

ROTORCRAFT CHECKRIDE Training Musings

By Matt Johnson

ADD-ON ANGST

What we often think will be easy quite often turns complicated. This seems to hold true for those seeking an “add-on” rating, such as the pilot with an airplane private pilot certificate who desires to add a rotorcraft-helicopter rating to their pilot certificate. These pilots may have started their primary training in a basic fixed-wing trainer, earned their certificate, and decided to move on to helicopters for pleasure or career aspirations.

This venture of adding a helicopter rating is common. In fact, for the calendar year 2022, FAA statistics show that 650 applicants were tested for a rotorcraft “add-on” rating. That may not seem like a hefty number, but only 1,495 applicants applied and were tested for an “original” issuance of a pilot certificate. (Unfortunately for rotorcraft, the stats aren’t broken down for private, commercial, etc.)

So, what’s the problem? I’m glad you asked! From my perspective as a DPE for more than a decade, the “angst” of add-ons comes in two categories. While I certainly can’t speak for the other 300-plus helicopter DPEs in the country, I have talked to several of my colleagues who echo my sentiments on these issues.

First issue: CFI Faux Pas

On more than a few occasions, an add-on applicant has arrived for their exam, and the CFI has failed to correctly complete the necessary endorsements for their applicant (note that I said “applicant” and not “student-applicant,” as this is an add-on; they are already a pilot and not a student).

In one recent experience, upon examining the applicant’s logbook and endorsements to establish his eligibility for the exam, it was quickly apparent the applicant’s CFI was unclear on what endorsements to give and had simply gone the “I’ll just endorse the hell out of him” route. This add-on

applicant had been given an initial student solo endorsement under the 61.87 section, and his “final” sign-offs included the 61.107 and 61.109 endorsements. Granted, all of these endorsements would have been correct had the applicant been an “initial” applicant for the private pilot certificate, but instead, he was simply “adding” the rotorcraft-helicopter rating to his certificate.

In reality, the correct endorsements would include a 61.31 endorsement (for solo) and a 61.63 endorsement for the actual flight exam. For the correct endorsements, we must look no further than Advisory-Circular 61-65H (the current version at the time of this writing), which came out in August 2018. The endorsements are readily available for “copy and paste” from Appendix-A in the AC, and this document should be a must-have for every CFI toolbox.

Second issue: Wrong Assumptions

The second issue is often jointly owned by the applicant and their CFI. That issue is one of preparedness. Again, speaking strictly from my experience, add-on applicants have historically been less prepared, specifically for the oral part of the examination. Several years ago, I was reminded of this when an applicant asked me if he could Google what LTE was; you can imagine how that ended.

In a nutshell, the CFI wrongfully assumes that their applicant “knows the bookwork” because they are already a certificated pilot. And the applicant assumes, again wrongfully, that they have the necessary stick-and-pedal skills, so they feel they are ready. The additional rating matrix in the PTS lists the required sections that must, at a minimum, be evaluated by the examiner. However, the examiner can test *all* areas of operations and tasks. There are a lot of differences between helicopters and airplanes as it relates to the various FARs, and it is critical that you know them.

Remember those stats mentioned earlier? Let’s revisit those to add some clarity to my observations. Of the 1,495 rotorcraft exams conducted last year for the original issuance of a certificate, 1,391 of those passed. That is an impressive 93%. Again, the stats provided don’t break down the numbers for private, commercial, etc.; instead, they are all lumped together. However, switching gears to the add-on side of things, of the 650 applicants tested for an additional rating, 508, or 78.2%, passed. For those not aware, DPEs do the overwhelming majority of pilot certifications in this country. In 2022, FAA inspectors did only 23 exams (yes, you read that correctly) compared to 2,145 exams conducted by DPEs.

The angst of add-on checkrides can be avoided. If you’re a CFI, prepare your add-on applicant for all areas of operations in the PTS (which will hopefully soon be the ACS). If you’re a rated pilot adding a helicopter rating to your certificate, meet your CFI at least halfway and do what’s needed to prepare for your checkride.



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