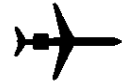


Ten-HUT!

by Jerry E. Tobias



We all understand that *paying attention* in the flight planning room, the maintenance shop or hangar, the control tower, or the cockpit is extremely important. That, however, is sometimes easier said than done. It is relatively easy for something to *get* our attention. The challenge, though, is for that same something to *keep* our attention.

We humans can receive and - to some degree - process information from different sources at the same time, but we are normally only able to respond to one input at a time. So, although we may be aware of more, we can really only pay attention to *one thing at a time*. Being able to accurately determine - minute by minute - *where to focus our attention* (whether in the hangar, in the cockpit, or in life), therefore, is the issue.

Just how well we *control* our attention is also not a constant. We can loosen or tighten our attention as we see fit, a fact which we have practiced, if not understood, since childhood. Don't you remember sitting in class thinking about anything and practically everything else but school? You did so, that is, until the teacher interrupted your daydreaming (attention wandering) by abruptly saying something like, "Now class, PAY ATTENTION!"

We are no different as adults. We still can allow rather loose control of our attention until we are forced or have disciplined ourselves to do otherwise. What, for instance, do you really pay attention to while driving the familiar route home from work? Anything but your driving, probably, until the brake lights in front of you force you to refocus.

This latitude in the control of our attention is also well documented in aviation. Studies of NASA's Aviation Safety Reporting System (ASRS) database note that *altitude busts do not often occur in bad weather*, and *serious malfunctions do not trigger distraction reports* the way that minor malfunctions do. Apparently, then, our perception of the seriousness of the situation has a lot to do with how stringently we control and restrict our attention. If we perceive things to be important, serious or bad enough, our *determination* moves us from complacency to concentration, from sloppiness to precision.

Factors other than determination can also greatly influence our ability to control our attention. Things like fatigue, illness, certain medications, monotony, anger, or a harsh environment (extreme noise, heat, or cold) all have significant impact. These cognitively detrimental factors can seriously inhibit our ability to concentrate, reason and prioritize, while increasing our vulnerability to distractions. The resulting mental dullness that such factors produce can also cause us to fixate on minor or non-pertinent details, while ignoring other much more important information and concerns. Obviously, attempting to fix or fly under such conditions greatly increases the potential for human error.

Knowing and understanding the factors that influence *your* focus and attention is the first step toward combating the impact of those factors upon your performance and, therefore, your contribution to flight and/or maintenance safety. ■

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