

SUSAN PARSON

To Be *Rather Than* To Seem

How A Personal SMS Can Make and Mark You as A Good Aviation Citizen

There is much more to being a patriot and a citizen than reciting the pledge or raising a flag.

— James George Janos (aka Jesse Ventura)

Whether referring to participation in a nation or in a community of shared interests, good citizenship is one of those terms that we all use commonly, enthusiastically, and knowingly. But do we really know what it means to be a good citizen? And, for the purposes of this topic, how many of us truly understand what it means to be a good aviation citizen?



Photo by Tom Hoffmann

Esse Quam Videri

As I pondered these questions, the phrase *esse quam videri* came to mind. That is the official motto of my native state and, as every North Carolina school child of my generation learned, the Latin phrase translates as “to be, rather than to seem.”

Applied to aviation, there are various ways that someone can *seem* to be a good pilot, and thus a good citizen of the aviation community. Unfortunately, some of those most visible characteristics may be more about “seem” than “be.” For example, it’s easy to assume that an individual who has never had an accident, incident, or violation must be a good pilot. While that may seem to be the case, a spotless record could be the result of good fortune rather than good behavior.

So back to the question: how can any individual pilot truly be (rather than merely *seem* to be) a good pilot and a good citizen of the aviation community?

My Southern upbringing offered a few more pointers in this particular quest. For instance, I can remember many times as a tot when, dressed up in a lacy little frock for church or some other public outing, the parental pre-departure briefing included the admonition that “pretty is as pretty does.” There were also lots of reminders that actions speak louder than words — a concept that was embedded even more deeply during my training for the flight instructor certificate. The basic idea is that “being” arises from “doing.”

In the process of researching concepts of good citizenship, I came across a range of research writing and pithy quotes that support the connection between “being” and “doing.” Of particular interest in the academic arena is a set of characteristics suggested by Dr. Joel Westheimer, a professor in the sociology of education. In Westheimer’s construct, a good citizen is one who not only values, but also *demonstrates* traits such as personal responsibility (e.g., practicing and modeling good values) and concern for the collective welfare (e.g., through active participation and contributions to the overall community). I also came across a couple of interesting quotes that deftly summarize this idea:

As a citizen, you need to know how to be a part of it, how to express yourself — and not just by voting. — Sandra Day O’Connor

Now let’s apply the “do” in order to “be” concept to good aviation citizenship. Each of us could probably come up with a long list of DO and DON’T actions

that are consistent with safety and good airmanship. Any such list would no doubt include actions that involve personal responsibility and accountability, concern for the community, and behaviors consistent with safety and risk management.

Although I considered creating a top ten list of my own, it dawned on me that most, if not all, the items I might suggest are fully consistent with the four pillars of the Safety Management System (SMS) approach that the FAA, the international community, aviation operators, and many other industries have embraced as the best and most effective way to achieve acceptable levels of safety risk.

Although many GA pilots (including me) sometimes perceive SMS as either an abstraction or a structure for the big operators, one of the much-lauded benefits of SMS is its scalability. So, in lieu of a list, let me offer an outline for how creating a simple personal SMS can frame both the conceptual and the participatory elements that can accelerate the essential evolution from *seeming* to *doing* to truly *being* a safe pilot and a good aviation citizen.

There are many ways that someone can seem to be a good pilot and a good citizen of the aviation community, but some of those most visible characteristics may be more about “seem” than “be.”

Safety Policy – Defining Your Aviation Values

I can’t think of a better starting point for this part of your personal SMS than the Aviators Model Code of Conduct (AMCC). Right from the start, this document (available *gratis* from www.secureav.com) lists the values we should display in our role as good aviation citizens. Among other things, it suggests that a pilot’s safety policy should make safety the highest priority, seek excellence in airmanship, aspire to professionalism, adhere to laws and regulations, and act with responsibility and courtesy to others. The values enumerated in the Aviators Model Code of Conduct also highlight the importance of situational awareness, risk management, and “prudent operating practices” such as personal minimums.

Safety Risk Management – Setting Your Personal Minimums

Clearly defined, individually tailored, written personal minimums should be part of a good aviation citizen’s individual SMS. I think of personal minimums as the human factors equivalent of the regulatory requirement for fuel reserves, because they define the safety reserve between the skills and



aircraft performance required for the specific flight you want to make, and the skills and aircraft performance available.

There are numerous tools available to help guide you through the process of setting personal minimums, and longtime readers may recall a step-by-step guide published in the May/June 2006 issue of this magazine ("Getting the Maximum from Personal Minimums" — *FAA Aviation News*). Regardless of the tool you choose, the key is for your individual SMS safety policy to include personal minimums tailored to your individual training, experience, currency, and proficiency, and consistent with the characteristics and capabilities of the aircraft.

