



Mission: Impossible

by Tom Johnson – SSF Trustee

As an avowed aircraft and flying nerd, I read any and all flying publications I can get my hands on. I place great value in the different perspectives they avow for the various segments of aviation they cater to.

Recently, the editor of a magazine aimed at low time and casual recreational pilots essentially demanded that the Federal Aviation Administration back off any effort to discourage pilots from engaging in legal yet highly risky behavior. The strong implication was that the FAA has better things to do than harass pilots just trying to have a little fun.

Aviation safety is all about the identification and mitigation of risk. Any time any of us climb into our machines and venture into the sky, we are accepting a certain amount of risk. As soaring pilots, we actually look forward to the challenge of conquering tasks that a significant portion of the population believes to be extremely dangerous. Think about the risk involved in climbing in the wave up to FL280, or bombing along the ridge at 110 KIAS.

Yet, we can do these things safely and repeatedly because we have identified the risk factors and developed prudent and practical procedures and techniques to mitigate the risk.

Soaring is very much like flying tactical aircraft. The mission dictates the risks and then we develop tactics to mitigate them. Anything that introduces unnecessary risk into the mission is questioned and possibly removed. Why fly through the defense missile envelope when I can take a short deviation around it?

This training and experience caused my bother at the editorial. The author cited a couple of maneuvers that while legal introduced a tremendous amount of risk into the operation. Additionally, the maneuvers did absolutely nothing to further the mission of the flight.

Make no mistake about it, every flight you make in any aircraft does and should have a mission. Whether it is to have an evening sunset flight or to fly a 300km triangle, you are flying for some purpose. And that purpose defines the risk and should lead you to mitigation procedures and techniques.

The Soaring Safety Foundation (SSF) is tasked to look at the flying our community does. We try to identify areas of concern and develop way to address these concerns.

One of these concerns is the low-altitude high speed pass down the runway.

The FAA is also concerned about this behavior. While this maneuver is on the ragged edge of being legal, it serves absolutely no purpose for the furtherance of your mission. The argument is made that the pilot is ascertaining the condition of the runway, looking for animals, children, pilots, etc. How a pilot can effectively evaluate the condition of the landing surface from 10 ft up at 100+ kts is a skill I do not possess. I doubt many others do as well.

The pilot doing the low-altitude high-speed pass is introducing a great deal of risk. Interaction with aircraft in the pattern who are not expecting the pass; increased probability of a bird strike; just to name two.



And the pilot is probably doing this maneuver at the end of a long flight. Fatigue, dehydration, and hunger are very likely to be present and will likely reduce your mental acuity. Trying to execute a highly technical maneuver in a state of reduced mental acuity introduces risk into this situation and is counter to the concept of identifying and mitigating risk.

Do experienced pilots do a high-speed pass at the end of a flight. Some do and most execute it successfully. But how does this maneuver further the mission? What level of experience and ability is required? When do you know you are ready to attempt this maneuver? (Having made many 400+kt passes by the aircraft carrier at deck height, I can assure you that my desire to “look good around the ship” probably exceeded my abilities and I was lucky I did not kill myself and others. And the ship’s leadership also promoted this highly risky behavior by a bullet-proof 25-year-old to excite the deck hands.)

I have talked with pilots who believe low-altitude passes are no more dangerous than any other maneuver in a glider. They believe they have taken factors such as conflicting traffic, wind, or excessive turbulence, surface winds, their skill level, and physical fitness into account, and they have the necessary abilities to successfully accomplish this maneuver.

But these pilots are admitting this maneuver is outside of normal operations because of their concerns. And it does nothing to further the mission for the flight.

The question I ask myself and I hope you ask yourself is why am doing this? Am I trying to “look good around the glider-port and impress the on-lookers”? Am I trying to show myself and others I am now one of the experienced pilots who can do this? Or am I trying to prove that I am bullet-proof, and accidents happen to others?

If your answer to any of these is yes, I implore you to re-evaluate your thinking. I know, I have been there. I had to learn that the mission was the fun and fulfilling part, not pushing the edge of danger for dubious reasons. And I have been to too many memorial services for fellow aviators who did not learn this lesson.

So please, go soaring, fly high, go far, and return to a nice benign boring pattern and landing. Leave the low-altitude stuff to professional airshow pilots. Now back to my stack of magazines.