



# UNINTENTIONAL Drift

Pilots are unusually capable people. If you don't believe me, just ask any pilot. They'll confirm it.

Before cramming my inbox, pause and let me add two more things. First, I wasn't kidding and, second, to do what pilots do they must have a high degree of self-confidence and a tendency to be candid, even blunt, in their communications because that is what is needed for the job.

The ability to function intuitively in three dimensions is something a pilot takes for granted but is not shared by many in the population. Considering the high level of skills and training most pilots have, and the evident love of the profession and therefore the attention paid to it, some understanding is achieved about why pilots have a good deal of self-confidence.

This self-confidence is justified and confirmed on a daily basis when they flout the law of gravity and return to talk about it. If such a bedrock law of nature can be overcome so routinely, maybe other rules can also be rejected, or at least modified. But pilots know that gravity cannot be ignored, and that its effects can be mitigated for relatively brief intervals only if numerous protocols are observed.

Yet, how pilots can get themselves and their aircraft into trouble is a subject that certainly will remain a topic of exhaustive examination after all of us are long gone simply because there seem to be an infinite number of routes through which this can occur.

In the past several months, *ASW* has included stories that examined the trouble pilots can get themselves into by pushing too hard in their attempts to complete the mission. "Pressing the Approach" detailed examples of how the desire to complete an approach kept crews from recognizing how badly out of shape their situation had become (*ASW*, December 2006, p. 28).

In this issue we are told that corporate pilots' desire to get the job done and please the customer leads them to bend the rules, even to the point of violating procedures established for their protection (p. 35). While that story discusses "procedural intentional noncompliance," that's not what this discussion concerns. It is the unintentional noncompliance borne in the effort to solve an evolving problem.

The paradox is that the same self-confidence that allows pilots to do the job also can evolve, through experience, into allowing an in-flight situation to

move one step closer to an unsafe condition, or even an accident. The authors of the "Pressing" story said the willingness to push an approach despite numerous problems piling up comes from having gone a bit outside the lines before and getting away with it. The next time, maybe a little bit more outside, and the drift sets in. This insidious but very human behavior deserves a great deal of attention.

On the other hand, it is difficult to get one's mind around accidents that happen because pilots invited disaster by casting aside reason and training, violating rules in ways that dare fate to take its revenge. The Pinnacle accident report is the most obvious one of this sort recently, but there are others less egregious, such as the Teterboro Challenger accident in which aircraft weight and balance got inadequate consideration. But these are more basic, traditional problems.

It is the unintentional standards drift that needs further discussion to keep the idea working on the conscious level.

*J.A. Douglas*