

BRUCE MAYES

# GUARDING *the* PRIVILEGE

*Understanding the Responsibilities  
of Good Aviation Citizenship*



Photo by Adrian Eichhorn

Every student pilot who gets through the lectures on lift and drag, the permutations of weather, or “buttonology” for new-age avionics, knows the struggles of completing basic ground school. Mastering the knowledge required to successfully pass the written (knowledge) exam for a pilot certificate or rating is a huge undertaking. Even if you accept the old adage that “every point over 70 on the test is overkill,” there is still a lot of studying required to get that passing grade.

When combined with the bookwork, the many steep learning curves and performance plateaus the student pilot experiences are sufficient to weed out those who lack the genuine desire to become a pilot. Achieving this status is not taken lightly by those in the midst of the learning cycle. The tradition of cutting off one’s shirt tail after a first solo flight illustrates the intensity of the learn-to-fly experience.

## Privileges and Responsibilities

Once the much-coveted document is in hand, pilots are free to exercise the privileges of that certificate or rating. What we need to understand is that, as with citizenship in a country, the privileges that come with admission to the world of aviation carry responsibilities. Abuse of those privileges can result in losing them. Medical issues aside, the most

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**Each individual with a pilot certificate has been given the trust and responsibility to operate an aircraft, and to carry passengers.**

common way to lose piloting privileges involves some version of “stupid pilot tricks.” Why would a pilot who has invested so much time, money, and energy to earn a certificate or rating blow it all with one foolish act? I don’t have a satisfactory answer to that question, but I have plenty of examples of the mindset that gives rise to poor aviation citizenship:

*If the aircraft is over gross weight but lands safely and no one else knows, what’s the harm? Besides, that aircraft will easily haul twice its gross weight.*

*The only thing that matters is for the paperwork to match the regs, right?*

*I need to make the flight, so I am going to fly regardless of the regs or legal limits.*

*I can’t believe you won’t take off into fog. It can’t be more than 1,000 feet thick.*

*If you take off and fly into IMC, is it safer to just keep flying IFR until they give you a clearance? Just make sure they don’t know you are in IMC.*

*You turned around because of weather?! What about that “No Fear” bumper sticker on your car?*

*We might as well make up the weights; how will anyone know otherwise? Besides, a real pilot can look at the passengers and know if they will make the aircraft overweight.*

*It does not matter unless there is an accident; and we have never had an accident.*

Have you ever found yourself saying — or even thinking — any of these phrases? Let’s look at a few “stupid pilot tricks.”

## Exhibit A

I was an Army helicopter pilot when I joined the aero club in order to attain fixed-wing ratings. We did most of our training in a Cessna 172 *Skyhawk*, but, to earn a commercial certificate I needed to demonstrate proficiency in a complex aircraft (retractable gear and controllable pitch propeller). One day, the instructor and I were flying in the club’s Cessna 177 *Cardinal*. I guess he got bored, because at one point in the flight he uttered those immortal words: “I’ve got it, watch this!” (Yes, he actually said that.) He nosed the aircraft over into a dive, pulled it up, and rolled the airplane to the left completely upside down and upright again. I looked outside and noticed that the sturdy wing struts common to all C-172s were not part of the *Cardinal*’s anatomy. The airworthiness certificate stated that the C-177 was a normal category airworthiness certificate — not utility category. I angrily protested, and we returned to base. This instructor’s blatant disregard for aircraft and flight limitations and total disrespect for his student provided my earliest introduction to “stupid pilot tricks.”

## Exhibit B

Consider the story of a pilot who deliberately used his privileges to achieve a selfish personal goal, even though it put lives in danger. The short version: the glider pilot soared to 49,009 feet over the southern California desert, clearly violating airspace used by jetliners. The FAA sought to revoke the individual’s pilot certificate. The pilot expressed not contrition, but bitterness. He stated that revocation was unjustified because the desert airspace is far less crowded.

## Exhibit C

This example is a sad illustration of arrogance and deceit that not only endangers lives, but also gives pilots a bad name in the eyes of the non-flying public. The pilot, whose flight privileges were revoked after he buzzed the Santa Monica Pier in 2008, lost his pilot’s certificate a second time for illegally selling rides to the public in a Soviet-era military jet. The FAA discovered this fact as a result of an accident that killed another pilot and a passenger who had purchased a ride in a two-seat military jet trainer. The first pilot, who was carrying an illegal passenger in his own military jet aircraft, was flying next to the jet that crashed. Care to count how many regulations he violated?

## Exhibit D

I am always astonished by stories of professional pilots caught trying to fly while drunk. One of the most famous examples in this category is the airline crew who told their fellow bar patrons that they had to fly an airliner the next day. Or how about the regional airline captain busted in the cockpit for “intent to fly” with a blood alcohol content twice the legal limit?

These and other practitioners of stupid pilot tricks all lost their privileges to fly. In my book, loss of piloting privileges is a price that a pilot must pay for breaches of faith and trust with passengers, poor judgment, and serious deficiencies in aviation citizenship.

### Is There an Antidote?

Unfortunately, we do not have a reliable filter to weed out the proverbial “bad apples” before they kill or injure others. We rely on individual responsibility. We also rely on a higher standard culture because

regardless of aircraft size, each individual with a pilot certificate has been given the trust and responsibility to operate an aircraft, and to carry passengers.

If you follow the policies, procedures, and rules, and if you do so with the knowledge and skill required to be a good pilot and a solid aviation citizen, you will most certainly be safer. Guard your privileges through your own behavior, and never let company or peer pressure force you into acting in a way contrary to those principles. Guard them as if your future depends on it, because your flying future — and maybe your life — does. 

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**The privileges that come with admission to the world of aviation also carry responsibilities.**

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Photo by James Williams