



SAFETYGRAM

June 2015

I'm finally back from my Afghan odyssey and almost feeling civilized again. Unfortunately, my long stint on the ground overseas has left me feeling more like a pedestrian than a professional pilot. As much as I want to rush back to the airport, I have a lot of things to catch up on personally, professionally, and mentally before I can think about hopping back in an aircraft to knock off the rust and slip the surly bonds of earth.

In the Pilot's Handbook of Aeronautical Knowledge, the FAA defines Aeronautical Decision Making (ADM) as "decision-making in a unique environment—aviation. It is a systematic approach to the mental process used by pilots to consistently determine the best course of action in response to a given set of circumstances. It is what a pilot intends to do based on the latest information he or she has." I'm going to add a healthy dose of opinion here...I think most of us think about ADM in the context of a particular sortie or scenario, like how you might handle the weather, or a system malfunction in a particular instance for example. I don't think as an aviation community we focus on ADM at the macro-personal level very well. Aviators are pretty amazing people, but they are still people...failing to look at or assess the whole person can be just as dangerous as handling an emergency incorrectly.

Jumping straight to the extreme/sensational example, the copilot of the Germanwings flight that (allegedly) piloted the aircraft into the Alps intentionally should never have been at the controls that day. How did everyone around him fail to notice his state of mind? That type of tragedy is a tiny fraction of a percent of aviation accidents, making that a very extreme example of poor ADM, but more subtle instances happen far too frequently.

I've flown with many people over the years. It's usually obvious when one of them (or me!) has major personal things going on that affect their ADM, and it's not just in the air that it's noticeable. The most common example I've seen is when someone's schedule is so busy that they show up late and rush the preflight and postflight (and usually miss at least one important step in the process). In one more extreme case of someone's life affecting their ADM, I actually had an instructor texting while I was taxiing, and then in the pattern too. He was having trouble with his significant other and could really only focus on that part of his life. I didn't get very good instruction on that flight...thank goodness I was already a fully qualified pilot! That type of poor ADM also seems extreme to me, but the NTSB, just released a bulletin about electronic devices and associated distractions in the cockpit, so maybe it happens more than I ever realized.

My point is that ADM involves more than just dealing with emergencies or weather on a flight...the operations before and after the flight also need to be managed effectively and can be affected by the bigger picture of what you have going on in your life. For me, reintegrating with my family and the office duties of my Aero Club job are my primary areas of focus right now. I have a “To Do” list a mile long at the office and at home! If I were to rush back to the airport right now, my full focus would not be on the sortie as it should be – I know I couldn’t do the proper sortie preparation. So until I feel more caught up at work and at home, I’ll wait just a bit longer before turning my attention skyward again.

By this point, you might be asking yourself if I’m telling you not to fly unless your life is perfect. Far from it! Forgive the philosophical moment, but I’ve yet to have everything perfect in my life and don’t know if I ever will. ADM is all about determining the best course of action in response to a given set of circumstances. From the “whole person” perspective that means managing the risk of preoccupation and distractions before we ever show up for a flight. When circumstances aren’t ideal, in the air or on the ground, aviators weigh the options, risks, and rewards against the best information they have at the time.

Here’s how I’m applying ADM to my situation right now. Step 1: Get the personal and professional To Do lists to manageable levels. Step 2: Study the POH and Airplane Flying Handbook to remember airspeeds, pitch & power settings, procedures, and maneuver setup/entry/execution. (Reference March’s SafetyGram) Step 3: Book some ground time with an instructor. Step 4: Take said instructor up for an awesome refresher flight (or two)!

Germanwings Crash:

<http://news.yahoo.com/u-regulators-review-pilot-mental-health-germanwings-crash-175200063--finance.html>

Cockpit Distractions:

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/05/27/usa-aviation-safety-idUSL1N0YI1CE20150527>

Airplane Flying Handbook:

https://www.faa.gov/regulations_policies/handbooks_manuals/aircraft/airplane_handbook/media/FAA-H-8083-3B.pdf

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