



SAFETY GRAM

August 2016

A long time ago I was on a very long combat mission. For a number of reasons that I won't go into, I was left alone in the cockpit while the other pilot caught a nap before landing. (It was almost a 3 hour flight from the combat zone back to our base of operations.) We were all exhausted and I was struggling to stay awake myself. So I called another crewmember to come sit in the empty pilot seat and talk to me so I wouldn't fall asleep. This crewmember had over 1000 hrs of flight time, but he'd never been in the pilot's seat before. As soon as he sat down next to me a look of awe came over him and he blurted out, "WOW! You guys have an amazing view up here!!!" I took the view for granted because I was so accustomed to it.

There's an obvious parallel with aviation in general. Flying is amazing but always comes with inherent risk as well. It's easy to lose sight of that simple truth as we go about the "routine" business of flying. That's part of why I always put so much emphasis on developing and maintaining good habit patterns. Good habit patterns help us remember the risks we face every time we fly, and help us mitigate those risks.

There's no easy way to deliver this news. Last month we lost two aviators in a fatal crash. The flight was an ATP checkride; the ATP candidate and DPE were both killed. The aircraft was destroyed. Those are about the only facts we have right now; the NTSB is investigating. This tragedy is a stark reminder of the inherent risks we face every time we fly. Two experienced and respected aviators lost their lives on a "routine" flight.

Please don't misinterpret anything I've said. I don't want anyone to think I'm insinuating the two pilots who died last month took anything for granted or took any unnecessary risks. We don't have any idea yet what happened and I'm not making any innuendos. I'm merely reminding us all that flying comes with an element of danger that can't ever be forgotten. We have to control those risks to the best of our ability.

Whether you're a student, professional, or recreational pilot, you probably fly because you love it. And that love of aviation is probably what drew you to the Aero Club. It's easy to lose sight of the danger if you love what you're doing. But aviation is not just a hobby, it's a profession. A profession is "a vocation requiring highly advanced learning of some department or science; the body of persons engaged in an occupation or calling." Even at the recreational level, flying safely requires professional dedication. Our life and any passengers' lives literally depend on us making the right decisions.

So in the context of facing a tragic aircraft accident, what does that mean to you and I? I think it means each of us must continue dedicating ourselves to pursuing aviation in a professional manner. It means we always have to take it seriously no matter how routine the flight – know the aircraft limits, speeds, and procedures. Know your personal limits; we all have bad days.

Take pride in doing things right and letting others learn from your actions. It also means we fess up when we mess up, so everyone can learn from the mistakes. Finally, it means keeping an eye out for when your friends may not be having a great day or making the best decisions, and guiding them towards better decisions.

Again, I'm not saying all the things I just admonished did or didn't happen on the fatal flight. I'm just saying these are the tools that stand between us and the same fate. These are the parts of the equation that we can control. There are also things we can't control...

This is the first fatal Aero Club accident in over 5 years. That's good and bad at same time. It's good because the Aero club system has a safety record that's almost 3 times better than general aviation at large. Our safety record is the GA benchmark because we have such awesome people involved, and maintain such high standards for aircraft knowledge and proficiency. It's bad for painfully obvious reasons...any fatal accident is one too many.

I'll leave you with this anonymous quote I first encountered in USAF pilot training. I didn't fully understand it then, but with every friend I lose in aviation I understand it more and more:

"Whenever we talk about a pilot who has been killed in a flying accident, we should all keep one thing in mind. He called upon the sum of all his knowledge and made a judgment. He believed in it so strongly that he knowingly bet his life on it. That his judgment was faulty is a tragedy, not stupidity. Every instructor, supervisor, and contemporary who ever spoke to him had an opportunity to influence his judgment, so a little bit of all of us goes with every pilot we lose."

Links:

"Decision Making for Pilots"

<http://www.aopa.org/-/media/Files/AOPA/Home/Pilot%20Resources/ASI/Safety%20Advisors/sa24.pdf>

"Sky Kings: Managing Fatigue and Your Goal"

<http://www.flyingmag.com/sky-kings-managing-fatigue-and-your-goal>

Aviation quotes:

<http://www.skygod.com/quotes/safety.html>

Blue skies and fair winds!

FLY SAFELY!



LtCol Jon McBride, Director of Operations & Safety, USAF Aero Clubs
Jonathon.mcbride@us.af.mil; DSN 969-7232, (210) 395-7232