Written personal minimums are very helpful when it comes to a good aviation citizen's personal responsibility of adhering to stated values, and to demonstrating — *modeling* — that commitment to the broader community. Predetermined and explicitly stated metrics for go/no-go and continue/divert decisions in aviation are a hallmark of good aviation citizenship, because they provide the practical tools you need for meaningful management of the risk. For operation in instrument meteorological conditions (IMC), for instance, you might have personal minimums that say you will not operate in conditions defined as low IFR. Or, you might defer to another day if thick haze significantly reduces vis-



ibility, or if the strength of a gusty crosswind is more than you can handle without a white-knuckled grip on the flight controls.

Good safety risk management means that you adhere to your pre-established safety policy if conditions exceed the stated limitations. You negate the safety risk management value if you amend your personal safety policy "on the fly" in order to make a specific trip. In part for that reason, I encourage pilots to share the written personal minimums with potential passengers. In addition to helping non-pilots understand why a delay or diversion might be necessary, the pilot's personal accountability increases when passengers can ask whether conditions and circumstances for the trip are consistent with the predetermined limitations.

Safety Assurance – Updating Your Operating Policies

That said, you do need a sound safety assurance process to manage the prompt and appropriate incorporation of changes to your circumstances. Do you have a new certificate or rating? You naturally want

to use it, and the training and checking required to earn it make your knowledge and skill as fresh and sharp as they may ever be. Alternatively, has it been awhile since your last flight or, for IMC, since your last instrument approach? Is the airplane you normally fly unavailable for the trip you want to make? If so, are you comfortable — and safe — to fly an aircraft with different equipment or performance characteristics? These are just a few of the factors and questions that go into deciding when, how, and to what extent personal minimums should change. I always recommend that changes be well considered and easily explained and justified to family, other potential passengers, and fellow pilots. For example, you might be comfortable and accustomed to flying with visibility of five miles in haze. There are no unusual factors or pressures on the flight, so it may be reasonable to accept the risk of flying with three miles in haze (i.e., marginal VFR).

When it comes to updating your personal operating policies and limitations, you might also consider discussing such changes with a flight instructor who is familiar with your skills, your experience, and your aircraft. Better yet, “test” your proposed updated operating policies with that instructor in the right seat.

Finally, safety assurance in your personal SMS means that your personal minimums and other operating policies should be subject to regular review. The flight review is a good opportunity for this process. Ideally, though, find a way to review your safety policy and risk management practices at least once a year.

Safety Promotion – Contributing to the Community

Remembering that actions do speak louder than words, modeling safety-minded behavior on every flight is one of the most valuable safety promotion contributions you can make to the aviation community. In addition to adhering to your established practices, here are a few other safety promotion things you can do to be a good aviation citizen:

- *Continuing education and training:* A good pilot never stops learning. Today’s technology offers an abundance of new learning opportunities. These include online courses by the FAASafety Team, the AOPA Air Safety Institute, and, for homebuilders, access to the expertise of more experienced builders. Technology has also enabled the availability of interesting and innovative simulation.

- *Mentoring:* Almost everyone can benefit from a good aviation mentor. If you have particular skills or experience, why not offer to share that with a pilot who can benefit from it? It’s also a great way to demonstrate and model your safety values as a good aviation citizen.

- *Contribute to the ASRS:* Most pilots know about the Aviation Safety Reporting System (ASRS), colloquially known as “NASA forms” because NASA

administers the system on behalf of the FAA. Too many pilots think of ASRS only in terms of its sanctions-relief benefit in the event of an enforcement action. While this benefit provides a strong incentive for pilots to contribute to the system, the point of ASRS is to contribute to a safety culture by collecting, analyzing, and sharing information on issues and events affecting safety. Online submission makes the ASRS system easier than ever to use, and speaking up when you see a safety concern is definitely part of good aviation citizenship.

A simple personal SMS can frame both the conceptual and the participatory elements that drive the evolution from seeming to doing to truly being a safe pilot and a good aviation citizen.

As Flight Standards Service director John Allen observes in this issue’s Jumpseat department, there are enormous pressures on aviation today. To defend both the honor and promote the very survival of our community, aviation needs each and every one of us to be not just good pilots, but good aviation patriots and citizens. We are counting on you to do your part. 

Susan Parson (susan.parson@faa.gov, or @avi8rix for Twitter fans) is editor of FAA Safety Briefing. She is an active general aviation pilot and flight instructor.

Learn More

Aviators Model Code of Conduct

www.secureav.com

“Getting the Maximum from Personal Minimums”

FAA Aviation News, May/June 2006

Best Practices for Mentoring in Flight Instruction

www.faa.gov/training_testing/training/media/mentoring_best_practices.pdf

Aviation Safety Reporting System (ASRS)

<http://asrs.arc.nasa.gov/>