

FAA Safety

BRIEFING

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Safety Culture



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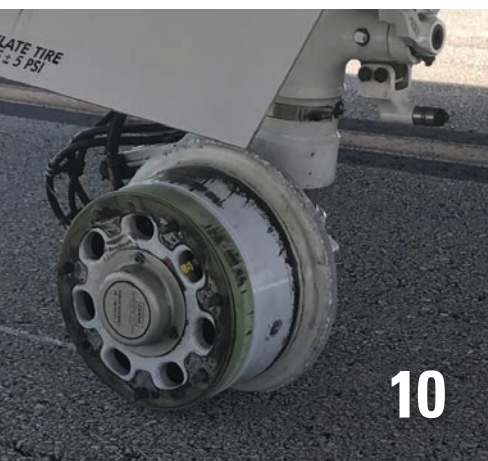
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The July/August 2019 issue of *FAA Safety Briefing* focuses on aviation safety culture. Feature articles focus on what a sound safety culture is and explore ways you can integrate those principles into your everyday flying and airman duties. We'll also look at the many FAA and industry tools available to help you build your own personal safety culture.



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[OTHER] PILOTS LOOKING OUT FOR YOU

Some Trusty Tips on How to Take a Hint

BY JASON BLAIR

Wow, sure is a strong crosswind out there today — I sure wouldn't want to fly in that!" How many of you can recall hearing words like these from a fellow pilot, just as you're headed out to fly? Or, how about an instructor who hints that the Facebook discussion you posted while "skirting around thunderstorms" described a flight that was a bit "too close for comfort." Sometimes these little comments go unnoticed by us pilots, but we go out flying anyway. But maybe, just maybe, these little offhanded comments are subtle hints that other pilots, instructors, or even examiners are trying to give us without being too blunt. It's a nice way of saying, "Hey you, you really shouldn't be going

flying today," or "You really shouldn't have made that flight, even though you got lucky enough for it to work out."

A few years back, I wrote an article for this publication highlighting our responsibilities as pilots to "be our fellow pilot's keeper" and to help make others aware when they are taking unnecessary risks. This can be a hard thing to do for fellow pilots, as it calls into question their decision-making skills. It can be even harder to take the hint ourselves when other pilots return the favor by questioning our own flying. Many times when other pilots are trying to tell us that what we are about to do may not be the best decision, it will not be obvious. The cautions can



come as small comments, questions, or even an odd look that should prompt us to carefully review what we are about to do, and hopefully think twice before going on a flight.

Pushing Our Limits

We want to go fly. It's natural. As pilots, we love it and sometimes we have places to go and a timetable that drives us to a "go" decision. But that doesn't always mean we should. What makes it even more difficult is that as pilots, we are often the most biased judges of whether or not we should go. Any number of pressures can color our judgment, letting us fall prey to the "I am mostly, almost, pretty sure that I can probably make the flight successfully." Here's a good rule of thumb: If you have to question whether the flight can be made safely, or use the word "probably" in connection with a flight, you should consider delaying the trip, finding an alternate means of transportation, or not going at all.

Subtle Hints

When we think about pushing our limits, there are usually people around us who can provide valuable and important feedback — and who sometimes offer it voluntarily, even when it's not obvious.

Savvy pilots have a set group of people that they can call upon to help evaluate decisions. It might be a former flight instructor, an experienced mentor pilot, or a friend who has a similar experience base. But, unless you have someone who is truly prepared to tell you the truth, even those resources may be reluctant to tell you that "you are being stupid and going to kill yourself today if you make that flight." So, it may take a little reading between the lines to recognize that your fellow pilot is really giving you some hints that you should take into account when

you do your flight planning. These subtle hints or comments should merit your attention.

For example: Instead of telling you up front that your plan to fly to an airport that is reporting close to minimum instrument flight rules (IFR) conditions is a bad idea, they might instead say something like, "Gee, I see that tomorrow's weather looks a little better than today." Or they might say, "I notice that the crosswind today is pretty darn strong. If I were making this flight, I might land at airport XYZ 20 miles away that has a runway into the wind and then drive the rest of the way." These comments can be "nice" ways of telling you that they think you should reconsider your plan.

Take the Hint

I clearly remember a practical test I had scheduled a couple of years ago for a private pilot candidate who was about a two-hour drive away. As a pilot, and an aircraft owner, this situation presents a great excuse to fly instead of drive! But the weather had other plans. About three hours before the start time, I called the applicant and said, "I see that the weather isn't all that great today [it was about 900 feet overcast with two miles visibility and lake effect snow showers in February in Michigan], are you thinking the weather will be good enough to do your checkride, or do you want to reschedule?" Wanting to get the checkride done, and not contextualizing the fact that the designated pilot examiner (DPE) was calling him and asking, he said, "Yeah, I think we can still do it today." Sigh.

