespread low clouds back to the leading edge of a cold front that stretched from Tulsa, to St. Louis, to Chicago. The nearest VFR conditions were behind the front and well out of the airplane's fuel range.)
"*What are my instructions?*" (This question was asked after a missed approach was executed at the destination airport. This is the location where the pilot would tell the controller what he/she intended to do, not the other way around.)
"*Nashville, I'm missed approach at Smyrna awaiting further instructions.*"
"*Do you want me to make another approach at Smyrna?*"
"*Approach (control) I can try again or come to Nashville, what do you think?*"

MY NOTES, THE TRENDS
After many observation of pilots making these kind of statements trends emerge. These are some excerpts from my notes while watching Non-Assertive Decision Makers in action:

"*More often than not, they will automatically go back after the first failed (instrument) approach to a second approach even when there is no weather improvement and with the knowledge/experience*

that the first attempt had failed. Could this be a fall-back response? Because they have no confidence in their own decision, they fall back to the 'over and over' or 'one approach after another' routine taught during their flight training?"
"*Most of these pilots will not tell ATC (air traffic control) of in-flight problems- They keep to themselves rather than getting help that could save their lives!*"
"*It would seem illogical that a person would shoot a second approach to an airport that they had just flown an approach to and could not get under the clouds while no (weather) improvement was being reported. Maybe they are not illogical - they just do not know anything else to do - they do not know how to make this decision - they do not know what is possible for them to do - they must be thinking: So what the heck, maybe the weather will get better!*"

WHY
When I asked participants why they did not declare an emergency they say:

1. fear of FAA,
2. male ego,
3. fear of doing so, and
4. '*I don't know.*'

THE BOTTOM LINE: There are pilots who seem to think that "*PIC*" is just a column in their logbook -- not a way of thinking. To truly be Pilot in Command, you have to be ready to make decisions and make them with confidence. Confidence is only gained by knowledge (that is hopefully one of the reasons that you are reading iPilot) and experience. You can avoid becoming a Non-Assertive Decision Maker by asking questions, with study, and with practice making decisions.