



"Trust but Verify"

By: Capt Bill Trussell, CFI, IA, MEI

A recent reading of an aviation industry newsletter brought the issue of misfuelling and fuel exhaustion to the top of mind. It also brought back a tough memory of an incident in which fueling for an instructional flight played an important part.

The story goes something like this:

A FAA certified flight instructor was preparing to travel a modest distance with a student pilot at a flight school adjacent to a well-respected university flight program. The instructor was a student at the university with professional pilot aspirations. The student was a customer at the flight school where the instructor was gaining additional flight time by providing his services.

On the day of this flight the instructor allowed the student to preflight the aircraft on his own, without close supervision while the instructor remained inside going over last-minute details for the flight. The instructor approached the aircraft, quizzed the student on the status of the aircraft preparations and determined, based on the responses by the student, that the plane was indeed airworthy and proceeded to climb aboard and commence the relatively short flight.

All seemed to be progressing normally once cruise altitude was achieved and the lesson objectives seemed well in hand, until silence came upon the flight.

The instructor recognized the engine failure right away, and one would assume that the student did as well. A small window of time was available to attempt to restart the engine, but those efforts were not successful. The instructor assumed control of the aircraft and executed an emergency landing on a fairway of a very convenient golf course. The flight ended on the manicured grass with minor damage to the aircraft, but major damage to two egos.

Upon review after the fact, the instructor indicated that he had neglected to verify the fueling status of the aircraft, opting to take the word of the student that he had checked the fuel level. The student indicated in his interview that he was under the impression that the instructor had ordered the fuel needed from the FBO and that there was no need for him to recheck it. This set up a classic error situation. The student had trusted the instructor, while the instructor was trusting the student. As a result, no one ordered the aircraft to be fueled for the flight. Obviously, this situation created a safety risk, but what was the hazard and how is this situation mitigated?

While it is unclear after too many decades of time passing what happened to the flying career of the student, one thing is very clear. The FAA came down on the instructor, relieving him of his commercial pilot and instructor certificates. He left his professional flight program shortly after. A quick review of the airman registry indicates that he did not petition the FAA to regain his certificates.

Moral of the story, or, rather, what is the mitigation? *You can trust but verify!*

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