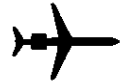


Impeded Judgment

by Jerry E. Tobias



Sound judgment is the basis and foundation of safe flight operations. Period. End of story. Well, OK...not quite. Let me expand that thought a bit.

Webster tells us that judgment is “the ability to make a sound and reasonable decision by discernment and evaluation.” Good judgment results in good decisions. Poor judgment results in poor decisions. It’s just that simple.

It doesn’t matter if you are enjoying your J-3 on a Saturday afternoon, flying a training sortie or combat mission in your military vehicle, or moving people across the state or country in your corporate or airline machine, good judgment is *always* a necessity and must accompany you on *every* flight. The problem, of course, is that judgment is tempered by numerous factors, many of which impede, or even prevent, good decision making.

One such factor is *pride*. While most pilots would probably never list “pride” as a personal characteristic on their résumés, all have undoubtedly dealt with it at one time or another.

Pride, I've learned, takes one of two forms. The first is the boastful attitude that says, “LOOK AT ME!” Or, “Watch what I can do!” (Remember the “Look! No hands!” incidents from your earlier bicycle years?) The root of this version of pride is the need to be noticed, liked, valued or appreciated. This kind of pride can actually cause a person to work harder and do a better job. It can also, however, negatively impact judgment.

Landings are an obvious example. How many inappropriately and even dangerously-long landings result from prideful attempts to “roll it on?” You and I both know it happens in all kinds of airplanes every day.

The second and more subtle form of pride shouts, “DON’T LOOK AT ME!” Or, “Don’t notice what I did wrong!” This version is produced by a fear of embarrassment, humiliation or reprimand, and is characterized by a desire to hide or cover up flaws, mistakes and errors. Left unchecked, this fear overpowers all concerns about consequences and obliterates clear thinking, producing poor, irrational and dangerous decisions.

Take the student pilot, for example, who - after mistakenly entering a *left* downwind instead of the *right* downwind that the tower had instructed - changed the intended full stop landing to a touch-and-go...and quickly departed the area. Consequentially, though, the refueling planned at that airport was then also bypassed. The fear of embarrassment that produced this irrational decision to “escape” eventually led to a dangerously-low fuel status before the final landing at the end of this solo cross-country. How do I know? I was that student pilot. It was a lesson that I remembered the rest of my career.

Has pride (either version) ever impeded YOUR judgment? Think about it, and then promise yourself, like I did after that solo cross-country back in 1967, that you will NOT allow pride to drive your decisions, actions or responses...or those of your crew. That commitment alone will significantly increase your probabilities of incident-free flying.

Another “judgment-defeater” in need of discussion, though, is *arrogance*. Arrogance is

defined as “being cavalier, presumptuous, and over-convinced of one’s own abilities or importance.” Arrogance produces the attitude that says, “I can handle anything!” Or, “Certainly the rules apply...unless they don’t fit what I need or want to do.” Or, “I know all I need to know.” The truth, of course, is that arrogant people often *don’t know how much they don’t know*.

I have lived (just barely) through several examples of such arrogance. One example happened the day a USAF T-38 instructor - not my regular IP - had me turn off the transponder during my T-38 cross-country (this was before encoding altimeters) so he could show me what the Grand Canyon looked like from the inside. The canyon could easily have become our coffin that day. Later that same trip, by the way, he “demonstrated” his former dive bomb techniques on Hoover Dam! Obviously, that Major skipped the “what’s smart and what’s not” part of his training, but his actions helped me learn a lot on that cross-country...about what NOT to do!

Another example of arrogance occurred the day I was riding copilot in an empty Sabreliner when - during the climb-out and without warning - the pilot rolled the airplane. Dangerous? Possibly. Stupid? Absolutely.

Then there was the time that I was in an MD-80 climbing out of Burbank, California, in controlled airspace, when a Piper Navajo shot past our nose from out of nowhere. The Navajo pilot was not talking to ATC, nor did they observe his aircraft on radar. If that airplane had arrived at that spot of airspace just one or two seconds later, or if we (and our 147 passengers) had been there just one or two seconds earlier, I wouldn’t be writing this account. After our anger at the pilot who jeopardized our lives like that subsided, the captain and I shook most of the way to our next destination.

And, on one other flight, my copilot and I were convinced that, since the King Air just minutes ahead of us said he got in “just fine” with weather reported to be right at minimums, we could commence the approach in our Falcon 20, as well. When we reached minimums, however, we could not see lights, the ground below...or anything. The King Air pilot had obviously gone well below minimums to land at what he had announced to ATC was his "hometown" airport. Once again, an arrogant, “I can handle it” attitude must have permeated that cockpit.

“Not me. I’d never do those things,” you say? Well, when was the last time you or I did *anything* (no matter how small) that we knew was illegal, unsafe, or just not smart? That puts us in the same category.

Sound judgment and good decision making *must* be the norm in every facet of aviation (yes, that includes maintenance). But, they don’t just happen. Pride and arrogance are just two of many potential dangers. Learn to recognize the subtle factors or pressures that negatively influence *YOUR* judgment. As a friend of mine says, “it only takes one bad decision to produce a ‘C-E-M’ (career-ending maneuver).” It also only takes one to produce an “L-E-M” (life-ending maneuver). Think about that the next time you are tempted to let *any* factor impede your judgment or obstruct your decision making process. ■

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