

Product test

The Holy Grail – almost

Steve Copeland is impressed by the SolidFX Electronic Plate Reader, which is very nearly all you need



Back in 1934 Elrey B. Jeppesen began publishing the first airway manuals that gave pilots valuable information on navigation, airport elevations, heights of obstructions and runway lengths. These were printed on paper and distributed on a regular basis by post.

Wind forward several decades and we still found ourselves in exactly the same situation, but now we needed several large tomes taking up useful payload and requiring considerable time and effort every few weeks to update. There followed a natural evolution where the plates became available on computer and were updated electronically. This still required us to print out the plates we

needed for our destination and our alternates. So we continued to search for the Holy Grail, a device that could contain all the possible information that we could need on a trip, that had excellent daylight readable characteristics and exceptional battery life and was easy to update.

We may well have the Holy Grail within our grasp as several solutions have recently come to market, one of the main contenders for the title being the SolidFX FX8 electronic plate reader. This is a small 8" device manufactured by IREX and based on the same liquid paper technology as the Kindle readers that people may be familiar with. The liquid paper devices do not have backlights and they update the display as a whole page in one pass. Ideal

for reading a static display but a little annoying when doing data entry; however this is offset by the longer battery life offered by fewer screen updates. I ran the unit on my desk for a week displaying the ILS23 plate for Cambridge and the battery life was still an amazing 34%. The unit carries FAA Class 1 EFB compliance for use as a flight deck EFB and has been depressurisation tested to 51,000 ft. as well as tested for Radiated and Conducted Emissions per DO-160. It is compact and easy to read in daylight but as it is not backlit it requires lighting for night use, and standard red cockpit lighting is not quite enough.

The unit connects to a PC and uses the Jeppesen Update Manager software to

update the unit in the same way one would programme a GNSx30 data card. The connector on the bottom of the unit is standard micro USB format.

As well as supporting the Jeppesen software the unit is also bundled with an Adobe reader and an optional subscription to the AC-U-KWIK® database. AC-U-KWIK® gives you additional information not found in the Jeppesen plates such as handling agents and the type of fuel available – a very handy top up to the Jeppesen service although not as useful as Jeppesen's own VFR plates which are available to accompany the Jeppview Subscription.

First impression of the unit is that it is very light and compact and fits easily in the hand. It has only two buttons on the front that form a very long thin bar on the left hand side of the unit topped with a charge light to allow very basic navigation. On the bottom is the power switch and connectivity port. All other navigation functions are handled by using a stylus that is supplied with a handy neck lanyard and retractable reel. This allows you to pull the stylus down for use, then let go when you have finished and not lose it down the side of the seat! It is possible to configure the unit in 'no stylus' mode but I found it very difficult and slow



to navigate this way, especially on a turbulent flight deck. Navigating with the stylus is a simple case of tapping the on-screen icons. This is where one of my frustrations mentioned earlier kept raising its head. As an example, to search for Cambridge would involve the entry of nine

Left: SolidFX - 'a fantastic addition to the instrument pilot's flight bag'

characters and each time you enter a character requires the screen to update. This is a little distracting, especially at night. However when actually on the approach you are not doing any data entry and the display is fixed so it does not present a real problem.

The unit also has a very handy notebook mode with a number of template pages for Departure Clearance, En-route Notes and even an FAA Flight Plan form. As the unit expands its presence into Europe SOLIDFX will also offer more European-centric templates.

All in all it's a very nice package and makes a fantastic addition to the instrument pilot's flight bag. It stood up well over several weeks of intensive use proving to have great battery life and easy readability. If SOLIDFX are going to keep the headway they have made with this amazing device they are going to have to continue to develop the product and resolve some of the minor irritations with using the liquid paper format over LED displays like that of its major competitor, the Apple iPad. ■

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