

## Do You Take Safety Personally?

By Tom Johnson – SSF Trustee

Back when I was young and naive, (as opposed to now as older and not as naive) we had a sentiment in our US Navy flight training that “passing would not be passing if it wasn’t good enough.” The idea being that the effort to get from 90% to 100% on tests was as much or more than the effort to get above the required 80% to pass the exam.

It took me a long time to realize this attitude translated over to all areas of flying. As young Naval Aviators, we did not correlate knowledge and attitude with safety. We thought safe flying meant no accidents. We thought aviators who did have an accident were either very dumb or very unlucky. You may have heard “Safety is NO Accident — It must be planned.” Indeed, it’s in all-caps bold at the top of the paper that your pilot certificate is mailed to you on. This does not mean an absence of bent metal and broken bodies, but an attitude. It means that safety is achieved only on purpose and not as a happenstance.

The idea that safety is not an outcome, but an attitude can be very difficult to grasp. This attitude has to be instilled in you. Hopefully it is instilled by someone whom you respect and is leading by example. There is a great case study involving two A-4E squadron’s operating from the same ship off the coast of Vietnam. Both squadrons flew the same aircraft and missions in the same weather and tactical environment against the same targets. One squadron did not lose a single aircraft and the other had almost half of their pilots killed or captured. The difference was one Commanding Officer demanded a strict adherence to and knowledge of the procedures needed to operate safely in a very demanding environment. The other CO thought the environment was too dynamic for preparation to make difference and besides, preparation is hard work.

This attitude pervaded every aspect of their operations with dramatic results.

The same is true at your glider operation. If the President, Board, and CFGs think preparation and knowledge are important, it will enhance your safety culture. However, if they think preparation will not make a difference or is too much work, your attitude towards safety will suffer.

How can you help to foster this good attitude?

The FAA advocates organizations develop a Safety Management System (SMS). An SMS can help an organization detect and address safety concerns before the concerns become dangerous. You may hear this referred to as Safety 2.

Even if your operation has not embraced Safety 2 yet, you can implement your own personal SMS/Safety 2 program and this can be as simple or complicated as you desire. I suggest a simple approach, as great wailing and gnashing of teeth tends to be a bit melodramatic.

First, develop a list of your personal DO’s and DON’Ts. This list should include actions that you believe promote good airmanship. This list should keep in mind that we fly with others in close quarters and in a highly dynamic environment. You need to be personally responsible for, and accountable to others about your actions and be a good steward to the local community around you.

Second, define your aviation values and personal minimums. Do you have a checklist for each phase of flight, and do you follow it? Do you know, understand, and adhere to the FARs that pertain to you? Do you know what other pilots would say about your commitment to safe operations? Do you have a personal minimum altitude - a hard deck - that you will not thermal below? Do you have predefined go/no-go criteria? At what level does the mechanical condition of your equipment become unacceptable?

The set of values and minimums I set for myself may not be applicable to you. Think through and write down what your values are. Review these values to periodically re-evaluate their relevance to your personal situation.

Third, now comes the hard part. Stick to your personal minimums. There is no flight that is so important it must be flown. There will be another day. There will be another contest. And telling your passenger that conditions exceed your comfort level get easier every time you do it. I have yet to meet a passenger who is upset their pilot decided not to fly because the pilot deemed it beyond what they considered to be safe.

Finally, continuously monitor your abilities and seek ways to improve them. You can improve your ability by seeking the guidance of a CFIG or mentor. You can also be the mentor. Mentoring is very rewarding and forces you to up your game. As a mentor, do not be afraid to admit you do not know the answer. Use this situation as an opportunity to show how you can find the information and expand both of your knowledge bases.

How you apply your personal minimums are the best example you can give. And using yourself as a good example and “paying it forward” is a great way to give back to this wonderful community we are part of.

So be like the older and less naive me and work for the 100%. You will be a safer pilot for it.