



Left Seat
By J. Mac McClellan

Proof That Pilot Training Works

In the three years since the FAA issued the Special Federal Air Regulation (S-FAR) requiring extensive regular training and checking for pilots flying the Mitsubishi MU-2 turboprop there have been only two accidents, neither of them involving a fatality. In the 30 months before the rule change there were 14 accidents, 10 of them fatal. That is the most amazing reversal in a safety trend I have ever seen.

Because the MU-2 is a turboprop weighing less than 12,500 pounds maximum for takeoff, there were no special training requirements to fly it. A pilot could legally earn a multi-engine rating in some benign twin, such as a Piper Aztec, and jump right into the MU-2 without so much as a trip around the pattern with an instructor. But the MU-2 is anything but benign with a high wing loading and high drag from its very effective flaps. Without passing judgment on whether its flying qualities are good or bad, any pilot who has flown it knows that the MU-2 is a different airplane than any other turboprop or piston twin.

The FAA could have used the S-FAR procedure to impose a type rating on the MU-2 as is required for pilots to fly any jet or an airplane weighing more than 12,500 pounds maximum. But in its opinion, the FAA decided the type rating would not be enough to solve the MU-2's accident problem. The reason is that type ratings for airplanes that require only a single pilot do not have an annual recurrent training and flight check requirement. If the MU-2 were to have a type rating, pilots would need to be trained and tested initially, but then would not be required to go back to school regularly.

Instead, the FAA created the S-FAR that demands initial and recurrent training and checking for all MU-2 pilots, no matter their level of experience. And the rules are specific on how much training is required, and what procedures must be addressed. It is the most specific training requirement I have seen for any airplane to come from the FAA. Usually individual training organizations create a program and the FAA approves it. This time the rules came from the top down.

We don't know if flying hours in the MU-2 have diminished, but it's likely since the airplane has been out of production for years. But even a reduction in exposure is not enough to explain the huge change in the safety record, but the training requirement does. Richard Collins summed it up best when he told me "if you tell pilots an airplane is safe they'll kill themselves left and right, but if you say an airplane is lethal, they won't crash." Looks like both the FAA and Richard are correct.

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