

Taking Stock

By Tom Johnson

This time of year is unique to the soaring world. We have much to be thankful for.

While some of us have put our sailplanes away until the spring. Others of us are eagerly anticipating big wave flights. And some of us live in places where we can fly all the time. Regardless of your situation, we have all been given the gift of soaring.

The best part of the gift, for me at least, is the people I have met along the way. Truly amazing and gifted individuals who share this obsession with our sport. Some of you earn your living from this sport, and to them I am truly humbled and thankful. But for most of us, we fly for the pure enjoyment of doing something that many people consider dangerous and reckless.

And our sport can be dangerous.

I am very disheartened every time I hear of an accident and when I hear of a fatality, I know it will probably be someone I know or have met. I wonder how these amazing people got themselves into the situation? I wonder if they truly knew or imagined the risks they were taking?

By necessity, we keep ourselves alive by identifying and managing the risks associated with soaring. We take a puckish pride in overcoming the risks. We may casually comment at a gathering of non-soaring people that we only got to 27,000 ft in the wave; or that we had a 300 mile flight. We can rightfully take pride in this.

In many ways, we casually accept these risks as an essential component of soaring. But do we truly understand the implication of these risks?

As a carrier pilot in the Navy, many of my fellow Naval Aviators used the survival mechanism that the big accident was going to happen to the other guy. They were too good, or too lucky, or too whatever, to be caught in circumstances that would lead to their demise. It is very easy to rationalize that the other guy was a bad pilot, and of course, I am much better than that.

Of course, we all know that is pure nonsense.

Or do we?

Soaring is very much like tactical carrier aviation. Highly aggressive and accomplished individuals flying highly sophisticated machines in highly dynamic environments.

We routinely manage risks that many facets of aviation consider to be highly dangerous and irresponsible. Take for example, a tactical low-level navigation mission is very much like a cross-country flight on the ridge. You are both close to the terrain at low altitude and relatively high speed. You are both navigating your way along with little time to reference your chart. You both have to be highly aware of the terrain and winds, and how they impact your situation. And there is very little margin for inattention or error.

The same characteristics that make us successful sailplane pilots, make us susceptible to the same dangers of overconfidence and invulnerability.

So what does all of this have to do with the end of the soaring year?

In the tactical world, we all looked out for one another. The older and more experienced aviators made a point to mentor the new people. Their flight planning, briefing, and execution followed procedures and norms that were well established. Procedure and norms that were established through prudent observation and sometimes painful experience. The good Commanding Officers made sure this mentoring happened. So it is in our soaring world.

Do we look out for each other? Do us more experienced pilots mentor the new people? Do we provide prudent examples by our preparation and execution of our flying? Does our club leadership mandate this behavior?

Or are you the person who makes the high-speed pass down the flight line; or thermals at low altitude; or announces that they don't like the SOP so they aren't going to follow it? Do you believe the accident cannot happen to you?

Hopefully you take the time at least once a year to ponder these questions. And hopefully the answer is "yes, I do", I do provide a good example. I do what is right, safe, and prudent because it is the thing to do.

Because your actions do make a difference. The example you set may prevent an accident or incident. Demand high standards of yourself and implicitly expect the same in others. And when you see other pilots showing a good example, let them know it. Make sure their prudence is recognized.

And conversely, if you, as the experienced pilot, flaunt the rules and take unnecessary risks, you set a bad example.

So please, take the time, reflect on your soaring season. Ask the hard questions and demand honest answers of yourself. See if the answers you get are answers you would give to a friend or loved one.