



LINGERING Pain

Self-inflicted injuries always seem to hurt more, the pain exacerbated by the frustration that once again you've failed to maintain control and let things get so far out of whack that injury was the result. The subsequent healing process becomes a succession of reminders of your mistake.

Perhaps that's why the recent kerfuffle over data from the National Aviation Operational Monitoring Service (NAOMS), put together to develop new methods for aviation system safety analysis by the U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), is so grating.

From birth, the study's basic concept had credibility problems. That good, quantifiable data would come from 25,000 telephone interviews with pilots is a premise that many in the business of serious research question.

If two pilots report a runway incursion incident, were there two incidents or are they both reporting the same event? If a pilot's union is engaged in wrangling with management over flight and duty time limits, might the pilot be just a little more likely to identify fatigue in the cockpit as a major safety risk? And even if he does exaggerate, he still might be right in his assertion; it's just that there is no supporting data other than his individual war story.

And that is what many feared NAOMS would become — just a massive collection of unverified war stories that might or might not be skewed by each pilot's personal reference framework. We just don't know, and that is the baseline fact. And while all data have problems, this bunch seems too burdened with unknowable variables for researchers to bother trying to adjust the data to get a clear picture of an environment already fairly well described through other methods.

But another error was made. The researchers promised those who participated in the study that their contributions would remain anonymous. It makes perfect sense to do so; the Aviation Safety Reporting System that collects volunteered incident reports grants anonymity to its participants. Although the program is serviced by NASA, it is a Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) program, and Congress has granted FAA the right to shield that sort of information against disclosure due to a request based on the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), a right that NASA regrettably lacks.

Several years after the project was mercifully laid to rest, a news organization got to wondering what happened with NAOMS and filed an FOIA request, and NASA's problem became clear.

The situation was made worse when NASA, trying to explain its decision not to do more with the data, sounded like it was purposefully hiding bad news. This had the effect of throwing gasoline on a fire.

Trying to do the right thing for its study subjects, and remembering the very bad experience of several years ago when Dutch researchers had to divulge identifications it had pledged to protect, NASA on New Year's Eve released a package of data that went the extra mile to protect the participants.

Sadly, this is an election year in the United States, and members of Congress are getting attention by continuing to beat on the issue. Last month, the chairman of the U.S. House Committee on Science and Technology, Bart Gordon (D-Tenn.), joined with some committee members to request that the Government Accountability Office, an arm of Congress, take over the original data and analyze it. Looks like this self-inflicted wound will take a while to heal.

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

J.A. Donoghue
Editor-in-Chief
AeroSafety World