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Recently while in Boise, ID I had the pleasure of having dinner with two friends who are also pilots. As is usually the case with a group of helicopter pilot, type A personalities sitting down and talking, the stories of “there I was” were abundant.

If someone was to eavesdrop on our conversation the unconditioned listener may surmise that our profession is brimming with a chaotic danger at every turn or is an ever-ending series of dynamic occurrences. Throughout these tales each was a recount of an adventure in adversity or an event of self-preservation.

Though in reality these occurrences are but small capsules of a larger time line, it does highlight that the endeavor of human flight is an enterprise filled with risk. The old adage “long periods of boredom punctuated by moments of sheer terror” can at times describe our normal workday.

These moments of elevated heart rate and adrenaline can become so common place that we become accustomed their presence. A moment in time that would later supply a story for us to share with our pilot friends, a story that ends with us having the opportunity to regale it to our peers.

Unfortunately in a high-risk profession such as helicopter flight there are going to be days where the risk overcomes the professionalism. Perhaps when looking at these tragic events that have occurred in our industry a part of the solution may lie in the tragedies that did not occur. We become so focused on trying to fix a chain of events that resulted in a devastating story on the six o'clock news we forget about our own close calls.

An engine failure resulting in a successful autorotation, a governor failure that resulting in a safe landing, a flight into inadvertent IMC resulting in stable flight out of the meteorically conditions, or a pilot who said I am not going to take that flight.

These occurrences rarely make the newsstand and very few people may even know they took place. But within our own stories may lie part of the solution to reducing the accident rate within our industry.

In my own self-reflection there seems to be common threads within these adrenaline filled moments that halted the onset of a tragic event or put me in the undesirable situation. As the log of my in flight malfunctions increase there is little doubt, time after time, when I mentally caught up with each of the situations at hand I had already handled or landed the airframe. This automated response to a situation is a result of training and is a skill set that can only be achieved through conditioning.

Throughout the NTSB reports there are examples of experienced pilots without the knowledge level needed for their airframe crashing aircraft because of a minor failure. They did not necessarily crash because they were unskilled aviators but simply did not have the conditioning needed to operate their model of aircraft.

If my own adrenaline filled moments were isolated to the proper operation of the machined pieces of metal and composites that make up the aircraft I fly the solutions would be simple to address and accept. The far more difficult events to come to terms with are the situations that were self-imposed.

When we find ourselves in situations that makes the hair on the back of our neck stand up or cursing ourselves for our own lack of reasonable foresight we know that the decisions that placed us in the precarious situation are of our own doing. Whether it is pressure to fly placed upon us or our own self imposed pressures to complete a mission we realize too late that we should have said “no”.

If we as pilots are encouraged to say “yes”, and rewarded for saying “yes”, what encourages us to say “no”? If our own skills as a aviator are called into question or the bar of aptitude is set by another saying “yes” only ourselves or a possible later NTSB report are left to question the wisdom in accepting the proposed flight.

Most often when we find ourselves in a moment produced by the lack of proper foresight we are able extricate ourselves from this less than desirable situation. This can validate our bad decision-making and perhaps provide for a mental encouragement in a similar situation in the future. Skill does provide for an edge in removing ourselves from our predicament but often “it is better to be lucky then good”. In your past adrenaline filled moments, how much was luck and how much was skill?

Perhaps as an industry we can find some moments of clarity in our own stories that will drive the conversation within our regulatory bodies to a more productive set of recommendations and rules. Of course that is just my opinion, I could be wrong.

Fly Safe. ■

GLEN WHITE
EDITOR