

# The most important wings...

...are worn by the pilot

**I ONCE READ** an FAA study dealing with accidents resulting in controlled flight into terrain (CFIT). One bullet point stood out: “The majority of such accidents involving flight into mountainous terrain occur surprisingly close to the peak of a mountain or barely below a ridge.” In other words, if the majority of aircraft involved in CFIT accidents had been flying ever-so-slightly higher, these accidents would not have occurred. This made me wonder if I had ever missed disaster just because I was not quite close enough to have made impact.

Continuing with this reasoning, I wondered how often I might have come close to other types of accidents without realizing it. For example, how many times have I come close to a midair collision but never knew it because of not having seen the other airplane? This means that fate can play a role in our survival. Our goal as pilots, therefore, must be to eliminate the effect of luck to the maximum extent possible.

In the case of CFIT accidents, for example, we must not be satisfied thinking we know the minimum safe altitude for every phase of a night or instrument flight. We must know that we know. To avoid midair collisions, we must scan the skies with increased vigilance.

My first instrument instructor used to say, “If you’re not always doing something to increase situational awareness, then you’re doing it wrong.” This also applies to VFR operations.

TWA, the airline from which I retired, once had posters in its training center proclaiming “The most important wings on a plane are worn by the pilot.” Think about that. TWA also developed a program for its pilots called “Aggressive Safety.” It reminded us that accidents usually are not the result of one event but instead are caused by a chain of events, the first of which often seems inconsequential. That first link, though, enables a chain of events to develop, a chain from which recovery might not be possible.

We were taught that being aggressively safe means that pilots should regard every unusual or unexpected event—however innocuous it might seem—as the possible first link in a chain that could lead to an increasing erosion of safety. The idea is to break that or subsequent links as soon as possible.

For example, a night takeoff without a flashlight could be the first link in a safety chain. The next might be an ammeter with a slightly unusual indication, and the third might be total electrical failure. Fate works like that.



BY BARRY SCHIFF / AOPA Foundation Legacy Society chairman

Preventing that first link might be an unwillingness to fly at night without a flashlight and spare batteries. This can minimize the effect of what could come next. (Those who believe in karma suggest that having a flashlight prevents electrical problems.)

Safety is an attitude—an unwillingness to sacrifice prudent operating practices for purposes of expedience or convenience. There are at least two ways to ensure a safe mindset during every flight.

The first is to pretend that every flight is conducted with an FAA inspector in the right seat. If you wouldn’t do something with him or her monitoring your every move, then you probably shouldn’t do it when alone.

The second is to assume you will be called upon to explain your actions to a group of FAA investigators convened in your honor. If you are about to make an operational decision that could not be satisfactorily defended before this august panel, then it most likely reflects poor judgment.

Finally, there is The Tribunal, that mystical and ancient order of airmen gone west. The Tribunal passes final judgment on the conduct of every pilot. There was the case of one pilot, for example, who had difficulty taxiing off the runway because of a gear-up landing. He meekly attempted to rationalize his carelessness by quoting that ridiculous bromide about there being two kinds of pilots who fly retractable-gear aircraft, “those who have made gear-up landings and those who will.”

The Tribunal had heard that excuse before. “Nonsense,” proclaimed one of the elders. “That is said only to pacify an embarrassed pilot who allowed himself to become distracted. There is no excuse for a gear-up landing unless necessitated by an emergency or mechanical failure.”

Another pilot tried to excuse himself from having bought the farm by proclaiming that he had flown west while doing what he enjoyed. The elders declared that the best way for any pilot to journey west was while sleeping comfortably in one’s own bed.

Admission to the ancient order is denied to any pilot unable to outfly the setting sun because of neglect, especially when others are forced to share his fate. Such pilots are sent elsewhere. ■

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**BARRY SCHIFF** has been writing for *AOPA Pilot* for 62 years. The June issue marks the anniversary.