

People That Don't Follow the Rules Crash Airplanes

A couple of evenings ago my family and I were watching television when someone made a snide comment about one of the (not so bright) characters as being a "...little rule-follower". I immediately reacted. "WAIT A MINUTE! ", I exclaimed.

A sort of pall fell on the room. I could hear everybody thinking "Uh-oh, Papa is upset about something, AND he's about to get on his soap box." I am known in my family as a man of few words, and I did not disappoint. "I strongly object", I continued, "to the use of the term 'rule-follower' as a pejorative". In my business, people who don't follow the rules crash airplanes.

There is a good deal of statistical evidence to back this up. A quick review of fatal Warbird accidents in the last 20+ years reveals at least 1 FAR violation as either a direct or contributing factor in a very high percentage of accidents.

Of course, there are different types of rules. There are the "hard stops" of physics and, with all due respect to "Star Trek", we have not yet figured out a way to violate these rules without disastrous results. Some of my favorites are:

- Force = Mass times Acceleration.
- A body in motion tends to remain in motion (or at rest), unless acted on by an outside force.
- Every action has an equal and opposite reaction.

I'm sure you recognize these as a distillation of Newton's three laws of motion.

The soft rules that we use as guides in aviation however - FARs, organizational policies and procedures, even our organization's culture, can indeed be foolishly disregarded. They represent a shared set of values (basically none of us wants to see airplanes crash), that we use to interpret the "hard laws" for use in practical day to day operation.

The numbers vary a bit of course, but in a typical year we have between 7 and 15 fatal Warbird accidents, resulting in the loss of just under 12 human lives.

So, why do we consistently choose to violate the rules that are there to keep us away from the hard edges? The answers to that question are as numerous as the number of pilots in this industry.

A better question might be "Why do we allow this?" Again, there are a lot of answers - peer pressure, ego, cognitive biases that skew our perception of risk, etc. But should we allow it? The short answer is "No, we should not."

We all like to think of ourselves as professionals. I know many of us are not professionals in the sense that we are paid for flying, but we still think of ourselves as professional in demeanor and capability.

Other professions in high consequence industries would not tolerate this type of behavior by their peers. Imagine if your surgeon willfully disregarded established policies, procedures, and protocols because he or she was in a hurry or wanted to do "something cool".

So, stay away from the hard edges. Let's use our industry's well-established procedures and the FARs to stay out of trouble. More importantly, let's work toward continuous improvement in our culture. Let's not tolerate unsafe attitudes and behaviors. Let's Raise the Bar. Be willing to speak up. "If you see something, say something." If we can move the needle on this just a little bit, we can save lives.

Stay Safe.

John

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