



BY TOM BENENSON

## Risky Business

THE FOLLOWING CONVERSATION *did not* take place during the Pilot Training Reform Symposium sponsored by SAFE (Society of Aviation and Flight Educators) — but it could have.

During a coffee break between sessions, a small cluster of aviation educators are discussing ways to lower the stagnant rate of general aviation accidents and to change the general aviation safety culture.

“We have to acknowledge that there are risks involved when we fly an airplane and not pretend that the risks don’t exist,” explains Rich, a flight instructor whose shirt indicates he is a Master CFI.

“Yeah, but if we talk about the risks, we’ll scare away potential students,” says Phil, an older instructor who cups his ear to hear better, testifying to his many years in the cockpit. “If we tell them it’s risky, they’ll be afraid to learn to fly.”

“I don’t think that’s really true,” volunteers Susan, a woman whose name tag indicates she’s the chief pilot with a flight school. “There are risks in almost everything we do; it’s just that we’ve learned to recognize the risks and mitigate them.”

“I still think that if we point out the risks we’ll lose potential students,” Phil insists.

“Look,” Susan says, “we don’t have to point out the risks. With the help of the media, there’s no question that anyone considering learning to fly is well aware of the risks. Unfortunately, airplane mishaps, no matter how minor, fuel the media’s appetite. Just think about recent news reports. There was the report of a ‘near miss’ when Michelle Obama was riding along and the airplane had to make a go-around. And the media lamented that pilots had to land without ‘help’ from controllers when the tower people were asleep at the switch. So people are aware of what the media ballyhoo

as risks. What they didn’t learn from the media was that in neither case was anyone ever in any danger. The public wasn’t told that a go-around is something taught from the beginning of training so pilots can deal with just such circumstances. And while the public was being frightened to think pilots had to land without someone on the ground holding their hand, pilots who operate from the thousands of pilot-controlled airports must have scoffed at the idea that, like Charlie who got stuck on the MTA, the pilots would have circled the airport forever and never returned.”

the accident rates.”

“That’s because we haven’t changed the culture,” John replies. “From day one, we have to encourage our students to consider the risks involved with every flight and teach them to make a decision, based on the perceived risks, whether to go ahead with the flight or change their plans to reduce the risk.”

“When someone comes to the flight school to find out about learning to fly, we have to be upfront about what’s involved in terms of time, cost and most importantly the risks,” Susan adds.

“You’re right,” John says. “We really do have to be better about addressing



>>> At the actual conference, Doug Stewart introduces the Industry Leadership Panel.

“You’re right,” John agrees. “The media have done a good job of portraying flying as risky. The responsibility for flight instructors is to help students recognize the risks inherent in flying and to teach them how to safely deal with them.”

“That’s all well and good,” argues Josh, a young instructor who plans on an airline career but is now worrying about accumulating the required 1,500 hours and an ATP, “but we already tell students they have to manage risks, and that hasn’t made a difference in

the risks. You know, when an accident investigation finds that the pilot ‘lost control of the airplane,’ it pays to look a little further into what led to the crash. Sure, loss of control may have been the immediate cause of the crash, but the real cause of the accident is often a failure on the part of the pilot to consider the risks involved in the particular flight.”

“You mean, like, did a pilot lose control because of inadvertent VFR into IMC or did he make the decision to depart despite low ceilings and plan

to scud-run?” Susan says. “Did a pilot lose control of his airplane because his vacuum pump failed or did he intentionally take off knowing that the vacuum pump was inoperative but felt his partial-panel skills were up to the task?”

“Exactly,” John agrees. “Loss of control may be the end result — particularly

if the pilot’s stick and rudder skills have atrophied — but poor risk assessment and mitigation of the risks are often the real underlying causes.”

“Excuse me,” interrupts Judith, a woman who teaches at a four-year aviation college, “but part of the problem is that we’ve perpetrated the

myth that the most dangerous part of a flight is the drive to the airport. But that’s disingenuous; flying is riskier than driving. What people don’t realize is that most accidents are not caused by mechanical failures but by the incorrect actions or decisions that were made by the pilots.”

“I sure hope some good comes out of this symposium,” Josh complains. “There have been too many efforts to solve the problems of the industry that haven’t resulted in any improvements.”

“Well, with the heavy hitters who are here and the way it’s been set up, there’s a good chance there will be positive results,” Susan counters. “There are something like 60 master instructors and representatives from flight schools, university programs, industry associations, courseware providers, equipment manufacturers and insurance companies.”

“Don’t forget the FAA,” pipes up Rich. “Mel Citron, AFS 800 manager, and Van Kerns, the manager of AFS 600, have been here since the opening presentation, and they’ve been taking notes!”

Scanning the agenda, Judith says, “The way it’s been set up with the panel discussions yesterday and the breakout sessions today to address problems and make specific recommendations with challenges to the organizations or groups that can address the recommendations, there’s a good chance for some good to come out.”

“Well, I sure hope so,” Josh reiterates.

“From what I understand,” Judith says, “there will be a preliminary report published on the symposium website ([pilottrainingreform.org/symposium-output/](http://pilottrainingreform.org/symposium-output/)) and the entire symposium is being videotaped and will be available on the Web at [vimeo.com/channels/safe#24177537](http://vimeo.com/channels/safe#24177537).”

“I was in the breakout session led by Rich Stowell that addressed the flight training curricula,” Phil says. “It soon became apparent that there was universal agreement that the most important way to reduce the general aviation accident rate that has been flat for years is to create a safety culture and ingrain the idea of risk assessment and subsequent risk management in every pilot from the beginning of their training.”

“One way to do that,” John says,

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picking up the conversational baton, “is to use scenario-based training that was pretty much formalized in the FITS (FAA/Industry Training Standards) program that, as you know, emphasized four areas: risk management, aeronautical decision-making,

require the student to consider the situation and come up with ways of mitigating any risks.”

“Look, we all know that a cockpit makes a lousy classroom,” Judith says with a smile, “so at the university we use scenarios in our ground schools

(asrs.arc.nasa.gov).”

“I think we all agree,” John says, “that flying is a risky business. But short of grounding the fleet, there is no way to make flying completely accident-free. We accept the risks in order to benefit from the advantages that flying offers us, whether for personal transportation or recreation. There’s a quote from Gen. George Patton that goes ‘Take calculated risks. That is quite different from being rash.’ We have to train our students to calculate the risks and not be rash.”

At that point Doug Stewart called the conference back into session to hear FAA Administrator Randy Babbitt reinforce the discussion when he said, “An aviation educator develops an aviation citizen — a professional — not just by training to proficiency in airplane control and aircraft systems, but also by educating that pilot to make safety the number one priority, use good judgment in making decisions, recognize and manage risk, and be accountable.” ✈

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situational awareness and single-pilot resource management. The idea was that, instead of treating each element as a separate or stand-alone lesson, scenario-based training would be used to integrate these elements into every training session. The idea is for the instructor to develop a story — a scenario — so that, as a lesson progresses, things change during the flight that

and one-on-one during a pre- or post-briefing session. We get the accident scenarios from the NTSB database as well as accident accounts in aviation magazines, such as *Flying’s* I Learned About Flying From That, Aftermath and On the Record, and *AOPA Pilot’s* Never Again. Another good source is the “confessions” available from the Aviation Safety Reporting System

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