



EVERETTE ROCHON

Fly like a PRO

If you're interested in aviation, it's a pretty safe bet that you have seen video of the carefully orchestrated operations on board an aircraft carrier flight deck. You've seen the pitching deck, the closely-packed jets, and the swarms of crewmembers in shirts whose color denotes the individual's role in launch and recovery operations: purple for fuel handlers, yellow for plane directors, red for ordnance, and white for safety observers.

I am lucky enough to have seen it in person. As a 20-year Navy veteran and former S-3B *Viking* Naval Flight Officer (NFO), I spent my share of sea time logging hundreds of "cats and traps" – Navy parlance for takeoffs and landings – on board ship.

My military flights were missions, with all of the get 'er done pressure a mission entails. In the GA flying world, my flights are simply flights.

It's exciting stuff, but it's also demanding. Without uttering a word on the radio during "zip lip" VMC flight operations, up to 40 aircraft circle in a "stack"

above the ship. The stack is arranged in an orderly fashion by aircraft type. As each aircraft maintains its own safe interval, a "trap" occurs aboard the ship every 60 seconds.

Do you wonder how so many aircraft and so many people can safely operate in such close proximity during radio silence? The answer boils down to one word — professionalism. Professionalism means flight discipline and adherence to regulations, guidance, training and standard operating procedures (SOP). Safe carrier operations rely on the ability of each member of the crew to maintain professionalism and discipline.

Different World, Same Strategy

Though I left active duty and no longer fly in support of war-fighting exercises and operations,

I have endeavored to keep my set of professional skills and attitudes as sharp as it was when I logged cats and traps in the *Viking*. Whenever my FAA position offers the opportunity to speak or work with GA pilots, I try to convey the idea that the agency – and everyone else in the aviation community – expects professionalism and discipline from every certificate-holding pilot in every kind of aircraft. That includes everyone from the first-day student in a Diamond DA-20 to the grizzled veteran ATP in the left seat of an Airbus A-380.

As you may have heard, the foundation of the FAA's five-year strategy to transform GA and reduce the fatal accident rate by 10 percent is risk identification, mitigation and outreach. An important component of risk mitigation is to embed a professional attitude and take a professional approach to everything we do in aviation.

Here are a few ideas on how to fly like a PRO in your aeronautical activities.

Personal Integrity

A professional is characterized by a high degree of personal integrity. Among other things, that means unflinching honesty about your physical, mental, and emotional fitness for flight. Don't fly if you can't pass the venerable IMSAFE checklist outlined in the *Aeronautical Information Manual* (AIM 8-1-1). That means ensuring that you are free of Illness, Medication, Stress, Alcohol, Fatigue, or Emotion that could adversely impact the safety of your flight.



Photo by Jon Hyde



The color-coded deck crewmen prepare the S-3B Viking for take off.

Still another element of the personal integrity professionals cherish is the ability to recognize and resist external pressures. For most people, this one does not come naturally – it is a skill that is acquired, sharpened, and maintained only through constant focus and discipline. That is because so many external pressures manifest themselves in subtle and insidious ways, making it difficult for pilots to perceive them until it is too late.

Here are a couple of tips for minimizing the effect of external pressures. The first comes from the AOPA Air Safety Institute, which advises pilots to avoid the word “mission” in connection with GA flying. When I was in the military, my flights were missions, with all of the get ‘er done pressure a mission entails. Now that I am in the civilian GA flying world, my flights are simply *flights*. Nothing about a flight justifies exceeding personal minimums.

The second tip is to hone your awareness of pressure and, if you detect it in yourself or someone else, STOP. Do not make any additional moves toward flying until you clearly identify, and then mitigate or eliminate, the source of the perceived pressure. Here’s a related concept that I have carried with me from my Navy career. When I reported for duty at my first Navy training squadron, I noticed the squadron safety motto in huge letters on the hangar: “If there is doubt, there is no doubt.” At any time I am in doubt about what to do, I remove all doubt by taking the safest course of action.

Ready for Anything

A professional is physically and mentally ready for anything that happens. I would like to see my fellow GA civilian pilots prize readiness as much as we valued it during my Navy flying days.

There are several components to a professional’s readiness. The first is training and currency. A good pilot never stops training, first to attain proficiency and then to maintain both proficiency and currency. Regardless of your total time and certificate level, it is important to recognize that flying is a skill – and skills erode when they are not sharpened through regular and focused practice.

A second component of readiness is to develop not just plan A, but also plan B, plan C, and even plan D or beyond. Weather does not always follow the forecasters’ expectations. Regardless of how well they are maintained, airplanes do not always adhere to their pilots’ or mechanics’ expectations. Play the “what-if” game with yourself before, during, and after every flight. If you’re curious about the “after”

advice in the previous sentence, consider that the immediate post-flight period offers one of the best opportunities for learning what you can take from one flight to the next.

A third form of professional-level readiness is disciplined use of checklists. Aviation abounds with checklists and acronym-based memory aids. Choose and use the ones that work for you – the point is to apply consistent structure and discipline.

On Target

A professional strives to be on target in every aspect of the operation. I have always been surprised to see pilots who can apparently hold altitude ... 200 feet away from the one assigned! Regardless of the reason for a given flight, aim to stay precisely on altitude, on course, on heading, on airspeed, and on glide path. Practicing for perfection will contribute to professional-level proficiency.

A professional pilot will also be on target in terms of the aircraft’s operating envelope. As you may recall from ground school, the “envelope” defines the maximum or minimum limits for safe operation of the aircraft. It generally includes items such as airspeed, load factor, and weight and balance. Don’t try to be a test pilot, which is precisely the role you assume if you operate the aircraft outside its established design limits.

Though it pains this Navy veteran to quote from an Army recruiting slogan, I urge you to be all that you can be by flying like a PRO.

Regardless of your total time and certificate level, flying is a skill – and skills erode when they are not sharpened through regular and focused practice.

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