

YEAR IN REVIEW: THE TOP STORIES OF 2022

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NOVEMBER/
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Teaching Passengers to Help

Having others in the plane with you can be a challenge, or it can reduce them

Most pilots know passengers can contribute risk any time a pilot chooses to take them on a flight. They can distract a pilot, they can put undue pressure on a pilot to complete a flight, or they can even detract from aircraft performance just by having their extra weight onboard a flight. But with some proper briefing and planning, they can also become part of the risk mitigation process a pilot uses to make flights safer.

Teaching passengers to be part of our risk avoidance and awareness process can actually reduce risk, especially for those passengers who fly with us regularly. In fact, not teaching them to do this might increase risk that could have otherwise been avoided.

Much discussion has been had in the aviation community about how to avoid the risks that passengers can create for a flight, but too little has been discussed about how to teach passengers to help pilots prevent risks in flight. Some passengers might be pilots who naturally help with this process, but in many cases our passengers are what I might call “aviation familiar” and have a general idea of what is going on. This is especially true of those passengers who fly with us regularly. And as such, these are perfect passengers to recruit into helping us evaluate and avoid risks on our flights.

Empowering your passengers to ask a few questions and, when necessary, tell us we are pushing our boundaries might just be the last gut check we need sometimes to avoid pushing ourselves into a risky situation or beyond our skills or proficiency.

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PASSENGERS AS CREWMEMBERS

Most of us remember being taught in our primary training to brief our passengers on how to help us scan for traffic. This is a great starting point for incorporating passengers into being a part of our risk mitigation efforts.

We use the saying, “if you see something, say something” for lots of things in aviation. The same adage could apply to our passengers. It might be other traffic in the air, an aircraft flying a non-standard pattern we can’t see from the pilot seat as we are going to pull out on the runway, a deer or coyote about to bound across the runway during our landing, or any number of other potential risks they can help us keep an eye out for during our flights. Briefing passengers that they have an active role in being a part of helping us reduce potential risk on a flight is something we should all do. We can effectively make our passengers part of our flight operation crew. Sure, they may not be helping physically fly the aircraft, but anything they can do to help us minimize or identify risks we may encounter can help us make our operations safer.

PASSENGERS AND BOUNDARIES

The aviation training community talks frequently about how we can personally evaluate our own readiness to flight using the IMSAFE acronym that most of us are familiar with and considering factors such as fatigue or stress, to name a couple. We talk about the pressure our passengers put on us to “get a flight done,” but we infrequently talk about the fact that sometimes we are the worst judge of our own readiness. The acronym is an easy way to self-check your readiness to fly. If you’re *not* familiar, the mnemonic is for “Illness; Medication; Stress; Alcohol; Fatigue and Emotion.

Our “can-do” attitude as pilots regularly gets us thinking, “I can get this flight done tonight after work” when we might be better deciding to make the flight in the morning after a good night’s rest. Taking a discussion about readiness for flight to our passengers, or even imagining what that conversation might sound like, especially when flying with our significant others or friends, can empower us to make better decisions.

Talk with your passengers about what it means to really be fit-to-fly and give them the tools to help make a decision for you. A significant other should be able to tell you as their pilot, “I think you’re too tired tonight to get us there.” While I recognize that we may not be able to be at a full 100% for every flight we ever take, we have to be a little realistic here; we shouldn’t be at the point where we are actively fighting to stay awake and just hoping nothing goes wrong on a flight. Many times, our best friends and significant others know



us best, and we should take their input. When you plan a flight, tell them that if they see you doing anything that is pushing limits, they should tell you that; empower them to veto a “go decision.”

Sometimes our own “get-there-itis” as a desire to deliver a promised flight is even stronger than the more frequently talked about pressure passengers might put on us.

PASSENGERS AND PRESSURE

A simple comment from a significant other like, “Gee, it sure would be better if we get there tonight” can be enough to get a pilot to consider taking extra risks.

It’s important to teach passengers to not “pressure” you to fly when you are questioning it. Sure, there are going to be bosses, friends, family or even missions for pets that might make us want to complete a flight. These external pressures should not be what we consider when we make a decision as to whether a flight will be conducted. The reason for the flight doesn’t change whether it is advisable.

Teaching passengers how to avoid pressuring us to complete a particular flight can help us better make clear decisions about risks of flights.

PASSENGERS AND WISHFUL THINKING

A passenger should always question a pilot who says, “I think we can make it” when considering a flight.

Most of us have said this to ourselves or a passenger at some point when evaluating a flight. It might be that the weather “is supposed to clear out,” or that we might be able to get there before it’s dark, or even just, “I think I have enough energy to make it there before I am too tired to fly safely.” These are all risks that a passenger takes when they trust us to make the decision regarding whether a flight will proceed, and one that they can help effect if a bad decision looks imminent.

If there is any potential question of if the flight can be fully completed, there should better be one heck of an alternate plan that the pilot can confidently execute, or they should be encouraged to exercise a no-go-veto.

This isn’t an automatic no-go, necessarily, but if you are planning on going somewhere and counting on changing conditions to make the flight completable, it means you really need to have the out plan ready. It might be something as simple as stopping partway and staying overnight. I have done this more

times than I can count in my own flying history. In some cases, it has generated cool adventures and great nights away that weren’t originally planned. A passenger can help a pilot ensure that if there is any question as to whether a full flight plan will be completed, an alternate is in place that *can* be completed.

Certainly, that “I think we can make it” should never be a question of if the aircraft has enough fuel to complete a planned flight. It might be as simple as “can we get this flight done before night sets in?”

There are a lot of ways passengers can add pressure and risks to flights, but there are also lots of ways they can minimize and mitigate them. With a little forethought as a pilot, we can make our passengers a part of our risk mitigation efforts.

Incorporating our passengers into the risk management process, not just considering them one of the risks, can help us increase our awareness of external and personal risks we might encounter on our flights. Take the time to educate your passengers and empower them related to how best they can help and avoid adding risks to the flights. Passengers can be a strong risk mitigation resource if you use them. **PP**