



DELICATE Balance

Perhaps the most difficult part of flying any aircraft is maintaining that balance of vigilance, that happy area between hyper-alertness and complacency. Since the process of learning how to fly generally weeds out the overly twitchy, let's first talk about the other extreme.

One of the most dangerous threats in flying is complacency, the knowledge that you've done this kind of thing hundreds, even thousands of times before, and the odds that you'll be successful again are very high, you believe, even as conditions slide downhill into dangerous territory. If you're diligent you'll run through procedures in your mind and, when appropriate, with crewmembers, and you'll have your antennae up for standard problems, thereby greatly decreasing the risk involved. Yet lists are populated with scores of accidents in which pilots, deeply into unstabilized approaches, press on, knowing that they've done this before and can do it again, so complacent that they ignore a threat that has been repeatedly highlighted as a major accident precursor. Or, as in the Beech King Air crash discussed in this issue, assuming that their go-around was proceeding well without checking the instruments for a positive rate of climb;

they advanced the throttles and felt that settling in the seat of their pants, so the airplane must be climbing, right?

Considering the words "standard problems" in the previous paragraph; on reflection it is obvious that this is not a static set. While training and procedures are designed to mitigate a proven set of threats, a pilot's personal experience enriches that set. If "A" and "B" happen, you know that "C" is the next thing to look for, but experience has taught you to watch out for "Z." Sometimes, even that can fail you if your balance is off.

Vigilance that becomes fixated can become as much of a threat as complacency. Numerous accidents occur even though the cockpit crew is being vigilant, indeed, but unbalanced in their focus. An intense focus on a known problem or threat reduces the attention that can be allocated to the rest of the piloting effort.

Here's a personal example: Working with a transition student, a commercial pilot, doing pattern work in a tandem-seat aircraft, I knew from having lost a friend in a midair collision on the downwind leg of the same runway that the major threat was over my shoulder, around the four-o'clock position, where

aircraft entering the pattern would appear. With difficult forward visibility, I wasn't looking straight ahead, but the pilot flying was, and he picked up an errant T-34 headed directly at us, nose-on. He said something colorful and threw the stick forward just in time; the miss was by a very few feet. At our position in the pattern, my student might justifiably have been looking mostly at the runway or at aircraft on base or final, but he balanced his scan nicely, happily to our mutual benefit.

This happened about the time that there were two airline accidents in the United States in which the pilots were so concerned about faulty landing gear indications they neglected to fly the airplanes, with fatal consequences. These events, and my close call, made me realize the importance of balancing the attention given to a known threat.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "J.A. Donoghue". The signature is fluid and cursive.

J.A. Donoghue
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