

AM I MY BROTHER'S KEEPER?



It's all hands to the pump when the aircraft goes tech but all too often pilots are wary of commenting on somebody else's airmanship – DON'T BE! Brian Hope reports

Many adventurous pursuits, particularly those that involve machines and/or take man into an unfamiliar environment, present hazards. Whether those hazards turn into risks depends entirely on the probability of occurrence AND the steps taken to mitigate them. Some will argue that this is why people become involved in these particular activities in the first place – risk creates excitement and challenge – but that is a debate in itself and not part of the discussion I want to concentrate on today.

The point about adventurous activity is that there is a natural human instinct to mitigate risk; when our ancestors hunted creatures large enough to do them harm, I doubt it took many of them being mauled by sabre-toothed tigers before they realised that they needed to do a risk assessment! They soon learned to use surprise and cunning to overcome their prey, mitigating the risk to an acceptable level, but accepting an element of danger rather than deciding to remove the excitement and challenge from their lives altogether and settle for a vegetarian diet – or starve!

Similarly in sport, many of the unnecessary hazards have been mitigated; motor racing circuits, for instance, and the cars and motorcycles that use them are infinitely safer than they were 20 years ago and yet the thrill and excitement for both racer and spectator remains. The safety instinct has come to the fore, sometimes instigated by individuals it is true, but ultimately becoming a crusade to prevent as best it can unnecessary death, injury and destruction, which add nothing to the thrill and challenge of the sport – in fact they greatly detract from it. In many sports of course, governmental intervention either by legislation or regulation has had a major impact on risk mitigation, usually on behalf of third parties, and that is certainly true of our chosen activity – Sport and Recreational Aviation.

MITIGATING AVIATION RISK

Though powered aviation started as what today we might call an extreme sport, post WWI it quickly developed into a commercial industry, and it was that industry that guided the regulation – mitigating the risk – rather than the sport and recreation offshoots themselves. Almost a century later, the overarching regulatory environment we operate in remains heavily influenced by the need to protect the fare-paying flying public and those below the flight paths. Fortunately though, proportionate regulation is increasingly finding an expanding presence within our sector, which has an ethos that is often at odds with that of the needs of commercial air transport.

We are then, constrained more than most by quite strict and specific rules and regulations. These rules govern the aircraft we fly, where

and how we fly them and indeed, what we need to do to learn how to fly and continue to do so into the future. You would sometimes think that very little was left to chance and I wonder if, because we are bound so tightly by regulation, our guard perhaps drops because we believe 'the regulators have it covered'. However, with much evidence to suggest that in a significant number of aviation accidents some rule or regulation has been broken, it would be naive to assume that regulation alone can keep us safe.

The reality of flying for most private pilots is that having gained a PPL, few are likely to trot off and buy themselves an aeroplane and, for a while at least, many will stay within a club structure and hire the aircraft that they learned on, or similar. By its very nature, despite the fact that as pilots we are ultimately responsible for what we do, the club environment provides a level of constraint, dictated by its rules and the vigilant oversight of a CFI; for the less confident there is help at hand, and for the overconfident a timely word of caution. But what happens when pilots do make that decision to spread their wings and join a group or buy their own aircraft?

The onus of responsibility has, in reality if not in theory, taken a definite shift and they really have become the master of their own destiny. If they remain at an airfield where there is a flying club, then experienced help and advice will still be readily available, and even if they move to a private strip, other pilots will be only too willing to proffer advice. For the vast majority of pilots this is the safety net that keeps them within a regime where risk mitigation is a major agenda item – but it is only available if the pilot wants it or realises he needs it, and then asks for it. And it is when this self-regulatory process breaks down that many of the accidents that we see all too often in the AAIB reports occur, accidents that could perhaps have been avoided with a quiet word in the pilot's ear.

A RISK TOO FAR

It is a fact that there are those that will seek guidance and there are those that will not, and there are those that welcome critique of their skills and others whose egos cannot accept even well-intentioned comment. So what of the pilot who, through lack of experience, foolishness or simply a misunderstanding of the inherent risks, decides to do something that is unnecessarily risky? Do we act to try to mitigate THEIR risk, or do we let them get on with it? We may all be nodding 'Of course' to the former right now, but the facts all too often indicate the latter.

