

SAFETY FIRST

AN ACCIDENT WAITING TO HAPPEN

By Felix R. Tormes, MD, FACS

CAPT, (FS), MC, USN

Department of Orthopaedic Surgery

Naval Hospital, Pensacola, Florida

President of Flying Physicians Association



Continuing on a topic previously addressed in this column, the differences between perception and the reality of aviation mishaps was recently discussed by J. McClellan's editorial in the June issue of *Flying* magazine. He reviews the experience of the AVEMCO Insurance Company's accident data, noting that this company covers only piston aircraft, and has an obvious vested interest in reducing accidents in their insured pool.

Their data disclosed that, contrary to popular belief, advanced pilot ratings do not lower accident rates in GA. ATP rated pilots flying GA aircraft have about the same accident rate as private pilots. Additionally, total pilot experience after the first few hundred hours does not affect the accident rate. Neither does the pilot being instrument rated. I was surprised to learn this, as it had been my supposition that my insurance company (not AVEMCO) offered lower rates to pilots with an instrument ticket and higher time flight hours.

The two metrics that DO correlate with lower accident rates are recent experience and time in type. When you think about it, it makes sense that total flight time and advanced ratings, in the absence of recent experience in type, may not yield a benefit in

terms of risk reduction. However, it has been an accepted aviation factoid in the pilot's lounge that a fat log book and heavy iron experience granted a pilot a measure of protection against buying the farm. Not so.

The lesson here for most of us is that, if you are going to fly, fly often, stay current in your airplane type and maintain your proficiency. I did note a letter this year from my insurance company specifically requested documentation of recurrent training and didactic courses well ahead of the date of policy expiration. The hint is, if you haven't done it; get it done before submitting the annual policy questionnaire.

In addition to staying fresh, human factors continue to be the most prominent factor in aviation accidents, generally in about 80% of mishaps. This is true in both civil and military aviation, although the accident rate in GA is considerably higher than in naval aviation, in some studies by a factor of 10.

Bill Rhodes, of Aereworthy Consulting and a retired professor from the Air Force Academy, has identified behavioral and attitude parameters in pilots that seem to break us down into the disciplined versus the risk takers. He stresses a culture of "aviation attitude", by which he means allocating time in your schedule for training, and

a sense of devotion and commitment to flying.

The Navy Postgraduate School has described a concept of leading and lagging indicators of safety in USN squadrons. An example of a lagging indicator of safety is the traditional tabulation of past accidents, such as the NTSB monthly tabulation of accidents. We review the accident, look at the sequence of events leading to it, and focus on prevention of a similar occurrence. There is much to be learned from this type of safety data, but in the end, it only describes an accident that has already occurred.

A leading indicator may be identified by focused interviews asking pilots what they consider potentially unsafe practices or policies which may lead to an accident. Transposing this concept into GA, and considering Rhodes' concepts, we may arrive at a leading indicator putting the spotlight on behavior such as careless attitudes, cursory pre flights, inflated egos and denial of health issues in our ranks.

In the final analysis, we don't want to be viewed by others as the accident waiting to happen.

Nil illigitimae carborundum