

VLJ Single-Pilot Operations

Captain Strait is rated in G-1, DC-9, B-727, B757/ 767 and seaplanes. Strait flies the MD-11 worldwide. Bill Strait has also instructed jet pilots in the B-727, B-757 and B-767 in his 32 year aviation career.

Very Light Jets, or VLJs, are here and there is concern over single-pilot operation of them. Right now there are jets that are flying around with two pilots aboard that could easily be flown with one! Jet planes are actually built so that if one pilot becomes incapacitated, the other has the equipment to land safely.

Bill Lear left a rich legacy including the term "Learjet" as a world wide term to describe the finest of things. His Lear 23 was reportedly built to fulfill the dreams of the "everyman jet." Now VLJs assume the position.

Here is how the system of getting to fly a jet works. Jets carry a designation of letters and numbers. Each type of jet has its very own hieroglyph. If you only fly commercial you may have noticed that the safety cards tell you that you are in a B-757 (BOEING 757) or an A300 (Airbus A300). Stay with me on this and you will be rewarded.

It compares to having to earn a different drivers license endorsement to drive your Hummer and another stamp to drive your Ferrari.

The pilot of the B-757 has a license to fly that type of jet. Same consideration is given to our hypothetical A300 Captain. They are said to be "typed" in the respective jets and pilots may have several type ratings. They are earned and they are required.

The Very Light Jets will also have their own designators so they will each require their own type rating. The FAA must approve individual courses that must be completed to fly each type of them. Fair enough.

The controversy comes in when it is pointed out that if a person so aspired, he or she could fly one by themselves! (Perhaps this would be a statement of independence and autonomy.)

The FAA knows about this possibility and so does the insurance underwriter. The FAA oversees the approved training course for the type rating and the underwriter covers his interest. This unlikely alliance goes very deep into the venter of practicality for those who aspire for single pilot jet operation.

Was there always this possibility? Yes. Did VLJs create this situation? Hardly! It is probably best blamed on the Wright Brothers. They turned bicycle parts into flying carpets and spawned the dream of going where you wanted to go, in our own plane, and whenever you wanted to go.

It was such a great idea that James Bond himself picked up on it and chose the rocket belt as a means to his some of travel ends! (The reported 30 second flight limitation certainly acted as a deterrent to us all having one at idle for our impulse trips.)

I have flown all kinds of planes and many of them single pilot in my all civilian aviation career. I have only flown jets with one or two other pilots aboard.

My military pilot veteran brothers assure me that the F16s of their experience were flown single pilot and that the model used for combat had no back seat at all! In fact, in the Navy F4's and F14's (now retired), there were back seats but no controls! Imagine that.

My type rating training experiences varied. G-1 school was at the Gulfstream factory in Savannah. (I aspire to go back there for my personal G-V training one day.) It was definitely a gentleman's experience and it was thorough and comprehensive.

My DC-9 training was with a major airline and it was conducted in simulators and the aircraft. It took place about two months after I received my G-1 Captain designation and I found myself flying Captain on a DC-9 three months after that.

My military pals tell me that they flew supersonic and in the 40,000 ft altitude range six or seven months into training. From zero flight hours to supersonic in months!

Now we have a new category of jet called VLJs coming from a dozen highly capable manufacturers. They are arriving in single and twin engine flavors and they weigh less than 10,000 lbs. Their uniqueness is their small size compared to their cousins, the light jets at 10,001 lbs. and up. VLJs cost less so they are on the must have list of more people.

Hundreds of my extremely fortunate pilot brothers and sisters have ordered VLJs and have chosen their leather accoutrements. They bought them to fly them. The reported experience level of the pilots in this category is quite high. It takes good judgment to attain a high level of pilot experience.

Do Very Light Jets present a new day in keeping aviation safe?

No. It is the same day with the same absolute commitments to flying safety.

I believe the right combination of good judgment, FAA overview, wary underwriters, and seasoned mentors will keep us all safe.

This mentor idea is not new. In the airline industry it has always been a practice. After the type rating the airline pilot is given IOE, or initial operating experience.

Perhaps 007 had the right idea with the rocket belt but that 30 second flight time limitation still needs work.