



SAFETYGRAM

June 2016

In my early flying career, my Air Force squadron would hand out a “Bone Head” trophy for dumb pilot actions. The Bone Head “award winner” would be forced to display the trophy in their work area until someone else did something cringe-worthy enough to take the award away from them. While public shaming is a time honored human tradition, I’ve come to believe that practice may have been counterproductive for maintaining a proper safety culture. I was a very junior aviator at the time; I witnessed seasoned aviators actually hiding mistakes rather than talking openly about them so they wouldn’t have to display the Bone Head award on their desk.

Thankfully, I had good mentors that taught me to focus on doing the right things so I never got the Bone Head award. That’s not to say I never made mistakes; I made plenty of them and fessed up every time. But it seemed applying the flight discipline to do the right things prevented the mistakes from snowballing into something Bone Head-worthy. I’ve seen over and over again that applying the discipline to develop (and stick to) positive aviation habit patterns keeps us out of trouble. Here’s just a few of those positive habit patterns:

- Take care of yourself - pay attention to the human in the machine. Proper rest, food, & hydration are critical to any pilot’s ability to perform. Many years ago I took my first stage check working toward my PPL. I’d just finished working a 10 hour shift and was sick as well. Needless to say, I failed my stage check miserably. The next week I flew again with the same instructor on the do over ride. He couldn’t believe I was the same pilot. When I told him about the condition I was in the week prior, we had a long discussion about my mental and physical state and the clear difference in performance. I never forgot that lesson. No matter how good my skills might be, I won’t perform well if I’m not 100% mentally and physically. I’ve seen many students succumb to the same trap over the years...and had the same discussion with them.
- Preflight planning is important. Doing a good sortie study and checking NOTAMS, WX, & TOLD before you go fly will keep you out of trouble. On routine sorties, it’s always tempting to just “fly by the seat of your pants.” People flew that way in the early days of aviation...and a lot of them didn’t live very long. I saw plenty of Bone Head awards given for lack of good flight discipline in this category.
- Don’t rush the aircraft preflight. Always make sure you’ve really got enough fuel, make sure everything that should be removed has been and everything that should be attached is attached securely.
- Use the checklist...always. This has saved my bacon more times than I’d like to admit.
- Fly the airplane! No matter what else is going on, fly the airplane.
- Fly a stabilized approach that leads to a good landing. Never accept a bad landing – go around instead. I’d love to beat this horse more, but you’ve either already gotten this message or you never will at this point...
- Avoid hazards – Thunderstorms, icing, windshear, excessive crosswinds, terrain, power lines...well you get the idea. I think maybe I’m reiterating #2 above.

It’s easy to tell people to do those things. I think all of us say we’ll do those every time. But here’s a simple test: It’s hot, but a great day to be up in the air. You did a thorough pre-sortie study, checked WX, NOTAMS, & TOLD. You just finished the aircraft preflight, have strapped in and are finally ready to start the engine (and get some airflow going!). But you can’t remember if you pulled the chocks or not. What do you do?

The book answer is clear cut (get out and double check the chocks in this case), but why is it so tempting not to? I can tell you from personal experience that it doesn't always feel easy in the moment to do the right thing. Sometimes it feels downright inconvenient to do what you know you should do. If you're eager to go, it's hard to stop for a moment. That's why people take short cuts. They tell themselves they're 80% sure it'll be OK to keep going ("I think I pulled the chocks, even though I can't actually remember doing it.") 80% of the time they're right. But that 20% of the time can really bite you in the butt...it's kind of like Russian roulette. Eliminate the 20% uncertainty factor by taking the time to do the right thing.

Here's what I've found over the years when I'm faced with the 80/20 situation I described above. Admitting and eliminating the 20% uncertainty means my ego will take a hit. Getting out to look for chocks that probably aren't in the way is obviously inconvenient. But I've found applying the flight discipline to correct the issue means that it doesn't become a bigger problem and it can't bite me later. Even more importantly, addressing the issue properly improves my future performance. It helps eliminate future mistakes; I'll definitely remember the chocks next time. That 80% chance of being right and saving face is always appealing, but I've seen that 20% bite people over and over. Doing the right thing can feel hard in the short term, but it'll keep you out of trouble in the long term. For a second, just imagine trying to roll over even the smallest nose chocks...almost a guaranteed prop strike. The ounce of prevention (double checking chocks are removed) is WAY better than the pound of cure (\$12,000 prop strike inspection). The same holds true in every case I've ever encountered or any I can think of (don't try and salvage a bad landing attempt...just go around...oops...beating that dead horse again...). If you apply good flight discipline, you'll overcome and learn from mistakes, and you'll fly safely!

Blue skies and fair winds!

Links:

"When Mom Told you the Stove was Hot" Weather Related Blog:
<http://blog.aopa.org/leadingedge/?p=4564>

10 Ways an iPad in the cockpit can get you in trouble:
<http://generalaviationnews.com/2015/08/23/10-ways-an-ipad-in-the-cockpit-can-get-you-into-trouble/>

FLY SAFELY!