I followed, adding, "Okay, I just wanted to check and make sure, because I had planned on flying down to save some time, but I don't think the weather is good enough for me [the experienced DPE, instrument rated, etc.] to fly myself down, so I will have to leave a little earlier to drive and be there on time."

I paused, wondering if he would take the hint. He didn't.

"Okay," he responded, "I will see you when you get here."

Long story short, the ground portion of the exam didn't go well, and we didn't have to get to the decision of whether or not he would fly for the practical test. However, I did ask what he would have done if I had told him he had passed the ground portion and moved on to the flight portion of the test. His answer showed he still wasn't taking the hint. "I guess I would have had to fly to an area of VFR to do the maneuvers on the test," he responded. Yup, a private

pilot candidate. He obviously hadn't learned how to apply VFR weather minimums during his training.

This may strike you as an extreme example of not taking the hint, but you would have thought that if the DPE wasn't willing to fly in the weather, it would have clued him in. Unfortunately, this happens all the time. At airports I visit, I see pilots whose instructor tells them they don't think it's a good day for a lesson, or a pilot who walks by another pilot and asks, "Are you really going to make that flight today?" But then the pilot does it anyway.

For sure, some pilots have more experience and aircraft that are more capable. But as pilots, it should give us pause when another pilot asks the "are you sure you are going to do that flight?" question. Take the hint.

Take the Time to Mitigate the Risk that Can Break an Accident Chain

Taking the time to consider comments or input from other pilots doesn't have to mean you can't complete a flight. It can be an opportunity to make changes to your flight plan. High-risk flights can often be mitigated to low-risk flights.

Leaving at a different time, taking a different route, choosing different airports, bringing another pilot — there are any number of mitigating efforts that make for a safer flight. When you get input from fellow pilots, instructors, or examiners that hint at unnecessary risks, take the time to pause and consider if you might alter your plan of action. These risk mitigations can stop one or two actions from snowballing and creating a situation that can take a pilot beyond their, or their aircraft's, capabilities.

I recently got a phone call for an instrument practical test that the applicant "just had to get done by Friday" [this was on Wednesday of the week] because he had to fly his family in his Cessna 182 [that only had round gauges and a DME] from Michigan to Florida. Looking at the weather for the next two days, it looked like a mix of rain, snow, sleet, and pretty much everything else you could imagine a March day in Michigan could deliver. Looking at my calendar, I honestly could have worked it in, but I chose to tell the pilot "my schedule was full until the next week." Interestingly, and not uncommonly, two other examiners I know locally also got a call from the same gentleman. They told him the same thing. Could one of us have given him a test time? Maybe. But all of us looked at what he told us he wanted to do with a brand-new instrument rating, in really ugly weather, and we all decided independently that

none of us wanted our names associated with that practical test. The applicant probably never knew that three different DPEs had politely influenced his ability to attempt flying on a fresh instrument rating — with his family aboard — through what turned out to be icing, thunderstorms, and low IFR.

In this case, the lack of ability to complete his rating test became an outside force that mitigated the risks he was going to take. He wasn't instrument rated in time to make the flight, so he didn't. Did we as DPEs avert a definite accident? We will never know. I do know that low-time, inexperienced instrument pilots flying a fully-loaded, minimally equipped aircraft in storms and icing do not fare well in the risk column.

A pilot like this won't always have someone who will stop the flight for them. That means that we as pilots need to be able to accept advice (or hints) thoughtfully, not emotionally, and mitigate as many risks as we can.

It Starts with Asking for Advice

There isn't a single pilot who has seen every weather condition, knows every airport, or is a perfect pilot in every aircraft. A little humble pie can go a long way. Don't be afraid to seek advice and let other pilots help serve as your keeper. They can help keep you from stumbling into conditions or situations that are either unforeseen or beyond the limits of your piloting skills, or your aircraft's, capability.

Talking with other pilots when we see them doing something that could lead to tragedy can be a hard thing for many pilots to do; we generally don't want to judge another pilot. It can be even harder to allow another pilot to be OUR keeper and take such input.

Let's face it. We want to think we are all highly capable pilots. But a little modesty and pragmatism can go a long way toward not having a flying career or pastime cut short. It may in fact be an even better indicator of a good pilot.

With that said, fly safe and pay attention to the subtle, but potentially critical, comments you get from your fellow pilots. Those comments and suggestions may be a polite way of helping you avoid dangerous decisions in your own flying.

Don't be afraid to seek advice and let other pilots help serve as your keeper.

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