



Experience Matters – Or Does it?

The Dangers of Equating Safety with Logbook Size

“Kitchen help needed. Must have food service experience.”

That’s how the help wanted sign read in the window of an on-campus pizza joint during my junior year at college. Strapped for some extra cash and without a whole lot of viable employment options, I decided to inquire within. Although I *clearly* lacked the restaurant skills they were seeking, I thought I could pass off the several meatloaf and chili experiments so thoughtfully provided in my “Surviving College” handbook as proof of my culinary capability. Thankfully, no samples were required but they liked my enthusiasm and eagerness to learn, so I got the job.

Before long I was tossing large globs of pizza dough three feet in the air with the best of them. It was a blast — until my first night shift. The bar was crawling with hundreds of hungry (and thirsty) students ordering food at all hours of the night. I noticed some of my seemingly cool-headed mentors and coworkers, who so skillfully schooled me in the ways of the ‘za, got frazzled and disorganized during periods of chaos. Ticket times for food mounted. Customers got angry. The servers were losing patience, not to mention tips. It’s not that my fellow cooks didn’t know what to do; they just didn’t perform so well under pressure. By staying organized and anticipating order demand, I was able to keep pace with the orders and keep the kitchen afloat, despite my newbie status.

So what does a pizza kitchen have to do with aviation? In the aviation world, it’s quite common to equate experience with skill. The more hours you have, the safer you’ll be in the air, right? Total myth. There’s no debating that experience is a valuable asset when it comes to flying. Good pilots learn from their experiences and, no doubt, the more you fly, the more of those types of learning opportunities you’ll have. The question, though, is whether you are pressing yourself to learn from those experiences. My pizza-slinging coworkers would swear they were the best cooks in town, yet they always found themselves backed up without ever taking the time to develop a more proactive plan.

Another point to keep in mind about flying skills is that they are highly perishable; they can stagnate or erode over time if they’re not maintained. A 10,000 hour logbook that hasn’t seen the light of day in two

years is a lot like that tomato you left in the refrigerator a *really* long time ago. While technically it’s still a tomato, you’d be pretty hard-pressed to touch it, let alone eat it. (Not that a skilled pizza chef like myself would ever do such a thing!)

The false sense of security a hefty logbook provides can be dangerous. A cursory scan through NTSB accident reports will routinely reveal four or even five digit numbers in the flight time column that too often correlate with a chain of head-scratching pilot errors in the narrative. Here’s a good example: in 2001, the pilot of a reduced-scale WWII Hawker Hurricane encountered engine problems while in the pattern at a Washington state airport. According to eyewitnesses, the aircraft lost power while on approach over the runway, continued north over the runway, and then pulled up and attempted a 180 degree turn back towards the grass strip. The aircraft returned to the ground nose first with no survivors. Investigators determined that 1,500 feet of open field lay just north of the runway area where the pilot attempted the “impossible turn.” The high level of diphenhydramine found when preparing the toxicology report likely contributed to his poor decision. Total flight time: 2,500 hours.

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“I measure a good pilot by the quality of the aeronautical decision making, not by the number of hours he or she has racked up,” says Spokane-based FAA Team Program Manager Minard Thompson, who was acquainted with the Hawker Hurricane pilot. “The more opportunities you have for making and demonstrating good ADM in flight ... that’s how you become a better pilot.”

In the end, safe flight operations aren’t a result of how many hours, ratings, or certificates you’ve earned during your career. Just as important as the knowledge and experience you have is how you apply them when it matters — that is, on every single flight. Safe flying.

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