



Pilot-in-Command Responsibility and Authority

Recent inquiries suggest that it would be useful to review the implications and responsibilities of being pilot-in-command of an Auxiliary flight.

We in Auxiliary Aviation are in a unique position among aviators. Not only are we certified by and responsible to the FAA for the conduct of our flying, but we are also certified by and responsible to the Coast Guard.

With respect to the responsibilities of the pilot-in-command (PIC), the two entities are in complete agreement, although they state it somewhat differently. Citations from the regulations of both organizations are below, followed by a discussion of their implications.

FAA

91.3 Responsibility and authority of the pilot in command.

(a) The pilot in command of an aircraft is directly responsible for, and is the final authority as to, the operation of that aircraft.

(b) In an in-flight emergency requiring immediate action, the pilot in command may deviate from any rule of this part to the extent required to meet that emergency.

(c) Each pilot in command who deviates from a rule under paragraph (b) of this section shall, upon the request of the Administrator, send a written report of that deviation to the Administrator.

The simplicity of these statements is the source of their power. There are no exclusions or qualifications.

Coast Guard Auxiliary

The other authority to whom we are responsible is the Coast Guard. The Coast Guard explains PIC authority in several places in our governing documents, but the message is the same.

Auxiliary Operations Policy Manual (Commandant's Instruction 16798.3E)

Appendix 1 - Flight Operations

Section A - Authority for Flights

A.2. - Command of Aircraft

The terms "pilot-in-command (PIC)," "pilot," and "operator" all refer to the Auxiliary pilot listed on the orders. Coast Guard Auxiliary aircraft under orders may fly only under the command of the pilot authorized by those orders.

A.3. - Pilot Responsibilities

The pilot is responsible for the safe and orderly conduct of the flight. This responsibility and authority exists from the time the pilot begins flight/mission planning until completion of the flight and related post-flight duties. All air crewmembers must understand, respond to, and comply with the pilot's authority. A misunderstanding of this authority may jeopardize the successful completion of the mission or the safety of the crew and aircraft. All passengers and crew must respond immediately to instructions given by the pilot.

Auxiliary Aviation Training Manual (Commandant's Instruction 16798.5B)

Chapter 5 – Observer and Air Crew Duties

Section A – Background

A.2. PIC Responsibility

The PIC is responsible for all aspects of the flight including all radio transmissions. The PIC has the authority to delegate duties during any aviation mission. This responsibility and authority for the mission exists from the time the PIC accepts the mission through the flight planning for the mission and until completion of the mission. It is imperative that flight crewmembers understand this authority. The successful completion of the mission, as well as the safety of all crewmembers, may well be jeopardized if the scope of this authority is not clearly understood.

Discussion

When one is held to any level of responsibility, it is necessary to grant to that same person a level of authority sufficient to discharge that responsibility. Thus, in our case, given that the PIC is held completely accountable, he is also given the same level of authority – complete. Please don't confuse that with not having to abide by any other rules, however. That is covered by sentence (b) of FAR 91.3 – in which we are told the conditions under which we may disregard the rules: an in-flight emergency requiring immediate action and then only to the extent required to deal with that emergency.

It is clear that the PIC is responsible for anything that happens in the course of operating that aircraft. There are numerous further regulations that prescribe specific tasks and/or operations that must be accomplished, but there is nothing in the rules that prescribe who must do them. Thus, the PIC may delegate tasks but not the responsibility for their accomplishment or their results. He/she may choose not to delegate anything, preferring instead to do everything themselves. Such is the prerogative of command. That would not work well on a Coast Guard Auxiliary mission, however, as much of what we do is based on delegation of whole groups of tasks in the conduct of any given mission.

Leaving nothing to chance, the Coast Guard states specifically that the PIC may delegate duties relating to the conduct of the flight – and it also leaves open the question of which duties, to whom and when. This is a judgment call left to the PIC.

Further, this judgment call – that of which tasks and how many tasks are delegated to another crewmember – will vary based on a host of conditions. The relative experience level of the people involved, the complexity of the operation, who is physically closer to whatever needs to be done, are but a few of the many things that will be considered and evaluated by the PIC. These things and many more are in a constant state of flux in a flying operation and thus must be managed on a moment-by-moment basis by the PIC and his crew.

We all go through these thought processes on an ongoing basis every time we go flying, but most do it on an instinctual basis rather than having thought about it in a significant level of detail. However, given the responsibilities of the PIC of an Auxiliary aircraft, it clearly deserves thought and a thorough analysis of the responsibility and authority of command.

The pilot-in-command (PIC) of an aircraft is completely responsible for everything that relates to the operation of that aircraft. That includes compliance with whatever rules and regulations govern that particular flight operation as well as the safety of the aircraft and its occupants and for the effect that aircraft has on the world around it. The PIC is not limited to having to accomplish all tasks personally – tasks or groups of tasks may be delegated – but there is no provision for delegation of his ultimate responsibility. That will always rest with the pilot-in-command.