

Not-So-Model Behavior

When “Rash” or “Brash” Leads to “Crash”



Photo by James Williams

“We were at the airport when this guy did a low pass over the hangar — nearly rattled the doors off!”

Sound familiar? You can of course substitute the word hangar in that sentence with a house, boat, or any other place, and it might still ring true. Sadly, a significant number of stories like these end in NTSB accident reports. As the oft-quoted Captain A.G. Lamplugh put it, “aviation in itself is not inherently dangerous. But to an even greater degree than the sea, it is terribly unforgiving of any carelessness, incapacity, or neglect.”

Although these words were first uttered in 1931, it seems that some pilots still try to test this principle for themselves. The ill-considered (not to mention ill-mannered) practice of “buzzing” is just one of

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the ways pilots not only create casualties, but also lower the community standards and certainly the public standing of our chosen avocation. As a pilot, even a student pilot, you are a member of an elite group with high standards. In aviation, violating these standards can be devastating, not only to the individual aviator, but also to families, friends, and innocent bystanders. And so, given the aviation citizenship focus in this issue of *FAA Safety Briefing*, I decided to take a closer look at some of the ways an aviator’s decision to be rash could lead to a crash.

One of the biggest — and most avoidable — accident factors involves maneuvering flight. I took

a tour of the accident database, looking at accidents in the 2007-2011 timeframe involving certain key factors: inappropriately low altitude, aerobatics, lack of preparation/poor preflight, and improper certificate issues. I also looked for incidents in which it appeared that the pilot was — no other words for it — showing off. Not surprisingly, the “show off” accidents generally involved some combination of low altitude and aerobatics. By the way, I took care to exclude any accident where mechanical issues or simple bad luck played a significant role. Also, I excluded operations like banner towing and agricultural application, where operating close to the surface is necessary for the job.

Overall, the search turned up 182 accidents. With 217 fatalities, nearly 63 percent of those involved were killed. Here’s the breakdown. (*Note: the percentages exceed 100 due to the fact that more than one factor was often involved. This is the percentage of total accidents that included the cited factor.*)

Respect the Limits

Improper certificate or privileges and improper preflight or planning fall into the “duh” category. It’s really simple: if you aren’t rated for the aircraft or the flight conditions, don’t do it. Even if the weather forecaster isn’t saying what you’d like to hear, don’t ignore it. Always do a thorough preflight, and never forget what your ground school and flight instructors told you about never putting your trust in the fuel gauges.

The bottom line is to know your limits, know the aircraft's limits, and respect both. Be ready (properly planned and preflighted) before you fly. In far too many cases, the pilot's intentional flight into challenging or deteriorating weather conditions ended with a controlled flight into terrain/object (CFIT). If you don't have an instrument rating, consider acquiring one. It will make you a better all-around aviator, and it will also help you obtain the knowledge and the skills to be a pilot in control as well as the pilot-in-command.

Putting on a Show

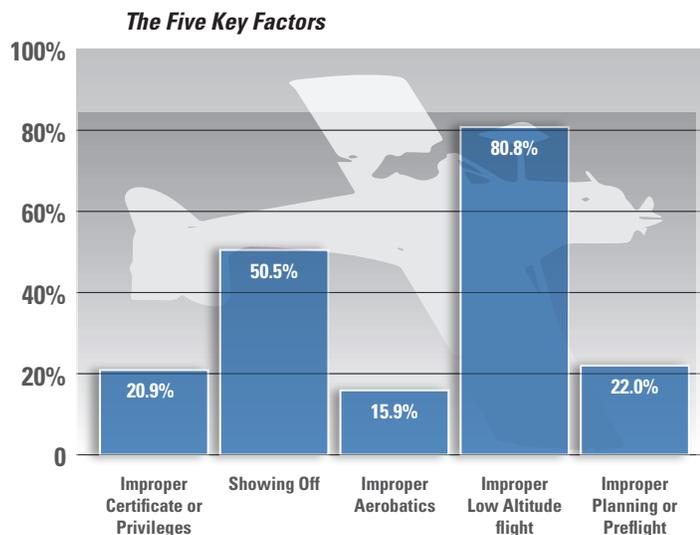
Most of us are rightfully proud of our abilities to pilot an aircraft of any size. But that doesn't mean that showing off is a good idea. Slightly more than 50 percent of the accidents in my review involved an element of showing off — either to people on the ground, or to people who were on board the aircraft. In fact, nearly 16 percent of the accidents I reviewed involved improper aerobatics. In most cases, it was as simple as buzzing a friend's house or the pilot's own home. Buzzing is never — *ever* — appropriate. 'Nuff said.

Please don't misunderstand, or think I believe that aerobatic flight is inherently dangerous. On the contrary, aerobatic training can be a powerful way to enhance your recognition of unusual attitudes and recovery techniques. But these skills must be properly acquired and safely practiced. If you want to learn aerobatics, hire an instructor who is well-qualified to provide this type of training. Check with friends, fellow pilots, and even social media to get recommendations. Although the aerobatic performers you see at airshows make it look easy, remember that they didn't start their aerobatic careers 25 feet off the deck. Neither should you.

Don't Do the Limbo

Low altitude operations limit a pilot's recovery options, and this factor has contributed to nearly 81 percent of all the reviewed accidents. It's easy to understand why. When operating close to the surface, there's rarely room for error.

Low altitude maneuvering is necessary at points during any flight, but we tend not to give it the respect it deserves. While skimming around at 100 feet off the surface may be legal — assuming you maintain safe distance from people and property and aren't in a densely populated area — it doesn't leave you much margin for safety. As you zip over hills and dales, all that stands between you and



disaster is one tiny mistake — or even a sneeze that forces your eyes to close and possibly triggers involuntary hand movement. The professional and military crews who regularly conduct nap-of-the-earth flights are highly trained and highly competent. In addition, such pilots are constantly engaged in risk evaluation and mitigation, and they generally have sophisticated equipment and redundant systems to minimize the inherent risks.

Altitude is your friend. If you are considering a flight that requires low-altitude operations (e.g., aerial photography), start by making an honest assessment of your ability to safely conduct that flight. If you conclude that you have the training, the experience, and the proficiency, you also need to develop a solid plan. How low will you go (personal minimums)? What are the terrain and obstacle considerations you need to accommodate? Will you be tempted — by “mission requirements” or by a passenger — to go lower? If you can't resist the pressure or the temptation to fly below your comfort level, say no and don't go.

The bottom line: know your limits, know the airplane's limits, get proper training, and don't put yourself into “no way out” situations. And, most of all, remember that if you shun attitudes and behavior that could be called “brash” or “rash,” you are very likely to avoid finding yourself in a “what-was-that-pilot-thinking” kind of crash. ✈️

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