



Complacency

A recipe for disaster

BY STEVE KROG

WE ALL EXPERIENCE COMPLACENCY at one time or another. You've looked at that tail wheel every time you did your walk-around, but did you actually see it? Do you just assume it's okay?

As a longtime flight instructor, I like to observe each student when conducting the preflight inspection. Some do a thorough job looking at and moving all control surfaces and inspecting landing gear, tires, windows, propeller, and engine. Others look but really don't see what is in front of them. In those situations, I sometimes "plant" a potential problem, such as hydraulic brake fluid on the ground near a main wheel, and see if they find it. If they do not, it's time to have another lesson on being thorough when conducting the preflight inspection.

A chief mechanic for a well-known flight school once shared a story with me that dealt with complacency. A student arrived a bit early for a flight lesson, but the aircraft most often used was still out on a flight. The mechanic told the student to preflight another aircraft to save time for the instructor. Several minutes later the student reported back to the mechanic that the preflight was finished and the aircraft was ready for flight. The mechanic then asked the student to join him as he walked out to the aircraft and asked the student if he noticed anything unusual. The student said no. The mechanic then pointed to the tail and suggested a closer look. At that moment the student suddenly realized the rudder had been removed. Complacency at its best.

What if this student was destined for a solo flight and hadn't noticed the rudder was missing? The mechanic

taught the student a valuable lesson that day. Preflight an aircraft as if your life depends on it — because it does.

Several days ago, I met with my FAA safety inspector. Frustrated, he commented that accidents and incidents continue to occur. A vast number of them are attributed to complacency and lack of standard operating procedures (SOP). Remember, in an emergency, pilots do not rise to the occasion; they sink to the level of their training.

Have you ever stopped using or "edited" your checklists? I see this practice from time to time when conducting a flight review. When asked why they're not using a checklist, pilots often respond with something like, "I have it memorized so why do I need it?"

Last year I was giving dual instruction to a young man. We were flying a Grumman AA-5 Traveler, a great single-engine airplane. While conducting the pre-takeoff checklist, he was distracted by a landing aircraft as he set the fuel selector to the fullest tank. This resulted in the selector being positioned between the two fuel tanks, which restricted fuel flow to the engine. Upon applying full power for takeoff, the engine began sputtering as it reached approximately 1800 rpm. I had the student abort and taxi back to the end of the runway. While doing so, I pointed out the fuel selector position. It proved to the student how easily a mistake can be made. I don't think he'll make that mistake again for the rest of his flying career.

Have you ever flown without a current flight review or medical? This happens frequently, especially when dealing with the flight review. Some may say it doesn't matter because the airplane doesn't know; however, should you fly without one or the other, or both, and have an incident, your insurance is null and void.

Have you ever ignored engine instruments during flight? Today's designated pilot examiners are required to simulate an engine condition whereby the pilot must make a decision. The usual simulation is, "You have an increasing oil temperature and a decreasing oil

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pressure situation. What are you going to do?" For most pilots, this was probably the last time you practiced for this situation.

Have you ever flown when tired, stressed, ill, or hungover? I once taught in a university flight school program. A local pub had a band every Wednesday night. I reminded my Thursday morning students to go easy on the refreshments. If I detected tiredness or a hangover, it was unusual attitudes, accelerated stalls, and possibly a spin day. It never happened more than once with any of the students I trained.

As an instructor, it is usually quite easy to detect when students are experiencing any of the above symptoms. One day they can perform a maneuver flawlessly, and the next day they can't do it at all. In those situations, I'll ask if there's something on their mind preventing them from concentrating on the flight. They come clean, and we park the plane until the next scheduled flight. "You're wasting your money and my time when trying to fly under these circumstances," I say to them.

Have you ever become overly dependent on the GPS for navigation? In today's world of advanced electronics, it is quite easy to become complacent, set your destination, and follow the magenta line. Airspeed, altitude, true course, and magnetic heading are spelled out for you. What could be easier — until the GPS fails. Now what do you do, especially if flying over unfamiliar country? Good pilots always have a backup plan. Carry a map, map your course, and hope you are never forced to use it. At least it's in the side pocket if needed.

Today, many pilots have a panel-mounted GPS, subscribe to a program like ForeFlight, and thus have it on their cellphone for backup. I'm from the old school, though, and believe in carrying a map as a backup last resort.

Have you ever been surprised by a weather condition at your destination? Given different situations, the weather can change rapidly. It's 9 a.m. on a Sunday morning and you decide to attend an air show approximately 200 miles away. You've checked the weather forecast offered by the local television station, and it's saying clear skies and beautiful weather all day. Within 50 miles of your destination the clouds have become solid and the ceiling is dropping, but you proceed. Just 20 miles out, the ceiling has dropped further. Now what? The frontal activity has changed from a northeastern path to a rapidly developing southeastern path, creating low ceilings, and limited visibility is developing behind you.

When preparing to depart, did you check aviation weather? Did you ever think this might happen and then have a Plan B in mind? If you follow the FAA reported

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accident and incident data, this changing weather situation is responsible for many accidents and incidents.

If you were totally honest with yourself and answered “yes” to any of the above statements, you’ve personally experienced and demonstrated complacency. Complacency can breed hazardous attitudes. Perhaps it’s time to reflect on what you can do to ensure every flight you make is as safe as possible.

Have you ever developed and then put into practice an SOP for situations while in flight? Airlines, charter flight operators, and most all flight training schools have an approved SOP to follow for most any situation. Unfortunately, once the training is complete, many pilots forget about these procedures and never practice them again.

You can’t pick your time for an in-flight emergency.

After conducting a thorough pre-takeoff checklist, do you taxi onto the runway and push the power in? Or do you take a few seconds to determine a go or no-go point on the runway? I would venture to guess that about 95 percent of pilots assume all will be good and just go for it.

What if you experience partial power loss after lifting off the runway? Do you have enough power to come back and land? Have you taken the time to thoroughly study the surrounding airport terrain and then make a plan in your mind if you were going to be forced down? Have you ever gone up to a safe altitude and practiced making a simulated turn back to the airport to determine how much altitude you would need should the real situation ever arise?

What if you’re out for an evening pleasure flight in your Piper Warrior and begin smelling smoke in the cockpit? Do you have a plan in place to deal with this situation? You may have been introduced to this when learning to fly but probably haven’t thought about it since. The usual plan is to shut off the master switch, followed by turning off all electrical items like the radio, transponder, panel lights, strobes, etc. The smoke will usually clear in a moment or two. Then turn the master back on and wait for a moment or two. If there’s no smoke, you can then turn on the most important of the electrical items, like the transponder. Again, if there’s no smoke, try the radio. Following these steps will usually help diagnose the problem so that you can safely land at the next airport and have the problem properly diagnosed and repaired.

I’ve barely touched on the many potential situations you might encounter while flying. The important thing to remember is to first remove complacency from your thought process. Every flight is meant to be an enjoyable and safe event. Proper preparation, perhaps by developing an SOP for your aircraft, will make this happen for you and your passengers for all future flights.

Keep flying safely and enjoy the beautiful fall flying weather. *EAA*

Steve Krog, EAA 173799, has been flying for more than 40 years and giving tailwheel instruction for nearly as long. In 2006 he launched Cub Air Flight, a flight training school using tailwheel aircraft for all primary training.

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