SAFETYGRAM

May 2016

For the last couple months, I've spent far too much time reviewing Aero Club accidents, incidents, and generally cringe-worthy events. "What the heck were they thinking?" kept going through my mind each time I reviewed one of these. I'm very thankful that nobody got hurt, but we damaged too many aircraft for sure. Pilot error was the primary cause every time. I finally stopped entertaining the "WTH" thought as I realized that as much as I'd like to think I'd never make the same mistakes it could happen to me too, even as an experienced aviator. The chain of events leading to aviation errors (call it an error chain) are often subtle and hard to detect until it's too late. Each event in the chain compounds the prior event, making it harder and harder to recover as the chain progresses. Pilot error is typically the final link in that chain. Breaking the chain of events before we're painted into a corner allows pilots avoid the split second pilot decision that may not have any possible good outcome.

I've never met a pilot (myself included) who thought their actions would result in any kind of embarrassment, or much less an accident. Everyone I've ever been around in aviation seems to think they'll always make the right call in any given scenario…unless they've had an accident. Those I know who've had an accident/incident always tell me exactly the same thing: "I can't believe I let myself get sucked in," [to making that mistake]. The truth is, bad things could happen to any of us when we fly. The flight environment is dynamic and complex, and error chains are complex and often hard to detect until it's too late. They call it an accident instead of an "on purpose" for a reason.

I had an "Ah Ha!" moment last week. I was reviewing an accident involving an experienced pilot. I couldn't wrap my head around the pilot error involved until a long forgotten moment of my pilot ground school popped into my head. The particulars of this case involved a visual illusion on a pretty short runway. I've experienced my share of visual illusions, so I know how hard it can be to overcome them. But there was also a potentially dangerous aerodynamic effect created by the airport's unique geography. I've never encountered this type of geographic/aerodymanic problem. All of a sudden I realized the compound problem set faced by this particular pilot on this particular day might have been more than I could've handled… maybe more than any one of us could've handled.

The "Ah Ha!" moment I mentioned earlier was not realizing that I might have made the same mistake as I pilot I was studying. (That's important though too…) The realization for me was the simplicity of the solution nearly every problem set faced in aviation: fall back to the basics. In this case every pilot is taught from day one to go around from a bad approach instead of trying to salvage it.

The rest of what I'm going to say will seem very basic. I've found sometimes the most basic things we're taught can be the hardest to consistently execute. Forgive the philosophical

moment, but take the Golden Rule as an example; I've found it a lot harder to treat other people the way I want to be treated over my lifetime than I'd like to admit. Why? I find the complexities of life and human interaction can obfuscate the simple truth of how I should act, especially if someone's being very unkind to me. Let's bring that thought back to aviation.

Imagine Mother Nature is laughing at your aviation plans and spitting in your face. (Is that a good metaphor for thunderstorms/heavy rain, or what?!?) You have plans, you want/need to fly for whatever reason, but the weather complicates those plans/wants/needs. It can be deceptively easy to get lost in whatever your plans/wants/needs are, but this simple truth is taught to all of us early in our flying experience: avoid thunderstorms at all costs. Thunderstorms are nature's engine – they suck, squeeze, bang, and blow with ferocity, and you don't want to get caught in or near one. When you boil it down to that simple form, the decision process becomes clearer – your desire to stay alive outweighs any other plans/wants/needs.

Here's some simple aviation principles that always help me cut through any confusion: don't fly sick/impaired, always get a weather brief and check NOTAMS, always check weight & balance and TOLD, always do a good aircraft preflight, always carry enough fuel, always fly the airplane, always use the checklist, never try to salvage a bad landing, never mess with thunderstorms or icing, always have a backup plan, etc. I know there's more, but you get the point. I've applied a great deal of discipline over my flying career to try and stick to those basic points. Doing so on the easy sorties pays dividends by developing the habit patterns that save my bacon in the really tough or complex moments.

Spend some time reading accident reports or "Never Again" stories and you'll find countless cases where forgetting aviation basics bit (or nearly bit) someone hard. Develop sound habit patterns of sticking to the basics and no matter how rushed, pressured, or unclear the situation may be you'll find ways to break the error chain and come out safely each time. I said before the flight environment is complex and dynamic. I'm not a genius, I have to take the complex and make it simple to understand or I get confused. Stick to the aviation basics, and you'll always know the right thing to do. Fly Safely!

Blue skies and fair winds!

Random Links:
Five tips to benefit your health:
http://pilot-protection-services.aopa.org/News/2016/May/Five-reasons-to-prevaricate

Fly Well: A time to say no:
http://www.aopa.org/News-and-Video/All-News/2016/May/Pilot/flywell

FLY SAFELY!

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