



Interagency Aviation Lessons Learned



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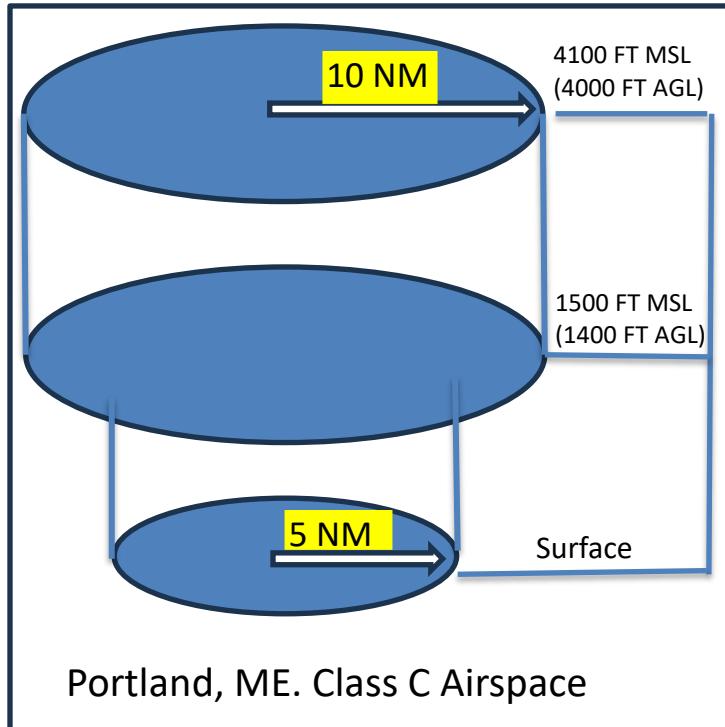
Subject: Flight Distraction and Complacency

Area of Concern: Flight Safety

Distribution: All Aviation Operations

Discussion: During a recent flight evaluation, the pilot receiving the checkride unintentionally violated Class C airspace. While there were likely several contributing factors that led to the airspace incursion, the pilot stated that the primary reason was that he allowed himself to be distracted in a conversation unrelated to the flight. Here's the story:

On the second flight of the day while flying under Visual Flight Rules (VFR) at an altitude of 3500 feet MSL, the pilot mistakenly entered Class C airspace without obtaining a clearance. The pilot noticed the error only upon entering the inner ring of the airspace when the ForeFlight app on his tablet flashed a notification. The top of the Class C airspace was at 4100 feet MSL. Upon recognizing the error, the pilot made an immediate left turn and began a descent to get below the outer ring of the airspace. While descending, the pilot contacted approach control and requested to transition through the airspace. The controller acknowledged the request. The pilot continued the descent to approximately 1300 feet MSL, below the outer shelf lower limit of 1500 feet MSL. The pilot maintained contact with air traffic control (ATC) until north of the Class C airspace, at which time ATC instructed a frequency change. The rest of the flight evaluation was without incident.



The first flight was conducted in accordance with Instrument Flight Rules (IFR) with two additional inspectors who were sitting in the rear seat of the aircraft. The pilot admitted that he was nervous having three Inspectors onboard and not having flown the aircraft much in the last 90 days, but was confident because he had recently logged quite a few hours instructing and flying IFR.

After landing, the two inspectors that were in the rear seats departed. After planning the final flight, the pilot and inspector departed under VFR.

The pilot stated that he was more relaxed during the second flight for several reasons. First, the initial IFR leg had gone very well. Second, the other two Inspectors were no longer onboard. Third, they were VFR, so

required radio communications were minimal. The pilot believed another factor included a very similar IFR route he recently flew at a higher altitude, which kept him above the Class C airspace making it seem “invisible” on the second flight and he simply forgot about it.

After leveling off, the pilot engaged the autopilot. The Inspector then asked to discuss an upcoming aviation course the bureau was planning. The pilot agreed and participated in the conversation, allowing himself to be distracted until after entering the Class C airspace.

The airspace showed on the pilot’s tablet, the Inspector’s tablet, and on the aircraft multi-function display, but both missed it.

Rules for the flight:

The pilot receiving a flight evaluation is expected to know and comply with all Federal Aviation Regulations (FARs), including those pertaining to airspace and the “see and avoid” responsibility for other aircraft, terrain, and obstacles.

The Inspector Pilot’s role is to evaluate the pilot’s performance, and only intervene when, in their judgment, a situation develops that requires immediate corrective action to ensure the safety of the flight. This would include an imminent airspace violation.

So, how do we ensure a safe flight?

Crew Resource Management (CRM) is the effective use of all available resources – human, hardware, and information to assure the safe and efficient operation of a flight. Its primary goal is the management of human errors, which are a contributing factor in the majority of aviation incidents and accidents.

Although the pilot in command is responsible for the flight, one of the core principles of CRM is safety oversight. The inspector pilot performs an oversight and safety role, authorized to intervene in a flight if safety is compromised during an evaluation.

Familiarity, informal conversation, and assumptions about each other’s awareness can erode professionalism and safety. As we all know, CRM requires continuous situational awareness, disciplined communication, assertiveness, mutual monitoring, and prioritization of flight duties — regardless of roles, experience level, or personal relationship.

This event generated several lessons for all pilots and evaluators. These lessons include:

1. **Situational Awareness** — Even low-risk conditions require continuous awareness — airspace boundaries must be actively monitored, not assumed based on previous experience and familiarity with the area.
2. **Human Factors** — Distraction, familiarity, and evaluation stress can impact judgment, even in experienced pilots.
3. **Communication Discipline** — Timing and purpose of cockpit communication must support safe operations, especially near controlled airspace.
4. **Evaluator Responsibility** — Evaluators are safety participants, not just observers. They must anticipate and intervene before errors occur.
5. **Professionalism** — Personal familiarity cannot replace procedure and cockpit discipline.

Remember, complacency is one of the most insidious human-factor hazards in aviation because it often appears when conditions look safe, familiar, or routine.

1. It grows in familiar environments, when nothing seems risky
2. It's fueled by experience. Experienced pilots become confident, then comfortable, and eventually less vigilant.
3. It removes the feeling of threat, ultimately reducing attention, scanning discipline, and decision-making awareness.
4. It makes a pilot feel "everything is fine" even when it isn't.

Feeling relaxed can be a positive attribute to enhancing performance but can also lead to complacency at times you can least afford it.

For additional information, check out ForeFlight Video Resources:

[ForeFlight Feature Focus: Controlled Airspace Alerts - YouTube](#). How to enable and configure alerts for Class B/C/D airspace.

[ForeFlight Feature Focus: Airspace in Profile View](#). How to use Profile View to anticipate airspace conflicts during planning.

[Hazard Awareness Features in ForeFlight \(Webinar\)](#) Deep dive into FF's hazard avoidance suite, including airspace alerts.

Preflight Tip—Build “Airspace Intelligence” before wheels up.

- Use Profile View to “see the shelves” before you ever get airborne.
- Turn on (and filter) Controlled Airspace Alerts—then customize buffers for your plan.
- Pair ForeFlight audio to your headset.

/s/ Keith C. Raley

Keith C. Raley
Chief, Aviation Safety, Training, Program
Evaluation, and Quality Management
DOI, Office of Aviation Services

/s/ Lori Clark

Lori Clark
Branch Chief - Aviation Safety Management
Systems
USDA, Forest Service