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Attitudes

Remember the old saying “There are old pilots and there are bold pilots, but there are no old bold pilots”? In my experience in general aviation, which dates from being a teenager in the early 1960s, nothing could be closer to the truth. A pilot’s attitude toward flying will do more to make herself or himself safe or dangerous than anything else. This is so because with the right attitude, any pilot will recognize the limitations of both aviator and machine.

Most all of the endeavors in which we engage have accepted standards of levels of performance that are considered satisfactory. When a person performs to those levels, he or she is not negligent because he or she has met the required level of skill and care for that activity. But there is another higher goal to seek. We can never achieve perfection in anything we do, whether it’s as a parent, child, practitioner of our profession, or as a pilot. But the reality that we can’t be perfect should not prevent us from trying.

General aviation, in the words of a popular photo and saying, is not inherently dangerous. That is a true statement, with certain givens. One of the assumptions behind the safety of aviation is that the pilot of the aircraft will be competent and safety oriented and will possess

the proper attitude about the entire affair of flying. All certificated pilots were required to demonstrate the legal minimum level of competence during the written, oral, and practical exams they underwent to get their licenses and ratings. In training, all were taught to be safety oriented. What the system of pilot training and licensing can't do is control a person's attitude. In my mind, once a pilot gets a certificate, attitude makes all the difference in the world from then on in one's flying career.

A safety-minded pilot will constantly seek to improve her flying knowledge and skills for as long as she sits in a cockpit. Just maintaining the competency level that had to be demonstrated to pass the tests for whatever certificate that a particular pilot holds is not the answer for a safety-conscious aviator. The answer is constant improvement, not maintaining the status quo. Every airline pilot has to pass a proficiency check semiannually or annually. All pilots of jet aircraft, whether in commercial or private operations, must do likewise. Virtually all corporate flight departments require recurrency training of their flight crews, again normally done on an annual basis. Flight instructors must show the FAA every two years that they are competent to continue to exercise the high privileges of their certificates.

Yet any pilot who is flying piston-powered equipment normally considered as a lightplane is only required by the federal aviation regulations to undergo a biennial flight review. While the regs dictate that this review, uniformly known as a *biennial flight review* (BFR), must consist of at least one hour of ground discussion and one hour of flight instruction, the real content of the review is left up to the instructor who administers it.

I've seen many certificated flight instructors (CFIs) who have allowed the pilot undergoing the review to set the agenda for it. While it's certainly wise to tell the BFR instructor about any areas in which you feel weak or where you'd like to concentrate during the review, run like a scared rabbit from a CFI who just rides along during a BFR and who shows any disdain or cavalier attitude toward the requirement.

Unfortunately, one flight review every two years can never achieve the level of recurrent training that any pilot should want or even

needs. There is no area of human endeavor that cannot profit from continual practice, and when practiced, every person engaged in a job, profession, or hobby will improve in the performance of it. Most pilots of lightplanes consider their flying to be more of a hobby than an occupation. Regardless of everyday work, few of us would consider two hours of training once every two years to suffice. Few occupations harbor the potential for disaster that the recreational use of lightplanes holds.

Sadly, if you read aviation accident reports, you'll come across many instances every year where a pilot was confronted with an emergency that resulted in serious injury or death to someone, a result that probably could have been prevented if that pilot had only undergone enough training to deal with the situation.

How many private pilots have ever experienced an engine failure? The answer to that question is always positive because few modern engines do fail, except for pilot-induced causes. The reliability of engines makes most pilots give little thought and practice to a successfully executed forced landing. I've suffered through three occurrences of either total or partial engine failure in small airplanes. You shouldn't ignore the possibility of engine failure either, even if you've never seen a cowling jump up and down after an engine swallows a valve, or if you haven't yet seen a motionless propeller on the front of your airplane. If you have the right attitude about practicing forced landings and fly accordingly, you'll probably make it through such an experience with nothing more than a fast pulse.

There is no excuse for a pilot rated only for VFR operations to continue flight into instrument meteorological conditions (IMC). Yet this is still the leading cause of lightplane fatal accidents because the pilot had the wrong attitude. The pilots who I have known to do it did not come out of the other side of the weather in one piece. Beyond flying, they didn't play Russian roulette or engage in other suicidal behavior. Possibly they thought that for some reason or another they were immortal in an airplane. If that were the case, they proved themselves wrong. But worse yet, the outcome also proved that they didn't have the skills to extricate themselves from that emergency, even if it were of their own making.

Any pilot can get lost. In the old days before reliable electronic aids to navigation, we used to jokingly say that the only people who hadn't gotten lost were nonpilots and liars. Modern navigational gear has certainly lessened that problem, but the most prevalent side effect of the rarity of getting lost has become the fact that "being unsure of your position" is a real emergency to all too many pilots. Again, a correct attitude about learning how to navigate with a chart, compass, and clock will make the failure of navigation radios an inconvenience instead of a time of fright. Even when truly lost, a competent pilot will solve the problem through deliberate trained action rather than maybe by chance alone.

Other elements of an airplane's equipment can and do fail. Modern dry-vacuum pumps have a failure rate much higher than their older and heavier ancestors, the wet pump. Every pilot who has an instrument rating had to demonstrate rudimentary partial-panel skills during the flight test for the rating. How many pilots could do an instrument approach at night in turbulent air to minimums 10 years later? I would venture not many. Have you given any real thought to this possibility if you fly instruments? If not, and if you haven't kept a sharp edge on your no-gyro instrument flying abilities, you need to modify your attitude about the subject.

We've all seen pilots who lose their cool when the communications radios go silent. Can you remember what to do without reviewing the *Airman's Information Manual* (AIM), especially if you're IFR, when you suddenly find yourself unable to talk to anyone? Again, attitude about training and then getting it on a reasonably frequent basis is the answer to making radio failure into a nuisance instead of an emergency.

Certain emergencies can never be made into the inconvenient. Life is full of risks, some of which can be totally managed. Some risks can be only partially eliminated. You can only hope that you never encounter a few risks, such as the prospect of ditching an airplane over open water; however, with some training in the subject, even this most dire of emergencies can be handled in a manner that your chances of coming through it alive greatly increase.

One pat answer will never enable even the most careful and well-trained pilot to deal with every possible gremlin that might appear in the