

PARTNER'S PERSPECTIVE

» *A View from the Right Seat*



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Encouraging Your Pilot to Be Their Best

by Laurie Einstein Koszuta

The “Unreachables” is a story about general aviation pilots who believe their skills are so sharp and congruent that periodic recurrent training isn’t necessary once they receive their private pilot certificate. Sound like a gripping script in an upcoming blockbuster movie featuring A-list Hollywood stars? Not a chance. The problem is that this bad script is a daily scenario in general aviation.

As partners, we know intuitively that it is difficult for pilots to be all-knowing about the aircraft they fly. There would be few articles or briefs about safety and published accident reviews if they were. These publications encourage pilots to incorporate recurrent and advanced training into their flying routine after receiving their initial certificates.

Surprisingly, many pilots think of recurrent training as a burden rather than an opportunity to learn and hone their craft. With the rapid advancements in avionics and other available technology, ongoing education is there to help pilots mitigate risk, maintain currency, stay up-to-date and be proficient in problem-solving. Still, what makes pilots reticent about attending seminars, booking flight time, using simulators or other modes of advanced education? The reasons may include lack of time or limited financial resources, but there may be more to it.

“Ego is another reason,” Helen Cernak, a Platinum Cirrus Standardized Instructor Pilot (CSIP) and Director at The Flight Academy in Kirkland, Washington, says. “Some pilots feel that they already ‘know their aircraft.’ Others might be intimidated and feel they might be less of a pilot if they need additional training. Some have performance anxiety because getting into the cockpit with a CSIP can have that effect. The pilots who come out consistently and prioritize training with an instructor are safer and more proficient. Pilots who don’t feel they need extra training are the pilots you should be worried about.”

» **It is important** for pilots to attend events annually or every other year to revisit skills they are not using.

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) only requires a flight review every 24 months, which includes one hour of ground instruction and, at least, one hour of flight training. Safety experts believe these minimal requirements are insufficient for pilots who may not fly regularly to stay sharp.

“The Cirrus is a fast and complex aircraft,” Cernak adds, “there is only so much your brain can absorb. Pilots may have been competent on the day they completed their flight review, but they must build on that foundation to make it stronger and safer. Pilots may have ‘gotten away’ with something while flying without an incident or accident, but it becomes a bad habit and can create an unsafe environment when it happens repeatedly. An instructor can help close the lid on those kinds of things.”

The obvious truth is the learning should never stop. Statistics from COPA have shown that in the 31 Cirrus fatal accidents in the United States from January 2018 to July 2023, 11 involved COPA members, 20 involved nonmembers and zero involved pilots who had taken COPA Pilot Proficiency Program (CPPP) training. Since the introduction of the Cirrus in 1999, there have been 148 fatal Cirrus accidents; of those, only 9% (14) involved a pilot who attended a CPPP. Of further note is that being a COPA member also helped reduce accidents; of the 148 accidents, only 40 (27%) were COPA members.*



Tim Lewis, a platinum CSIP and chief flight instructor at Northwest Flight Service based in Spokane, Washington, reiterated that pilots who train regularly and keep their skills current are statistically less likely to have an accident than those who don't. Further, Cirrus pilots who have attended events like the CPPP have a better safety record statistically when compared to the total Cirrus pilot population as a whole. That is one reason that COPA University exists. It is the overall entity within the type club that has promoted the safety and education of pilots through training videos, articles and CPPP events globally.

“A lot of people,” Lewis notes, “own an airplane and fly from home to a second home or a work site, and that is all they do. They get into certain habits, which ultimately may be bad. For example, they may get used to takeoffs and landings on really long runways, but they don't execute it well when they have to land on a shorter runway. Or, they are not used to talking to air traffic control, and

when they have to do that, they aren't good at it. Pilots must keep their training level as high as they had just finished a rating and attend events annually or every other year to revisit skills they are not using.”

Another reason for recurrent training is the aviation insurance that pilots carry. Insurance companies want their customers to fly safely and recognize that proficiency in aviation can lower costs. Depending on the terms of the policy, annual training may be required.

The late Richard McSpadden, the senior vice president of the AOPA Air Safety Institute and a former lead pilot for the Air Force Thunderbirds, believed there were five principles of safety:

- Take knowledgeable people
- Train them well
- Keep them proficient
- Put them in reliable, modern equipment
- Surround them with a culture that supports good decision-making

What can we, as partners, do to assist our pilot to consider training as a life-long skill that increases safety? First, ask yourself a hypothetical question. Would you seek treatment for a serious illness from a physician whose medical skills were last updated at medical school 40 years ago? Then, further, ponder the obvious: would you want to fly with a pilot whose emergency management skills were rusty or non-existent? Would that pilot know what to do in bad weather, at unfamiliar airports, attempting night landings, or navigating through unusual crosswinds if they haven't flown much or have brushed off additional training?


The next thing that partners should do is understand that piloting a Cirrus takes skill and proficiency regardless of how long a pilot has flown. It is essential to realize that learning is not finite; it is a continuous, never-ending process that helps pilots prepare for the stressful situations that can occur in flight. Your life can depend upon it.

Good communication is a must. It is important to voice concerns or ask questions before a flight. Is the weather clear enough to get to the destination safely? If not, say so. Use your intuition to further the cause for safety. Ask about the airplane itself. Has it undergone the necessary inspections to make it

reliable? Ask about takeoff briefings and what they should include. Does the pilot complete all the checklists, and what do those lists entail? How will I know when CAPS is available at 600 feet when flying? Will your pilot verbally announce that to you?

Even if aviation is not your thing, consider attending a CPPP event with your pilot. Simulator experiences and classes are often offered at these events so partners can ask questions about subjects the pilot may not initially recognize as significant.

Cernak offered yet another suggestion. "Give a quick call to the local flight school and buy one or more lessons as a gift to your pilot. This removes the burden and gets them to understand that having an extra set of eyes that keeps them sharp is important to you as a partner."

"Pilots can't suck at this hobby," Lewis strongly emphasizes. "That is what it comes down to. It might not be a pilot's day job, but they have to treat the people flying in their airplane like those paying to fly on a commercial flight. They might suck at golf or suck at bowling, but pilots can't suck at flying an airplane. That's where partners can help by advocating for education and safety." 

*Taken from Safety Education Foundation Letter, Jerrold Seckler, President, Oct. 2023 COPA Pilot

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« **Spending simulator time** with a CSIP is a good way to practice emergency skills in high-risk situations, for instance an engine fail.