The Flight Plan File

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So you're going to New Orleans again, for the third time this year. It's four o'clock in the morning. As you sit at the coffee table with your charts spread out on the floor below, filling in the back side of an FAA flight plan form for the third time this year with the same VOR frequencies, bearings, distances between navaids and minimum en route altitudes, you begin to grumble, "there's got to be a better way."

The airlines, of course, have a better way. They use computers to generate flight plans. When the dispatcher gives the captain the printout on his flight, most of the work already has been done for him. The airline's computer has even filed the flight plan directly into the FAA's computer. About all that remains for the captain is to check the weather and fly the plan. But for those of us unable to afford such luxuries, there still is a better way to ease the preflight task: the flight plan file.

I've learned not to throw away old flight plans. Rather, I save mine for "reuse" on future occasions. As a trial lawyer handling custody and divorce cases across the United States from my offices at Pueblo Memorial Airport in Colorado, I've found my professional and business connections invariably keep taking me back to the same places, even halfway across the continent. So I've developed a method when preparing a flight plan.

I fill in all details of route on the front of the plan: aircraft identification; aircraft type; true airspeed; departure point; route of flight; destination; fuel on board; pilot's name, address and telephone number; color of aircraft. I intentionally leave blank the type of flight plan (VFR or IFR); the proposed departure time; the cruising altitude; the estimated time en route; the number of persons on board. I own my own plane and always fly the same aircraft. A renter who frequently flies in different airplanes might omit the aircraft identification and type, airspeed, fuel on board and other variables that depend on the particular aircraft being flown. The idea, of course, is to fill in only the constants and leave the variables blank at this point.

On the reverse side of the flight plan form, I fill in the names, identifiers and frequencies of all navaids; the airway numbers; the minimum en route altitudes between navaids; the bearings to and from each navaid; the distances between navaids. I intentionally leave blank the estimated en route time involved and all spaces that may depend on the weather or winds aloft.

Then I take my skeleton flight plan to a photocopier and burn a copy, front and back. When I'm ready to go, I simply take the photocopy with me, obtain the necessary weather information, make time en route calculations based on current winds aloft, fill in the remaining blanks on the photocopy, file and go!

The skeleton "original" of the flight plan remains behind in my flight plan file. When, at a later date, I wish to fly the same route again, I simply resurrect the old skeleton plan, burn another copy, make new time en route calculations based on the current weather, enter the new data on the new photocopy, file and go.

A system like this practically eliminates dragging out the sectionals, WACs and en route charts before every trip. I say *practically* eliminates doing so, because it is important to check the old flight plan against current charts for new VOR frequencies, tower frequencies, intersection names, obstructions and so forth. However, I've found it's much easier to confirm that the data on a flight plan is correct than it is to construct a new flight plan from scratch. This is especially true in the case of RNAV flight plans, where the tedious plotting of off-airway waypoints usually takes much longer than the flight time saved on a single trip by flying direct.

While one caveat of this system requires checking the old flight plan against a current chart, another one is *not* to use an old route when weather considerations dictate a different way this time. Convenience is fine, until it presents a safety hazard. Obviously, if you've been going from Pueblo to New Orleans via Dallas for the past three trips, and now there's a squall line right over Dallas, take the time necessary to prepare a new flight plan via, say, Tulsa. But do it by the method I suggest, so that next time you need to go to New Orleans via Tulsa (or to Tulsa as an ultimate destination, for that matter), you will have your work already done and on file.

After a few years, your inventory of old flight plans will include almost every conceivable destination you might want. Even after just a few trips, the system will begin paying off in time saved. And conservation of time is, after all, what business aviation is all about. □