

President's Message - "Accidents: Are we facilitating them?"



I hope the title of this message got your attention. And no, I am not saying the helicopter industry intentionally causes accidents. But are we acting on all the information we possess to prevent accidents?

If you have been in the aviation business for any amount of time, you have either heard or said one of the three following statements:

“If there was going to be an accident, I always knew it would be him/her/them.”

“He/She/They was/were an accident waiting to happen.”

“I knew if he/she/they kept on doing that, it would result in an accident.”

It often seems that we recognize — but fail to act — on safety hazards. Accident reports released by the National Transportation Safety Board bear this out when they identify preexisting industry knowledge of unsafe actions and policies that were causal factors to an accident. Sometimes the report even includes evidence that an operator was widely known to be noncompliant with regulations or that a pilot had the reputation of flying in an unsafe manner, sporting nicknames like “Wild Man” or “Death Pilot.”

The saddest part is that we usually talk about how we “knew” that person would cause an accident some day when it is too late — after the accident — when lives have been lost and the damage done.

If we in the helicopter industry are so smart — if we know about hazards and have an uncanny ability to predict accidents — then why don’t we do something about it? What are our reasons for not breaking the chain of events leading to an accident?

Let’s get out in front of this and take a more aggressive approach to safety industry wide. We need to do more to improve our safety record, both as a group and, more importantly, as individuals, one on one with each other.

“But what can I do?” you ask. I have two suggestions:

1. Become more sensitive to indicators that cause you concern
2. Then act on them.

Nobody said it is easy to influence the decision making and risk assessment of third parties. But unless we all try to improve our industry’s safety record, I guarantee that nothing will change.

A safety initiative could be an industry-wide effort, with larger operators mentoring smaller operators in safety procedures. Or it could be as simple as a pilot or mechanic talking to a peer when he or she observes something of concern.

Some of you might ask, “Why should I get involved? My safety record is impeccable, and I have a vibrant safety culture in place. Go focus on the other guy, the one who is causing all the problems.”

Well, the most important reason to personally intervene in an unsafe situation is that you might save a life. But the bottom line is that one person’s accident is the industry’s accident. We are all held accountable for each accident, no matter who actually caused it.

Each of us must take the initiative to start that safety conversation with the other pilot, mechanic, or operator. Ask the question that will lead to a beneficial change in his or her thinking. Offer safer alternatives. Make others aware of safety efforts such as the FAA Wings program or HAI’s Accreditation Program. Get them involved in those efforts.

Statistics show that the helicopter industry segments that have the highest accident rates are training and personal flying. These aviators often fly in a less structured environment and don’t benefit from the backup and review that most operators have in place. This makes your one-on-one conversation with them about safety even more important.

At HAI, we have taken initial steps to coordinate with some of the larger operators and leaders in the personal flying and training segments to develop outreach and mentoring programs. One element is a training initiative to teach individuals and companies how to mentor others in our industry toward safe practices in a one-on-one environment.

When I give presentations or chair workshops on safety, I am always happy to see those in attendance. Just by coming, they are showing their interest in working toward a safer industry. However, the people we really need to speak to are usually not in the room. Accordingly, I view the people who attend safety workshops or programs as disciples who need to communicate the safety message to those who didn’t come. Who better to spread that safety message than those who work in the field each day, observing those activities that concern us all and can result in an accident.

As you go through your day, keep your eyes and ears tuned to events around you. If you observe something that concerns you, walk across the ramp or room and introduce yourself to that person. Start a conversation. You might save some lives.

What are your thoughts? Let me know via e-mail: tailrotor@aol.com.

As always, have a safe flight and fly neighborly.

Best regards,
MATT