

TOM HOFFMANN

# ASI:

AVIATION SAFETY INSPECTOR

## HOLDING THE LINE FOR SAFETY

It's 4 p.m. on a crisp fall day in southern New Hampshire. The sun, still brightly beaming over the horizon, compels you to squint as you carefully tie down and secure your Cherokee 180 after a relaxing leaf-peeping jaunt. Then, through the glare of the sun, you notice a tall figure with dark shades slowly approaching your aircraft. Your heart instinctively skips a beat as you notice a blue polo shirt with a familiar-looking green and yellow "meatball" logo on the shoulder. Yikes, it's the dreaded FAA ramp check! Quick, what do you do?

- Jump in your plane and make a quick getaway
- Click your heels and shout "there's no place like home," or
- Cross your fingers and quietly say your prayers

Well, the correct answer is actually "D," none of the above ... but more on that later.

Now, an FAA ramp check might seem a bit unnerving to most, but it's really just a routine procedure — dutifully carried out by aviation safety inspectors (ASIs) — that is meant to enhance safety for you and your fellow airmen. And although the ramp check might be one of the more recognizable (and admittedly least popular) tasks in the flying public's mind when it comes to ASIs, it's actually only one of myriad tasks they are responsible for.

### What's in a Name?

To understand more about what an ASI is and does, let's start by explaining the position's baseline responsibilities. As the name implies, aviation safety is of course paramount to an ASI. Working in the field and alongside aviation stakeholders in various capacities, ASIs often represent the front line of safety for the FAA. These highly skilled men and

women apply their knowledge of the aviation industry together with the laws and policies that govern aviation to make our National Airspace System the safest and most efficient in the world. And while a few might think ASIs are crudely assembled out of red tape and recycled rulebooks, they actually have the same background as many of you, their fellow aviators, along with a similar passion for the well-being of the GA community.

### A Wearer of Many Hats

Numbering over 3,000, ASIs are among the largest workforce groups at the FAA. They are spread out among eight regional offices and more than 100 field offices including Flight Standards District Offices (FSDOs) primarily, but also Certificate Management Offices (CMOs), International Field Offices (IFOs), the Aircraft Evaluation Groups (AEGs), the eight regional headquarters offices, and the FAA's national headquarters office in Washington, D.C.

ASIs are assigned to oversee one of two main areas — air carrier or general aviation — and then fall into one of three sub-categories: operations, maintenance, or avionics. Due to job function similarities, the latter two are collectively referred to as airworthiness inspectors.

Although we'll be focusing more on the GA side of inspector duties here, ASI responsibilities can still vary greatly among the different disciplines. Broadly speaking, however, most ASIs engage in the following activities:

- examining airmen for initial certification and continuing competence;
- evaluating airmen training programs, equipment, and facilities; and

- evaluating the operational/maintenance aspects of programs of air carriers and similar commercial and aviation operations to ensure overall safe operation.

“For a GA operations inspector, there are around 240 tasks that are required of you,” says Joseph Morra, ASI with the General Aviation and Commercial Division’s Operations Branch at FAA Headquarters in Washington, D.C. Reflecting on his time as an ASI with the Teterboro FSDO, Morra recalls focusing on everything from administering CFI checkrides, to assisting with the certification of new part 135 on-demand air carriers.

“Even though we’re trained to handle most aviation safety-related scenarios, the types of activities required of an ASI are usually driven by the complexity of operations as well as the geographic nuances of a particular area,” says Morra. As an example, fair-weather places like Florida or Arizona often have an abundance of flight training facilities, requiring ASIs to be more familiar with flight school surveillance and curriculum oversight. Or, you could have a busy metropolitan area, like Chicago, with complex airspace issues and a fair share of presidential temporary flight restrictions (TFRs), both of which require ASIs to be well-versed in handling pilot deviations.

### Worthy of Recognition

Although their efforts are focused on safety related to aviation maintenance, airworthiness ASIs encounter many of the same issues inherent to an operations inspector’s wide-ranging workload. “It can be challenging given the variety of operations and complexity that can exist with different operators,” says GA Airworthiness ASI Robert Keenum, formerly based at the South Bend, Indiana, FSDO, and now at

Flight Standards’ Aircraft Maintenance Division in D.C. “You could be inspecting an individual AMT or IA (Inspection Authorization) one day, and a certified large-scale corporate maintenance, repair, and overhaul shop the next. The key is learning how to develop a sound work program that accommodates the risk-management process which will identify and drive surveillance to areas with the most risk.”

### Safety is No Accident

Another key responsibility for any ASI — but one in which he or she certainly never wishes to have to perform — is incident and accident investigation. Normally an ASI will coordinate with the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) official assigned to an aircraft accident scene to help conduct the investigation. While both the NTSB and FAA work towards determining causal factors of an accident, ASIs focus primarily on nine specific areas, including the performance of any FAA facilities or functions, the competency of the airmen involved, aircraft airworthiness, and whether any regulations were violated.

