

Introducing Risk

By Tom Johnson

Let's face it, if you are reading this column, you like a certain amount of risk above the norm. Think about it, you willingly climb into a fiberglass tub and go up to the Flight Levels or fly long ways at low altitudes on a regular basis in an aircraft with no engine. You think this is normal and exciting. And it is something you enjoy doing.

Throughout the course of your soaring adventure, you have unconsciously learned to manage and mitigate the risks associated with our beloved sport. You have learned what behaviors increase your risk and what practices minimize them. You have watched and learned from your peers what good sailplane pilots do. The culture of your club or commercial operation has reinforced this way of flying through its policies and attitudes.

Something happens as you get more and more comfortable in the environment you aviate in. Your skills increase and your perception of what is happening increase. The rush you get from skirting along the ridge, or climbing up in the wave, or bombing out of a big thermal starts to go away. This is normal and predictable. And admit it, you like the rush, and some of you may even crave it. So what do you do?

You introduce risk to further the rush.

Naval Aviation realized this a long time ago. Low level tactical flying at 200 ft AGL was initially a big rush. But after 200 NM at this altitude, it actually seems to get very routine and almost boring. So you start to fly lower and lower to keep the rush alive until you are looking sideways at the farmhouses. Your margin for error is decreasing to almost nothing while your comfort level is becoming very high.

We had a radio altimeter and a squadron SOP of what minimum altitude to set to try and combat this. I will admit that on a nice day, with a navigator I trusted, I would set the altitude bug to 100 ft AGL. I did not realize these limits were written in the blood of others, because, you know, accidents happen to the other person. I scared myself silly a couple of times.

As I got older and began to realize I was not bulletproof, I began to see the wisdom of tailoring the risk to the mission. Flight maneuvers and such that did not further the completion of the mission were to be excluded. Once I accepted the concept that the mission was paramount, it became easy to exclude maneuvers that introduced unnecessary risk.

You have to do a personal analysis to evaluate whether the benefit outweighs the risk. Personally and professionally, I start with myself standing at the end of the long green table where I do not have a coffee cup, and I have to justify what I did. If I cannot envision that, I look for a different course of action.

How you chose too evaluate is something only you can determine.

High speed pass after flight does not further the mission.

Quasi-split-s in the tow plane after release does not further the mission.

Thermalling below pattern altitude does not further the mission.

You can name others.

When I bring this topic up at courses throughout the soaring community the reliable push-back is that I am trying to take all the fun out of soaring. If the mission you are on, cross-country, altitude climb, sailplane race, etc., is not fun enough, maybe you should reevaluate your definition of what fun is. Can you think of anything more satisfying than flying your sailplane to the limit of your capabilities, and maybe a stretch them a bit, to complete the mission?

I recently flew in my first aerobatic contest. Safety was paramount. Low altitude penalties were strictly enforced. Aircraft and equipment were inspected and personal documentation was required to compete. One contestant was publically admonished for an unsafe approach. People applauded this and thanked the organizers for addressing it. Prying eyes were watching and critiquing my every move. And despite all of this, I still had a great time. It was the norm, as far as I knew, and had always been that way. And it enhanced my enjoyment of the event.

So next time you see someone introducing unnecessary risk that does not further the mission, call them on it. Make it socially unacceptable to risk damage to a beautiful sailplane, and themselves. Let them know that you do not appreciate them placing you in a position where you may have to clean up their mess. Have people extol about their exploits of the successful cross-country without the low altitude save, the climb to the top of the thermal, or their wonderful first solo. Promote completion of the mission as the measurement of success, not whether you look cool at the end of the flight or had a harrowing tale to tell.

The next person who goes up a high speed pass, or low altitude save, or whatever non-mission specific maneuver will not be the first. But we all need to try and make sure that person is the last.