



President's Message

by Matt



Land the Damn Helicopter!

So, how is your day going? Mine was not that great. I spent it reading National Transportation Safety Board helicopter accident reports. I don't know about you, but my level of frustration is at an all-time high.

There were no surprises. No one has yet invented a new way to crash helicopters. The reports noted the usual suspects — fuel exhaustion, continued flight in marginal weather resulting in inadvertent IMC and, in the minority, mechanical failures. To round it out, there was a pilot under the influence of both prescription and over-the-counter medications with no reporting to the FAA.

In many accidents, there is prior knowledge that all is not well. With fuel exhaustion, most pilots are aware of low fuel and the uncertainty of reaching fuel. In weather-related incidents, pilots know they are in less-than-desirable weather conditions, with difficulty maintaining visual flight rules. Accidents caused by mechanical failures involve alerts by warning systems and abnormal noises or vibrations. In a medical incapacitation or under-the-influence case, the pilot is usually aware of his substandard performance and diminished abilities.

With the above in mind and assuming an acceptable landing site is available, why don't pilots exercise one of the most unique and valuable capabilities of vertical flight — namely, land the damn helicopter! In a high percentage of crashes, this simple act would break the chain of events and prevent the accident.

I once spoke to a pilot who had survived an accident and asked why he hadn't used his option to make a precautionary landing. He indicated he had not given it direct consideration and had focused instead on destination and mission completion. He admitted, though, that in the past he had worried about the scrutiny he would incur for making a precautionary landing. This didn't surprise me. In my early days of flying, I, too, pondered the same issues at times, although luckily I don't any more.

Pilots normally associate precautionary landings with the police showing up, their company incurring logistical and legal costs, upset passengers refusing to fly with them again, the FAA wanting an explanation, the press asking questions, and peers expressing opinions on their abilities.

Yes, these are all possibilities, but think about the reality of the available options. Option one: focus on the situation and its safety concerns, make the precautionary landing, prevent the accident, and have confidence that once you explain your decision, all those you were concerned about will support your actions. Option two: don't make the precautionary landing and instead kill everyone on the aircraft and maybe some on the ground. Call me crazy, but this seems like a no-brainer.

Obviously, your primary goal should be to not get into this situation in the first place. However, the last time I checked, none of us are perfect. Accordingly, when such landings occur, the industry and authorities should recognize the event as being part of a healthy, positive safety culture. Bottom line: when appropriate, "land and live."

On a totally different topic, I have to share with you the best experience I have ever had in a helicopter. I recently participated in an aviation association CEO town hall in Tarkio, Missouri, sponsored by Congressman Sam Graves, chair of the congressional General Aviation Caucus and a true friend to general aviation. HAI member Chuck Aaron, pilot of the Red Bull aerobatic helicopter, was part of the associated air show.

Chuck was kind enough to invite me to fly with him for an aerobatic demonstration flight. Truth be told, I was buckled into the helicopter before Chuck even started walking toward it. Although I had flown aerobatics in fixed wing, like most helicopter pilots I had been told by all, "Don't even consider such maneuvers in a helicopter unless you have a death wish." Please note that I wouldn't ride on such a flight with anyone but Chuck, who is the only certificated aerobatic helicopter pilot in the U.S.

My ride with Chuck was an amazing experience to be remembered forever. It was a pleasure watching a true safety-oriented, professional pilot in action as we rolled, looped, and split-S our way through the blue skies of Missouri. The only scary part was when Chuck let me fly back to the airport and land — now, that was something to behold!

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

Matt Zuccaro is president of HAI