With some general aviation accident cases, the NTSB may not be able to make it to the scene. In these cases, the on-site ASI must then coordinate and supply the accident information to the NTSB. That includes talking to the local authorities, taking photos, and obtaining statements from crewmembers and witnesses.

### But Wait, There’s More ...

In addition to the investigative and enforcement duties of many ASIs, there are also some assigned to more specialized roles, like those based at AEG, headquarters, and as FAASTeam Program Managers (FPM).

ASIs assigned to the FAA’s Aircraft Evaluation Groups are involved with aspects of engineering activities and operating regulations for aircraft, engine, or propeller systems. AEG also helps to develop Airworthiness Directives and provides guidance for aging aircraft.

ASIs working at FAA’s headquarters in D.C. work primarily to support the field offices by ensuring the regulations, guidance, and policy are properly suited to meet the aviation industry’s evolving operational requirements. They also help work on safety recommendations, facilitate Congressional correspondence requests, and liaise with other FAA divisions/regions to provide support and technical guidance as needed.

Finally, there are ASIs that have been assigned to aviation safety outreach roles as FAASTeam Program Managers. FPMs work directly with the aviation

Photo by James Williams



**Members of the Reno FSDO work with organizers of the Reno Air Races and the USAF Thunderbirds.**

community as safety advocates. They host public seminars on aviation safety topics and accident mitigation strategies, as well as gather critical data on accident causal factors out in the field. FPMs also support field office ASIs in mitigating identified risk through education outreach.

## The Enforcer?

That ominous term might stay better suited as a title for a “Dirty Harry” film than it is for an ASI. “Despite what preconceptions people might have, any sort of punitive enforcement measures are usually an absolute last resort for ASIs,” says Jeffrey Smith, formerly an ASI at the South Florida FSDO and now Manager of the General Aviation and Commercial Division’s Training and Certification branch. “Enforcement is an important part of an ASI’s job, but by no means is it the sole focus. Our ultimate goal is ensuring compliance with the regulations.”

If certain criteria are met and the safety risk is low, ASIs will typically turn to informal or alternative actions like counseling or remedial training. There are also administration enforcement actions ASIs can use for an airman that may have violated a rule, but which don’t charge them with a violation. This type of action instead brings the incident to the attention of the person involved, documents any corrective action if needed, and encourages future compliance with the regulations. Two types of administrative action available include warning notices and letters of correction. Both of these actions also provide an important source of risk assessment data so ASIs can better focus their safety intervention and outreach strategies.

You might also be wondering what ASIs use as reference guide, whether for enforcement situations or for one of the hundreds of other tasks and responsibilities they have. It’s all laid out in FAA Order 8900.1, volume 14 in particular, which is publically accessible at <http://fsims.faa.gov>.

## On the Straight and ARROW

Getting back to the scenario posed at the start of this article; exactly what do you do if you get ramp checked? For starters, one of the most important things is making sure you have the proper documents with you. You wouldn’t drive without having your driver’s license, so be sure to have your pilot’s license and medical with you. Your airplane needs documentation too, so make sure you follow the memory aid ARROW (Airworthiness and Registration certificates, Radio-telephone license when




Photo by James Williams

international, Operating limitations, and Weight and balance information). Also be aware of any specific airspace issues or NOTAMs (long term or pop-up) that could affect your flight, and be sure to get a proper weather briefing. Finally, if you are ramp-checked, don’t be afraid to ask questions. Ask for proper ID if isn’t initially presented. An ASI should always carry their FAA employee badge as well their ASI credentials, known as a 110A.

It might also help to know that ASIs typically won’t perform a ramp check with a pilot preparing to fly. It occurs more commonly well after a pilot lands and taxis in, and after any passengers are unloaded.

“ASIs do not have quotas for ramp checks that result in violations,” says Morra. “We’re not hiding behind clouds waiting to issue tickets. A lot of times what might be perceived as an enforcement action might actually be part of a proactive outreach effort, or simply an ASI wanting to introduce him/ herself to a new pilot.”

As you can see, the role of an ASI is pretty varied and complex, but also frequently misunderstood. True, an ASI needs to have a steadfast approach towards safety oversight and regulatory compliance, but in a way that’s respectful, courteous, and supportive of Flight Standards’ mission to enable the adventure, commerce and service of aviation.

“We want you to succeed as an airman, but at same time, we need to hold the line for safety,” says Smith. “We’re just there to make sure pilot is doing what they should already be doing.” 

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### Learn More

#### FAA Order 8900.1

<http://fsims.faa.gov/PICResults.aspx?mode=EBookContents>

#### Flight Standards Service Organizational Handbook (FAA Order 1100.1C)

<http://www.faa.gov/documentlibrary/media/order/fs%201100.1c.pdf>