# Anniversary

It was 100 years ago this month that aviation suffered the first fatal accident in a powered airplane that could actually fly, differentiating this death from those of brave pioneers who lacked the technology to sustain flight.

On Sept. 17, 1908, Thomas E. Selfridge, a U.S. Army first lieutenant and promising aviator, having already been rated as a dirigible pilot, died when the airplane Orville Wright was demonstrating in Virginia crashed after a propeller failure caused structural damage to the airplane.

Selfridge died from head injuries suffered when he was thrown against an aircraft structural member. Seeing a problem, the Army declared that future pilots should wear helmets, starting the investigate-and-correct cycle that still follows every accident.

From the beginning of aviation, pilots have been among the most committed advocates of aviation safety. While it has elements of being an offhand, flip comment, the expression "pilots are always the first at the scene of an accident" is undeniably true.

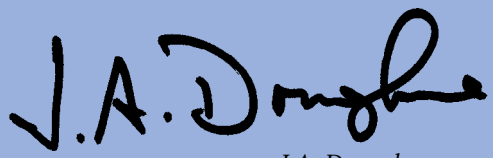
Individually, and in groups, pilots are indispensable components of the aviation system safety structure. Pilots are the veritable "canaries in the coal mine" providing early warnings that something is wrong. Then they help steer the development of answers down practical paths. Enthusiastic participation in incident reporting systems around the world is not driven just by pilots seeking amnesty from punishment, as amnesty is not always part of the deal, but by a fervent quest to keep themselves, their fellow crewmembers and their passengers alive and well.

There has been criticism of pilot groups, however, for what has been said to be the use of safety issues to advance their side of labor/management disputes. One of the longest-lasting such issues was when cockpits were going from three crewmembers to two.

The pilots' basic point was that workload, especially during times of stress, required three people up front, while management said that the pilots' goal was nothing more than the protection of unnecessary jobs. I leave it to others to decide if there was an ultimate truth behind either position, but what is clear is that pilot insistence on keeping cockpit workloads to manageable levels, even during times of extreme stress, paid off. Modern cockpits are so automated that, during normal operations, pilots become challenged to stay "in the loop," aware of their situation and aircraft status.

Rarely do pilots raise a valid safety issue that ultimately does not carry the day. The one failure that stands out in my mind started when environmental rules compelled manufacturers to cut engine exhaust smoke. Pilots correctly said, wait a minute, those smoke trails are vital in visually locating and tracking traffic. Anyone living during the 1960s, watching DC-8s and 707s trail large, oily plumes that went on for miles, had to admit they were hard to miss. In a world drowning in its own effluence, the pollution had to go, but pilots helped continue the fight to assure separation that eventually produced the traffic-alert and collision avoidance system.

Pilots, we trust, will continue to play key roles in maintaining and enhancing aviation safety in ways that remain firmly focused on real threats and real solutions.



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