Many of us can remember a time before the breathalyser when drinking and driving was quite prevalent. Tales of derring-do abounded and unless you had been personally touched by the human tragedy that such



SAFETY

stupidity can and does evoke, then it was all rather a jolly jape. Come the breathalyser and while there was much talk of it being unfair and oppressive, slowly the culture changed and it eventually became socially unacceptable to drink and drive. Yes, the law instigated the change, but it was the changing attitude of society that made it work and greatly reduced the incidence of the offence. It is not uncommon for those who will not accept the risk they pose when under the influence to have their keys taken from them by friends and colleagues to prevent them from driving, and even cases where the police are informed of somebody refusing to take such advice. Most of us would probably agree that such actions are quite reasonable.

Some while ago I was told about a pilot who, without instrument qualification, took off into a 300ft cloudbase and frightened himself witless. Fortunately he managed to drop out of the cloud and scud run around the circuit and land.

"What a stupid thing to do," said the reporter of the incident, "I certainly wasn't going to fly that day, it was obvious the cloudbase was very low." Need I say that the person relating the tale had a good number of hours and experience, certainly far more than the hapless pilot who ventured off into what for him at least, was the unknown? Is there not an obligation to try and dissuade somebody from making such an error of judgement? Had the outcome been a tragic accident, would not the reporter have had some culpability for standing back and allowing this sequence of events to unfold without his intervention? Of course, legally he would not be culpable, but morally I do not

believe there to be any doubt that he would be. I would like to think that somebody would have taken the pilot aside and at least tried to dissuade him from flying until the weather improved, perhaps even tried to give him some guidance on assessing the cloudbase and better understanding the TAFs and Metars so as to 'read' what the weather was likely to be doing over the coming period.

In a rather more extreme case, and one that ended far less happily, a chap bought himself a deriggleable aircraft – exactly what it was is not important. A friend who had some flying experience proceeded to help him rig the aircraft in a field and then stood by and watched this untrained pilot climb aboard, take off, climb at too steep an attitude and die in the ensuing accident. However forthright the 'pilot' in his desire to fly his new toy, it is difficult to believe that anybody, knowledgeable about flying or otherwise, would not have done everything possible to prevent him from doing so.

I suggest that none of us ever want to live with the guilt of feeling, 'If only I'd said something.' It may well be that there will be the odd occasion when somebody might unceremoniously tell you to mind your own business, and in such circumstances there is little else you can do. But by and large I think any pilot who has been told that perhaps he needs to rethink his plan of action is going to do just that – and be grateful that you took the trouble to help him see where he might be going wrong.

And you do not have to be a newbie to find yourself in the position of maybe taking a risk too far. A few years ago I was in Girona with two friends and we were planning to depart

for Sabadell, the GA airfield for Barcelona. It was stiflingly hot and it took considerably longer to refuel the three aircraft than we would have liked, so by the time we were ready to depart it was late afternoon. Having started the engines and called for taxi – the controller came back with, "Are you sure you want to do that?" It transpired the delay had turned what should have been a relatively straightforward flight down the VFR corridor through Barcelona International's airspace into a no go situation with late afternoon cu-nims blocking our path. This word from the wise was gratefully accepted – there was certainly no way we were going to second guess the local expert knowledge and we delayed our departure until the following morning.

SELF-REGULATION

So, the underlying question of this article is: do we, the flying community, genuinely want to see the accident rate fall? If the answer is YES then we have to accept that as with drinking and driving, regulation on its own can only go so far. It is us who have to take the next step and change our safety culture; it is not only ourselves we must ensure are tuned in and safe to fly but also the wider community of pilots around us. Use your own judgement and share your knowledge, and if you see somebody about to do something you consider risky then speak up before, rather than after the event – it might just save another damaged aircraft, or worse.

Am I my brother's keeper? Yes, I think the Sport and Recreational community needs to become exactly that. ■



Looking over a low-time pilot's shoulder while he plans his flight, you may be able to offer advice on a better routing