



Checklist, Checklist, Checklist!

By: Tom Johnson, SSF Trustee

Many of us remember the classic Friday night comedy, "The Brady Bunch". While I never had a live-in housekeeper like Alice, I nevertheless experienced the frustration of living with my brothers and sister. Jan Brady, the female middle child, would express her frustration over the lack of attention she received while the parents fawned over her older sister by yelling "Marcia, Marcia, Marcia" whenever Jan had to yield to her sister's needs.

At a recent contest, one of the pilots did not complete his before landing checklist and landed with the gear up, just as the entire group was returning from the task. To his great credit, he got up at the pilots' meeting the next day and talked about his experience. He did not make excuses. He did not blame anyone else. He said he simply forgot to do it.

He asked the group for suggestions on how to prevent this from happening again in the future. The response was very spirited. It ranged from "put the gear down and land" to an elaborate ritual.

As I listened to the passionate pilots advocating their particular methodology, I realized that one very important element was missing from them all. Why are we doing the checklist in the first place?

If you think about it, every time you enter a checklist you are changing a basic mode of operation. The glider has been pulled from the trailer and assembled, checklist to make sure you are ready to grid. The glider is on the grid, checklist to make sure you are ready to get into the glider. You get into the glider and do a checklist to ensure you are ready to take-off. This goes on throughout the flight until the glider is back in the box or tied down.

Each checklist defines a new mode of operation. Each mode of operation requires a slightly, or not so slightly, different way of thinking. This concept applies to abnormal situations as well.

Not only when, but how you do your checklist is important. The airlines and military have long advocated a cockpit set-up followed by the appropriate checklist. This accomplishes two very important things. First, it establishes a habit pattern for your operation. And it makes you check each item twice. This will help in trapping any errors you may have made.

Get in. Strap in. Systematically touch each lever and control and place it in its proper position. Now you are ready to enter the checklist.

Even in single pilot operations, verbally announce the checklist to yourself. This engages a different part of your brain and helps in trapping errors or omissions. And saying the checklist out loud lets others know you are engaged with the checklist and not to interrupt. Do this even in the air.

Once you have entered a checklist, you have entered a new mode of operation. The previous mode is done. That thermal I did or did not take, the turn I did or did not make is all now in the past. It is time to concentrate on the new mode.





This concept is paramount when landing out. You have gotten down to your personal Hard Deck and now it is time to land in the area you selected. Flaps set, speed bug set, trim set, and landing gear down and locked. Now you can enter your landing checklist. Checklist complete, now land.

But wait, the soaring gods are smiling on you as you hit a 6 knot thermal at 400 feet in your base to final turn. You have to put that thermal on your "Pay-No-Mind" list and ignore it. You are in the landing mode.

As the SSF has long advocated, many accidents happen because good pilots make bad decisions. A disciplined approach to the use of checklists can go a long way in helping you make good decisions. Understanding when and why you do the checklist, and how you do it are paramount to good checklist usage.

So the next time you hear one of the safety people talking about checklists, we aren't trying to frustrate you like Jan. We are trying to encourage you to use a very helpful tool that can save you embarrassment or worse.

Now if I could just get someone like Alice to help clean up the hangar.

