

A Bad Attitude

By Terry McDowell

When I saw the image to the right I was reminded that many preventable accidents are the result of a bad attitude. I'm not talking about the attitude of the aircraft, but that of the pilot. During my 43 years in aviation, I have been a pilot, instructor, and an examiner. I have seen many different approaches to flying, and flying safety.

I was fortunate to start flying when I was just a kid. My Dad was career Air Force and it seemed like the only adults I was around were all pilots. My history teacher, little league coach, even the Sunday school teacher were pilots. I knew that I was going to be a pilot as soon as possible.

That first opportunity came when I was a junior in high school. We had returned to the United States after a tour in the Philippines. I got a job in a gas station making a whopping \$2.00 an hour. For the first time in my life I had a steady paycheck. It didn't take long to figure out that the ratio between my income and my flying expenses of \$9.00 an hour were sorely out of whack. I didn't have a car, as all my money went to the airplane. That \$9.00 included the instructor by the way.

During my senior year in high school, the Army announced that they were accepting applications for the Aviation Warrant Officer Program. You had to be at least 18 years old and pass through the selection process, but the end result was the "Silver Wings" which I so desperately coveted. I was young, naive, and supremely confident. I signed up three days after my 18th birthday.

The recruiter had promised airplanes, but when I arrived at Fort Wolters, TX, there were acres of helicopters on the ramp. I knew that a mistake had been made by the US Army. I was supposed to fly airplanes. I soon learned that the US Army does not make mistakes. I was going to fly helicopters.

The real mistake had been believing everything the recruiter had told me. Instead of the Embassy Duty in Greece that I had asked for, President Johnson invited me to South East Asia, a friendly little place called Viet Nam. It was a great place for the Army to experiment with the helicopter.

Arriving in country in May of 1966, I was assigned to an Aviation Battalion, Aviation Company and then down to a platoon. One of the first orders of business was an in country check out. This was for real, a no Bull-S*** approach to flying in combat. This was not about flying the school solution normal

approach to a helipad. These folks were serious about keeping me alive. That realization sort of changes your perceptions.

Over the next year, we were all flying as much or more than we could stand. For a young man right out of flight school, it was the best place in the world to solidify skills. I had over 1,000 hours of combat flying in 11 months. We had a system of putting the new guys with the old guys. Sound familiar so far? The middle management (Majors and above) in the US Army Aviation program at that time was a wonderful collection of very experienced people. I flew with people who had been flying in World War II and Korea. My platoon leader (a Major) had been the Aviation Officer for the Berlin Brigade prior to Viet Nam. Some of the senior Warrant Officers (pilots) were former instructor pilots, with some now arriving on a second tour. These guys were great! I looked to them to provide the mentoring, guidance, and leadership that was not yet instilled in the cadre of junior officers (lieutenants and captains) arriving in country.

Some years later, I was flying with a very senior warrant officer, Emmett Hughes. We were working a Brigade level exercise at Ft. Campbell, KY. Emmett and I were flying the CH 54 SkyCrane supporting the Engineers with their bulldozers, road graders, and trucks. As fast as they could get their rigging in place, we would sling load their equipment across the battlefield. A couple of AH-1 Cobra pilots hit us up for a ride in the SkyCrane. We were glad to oblige. After they got to see the capabilities of the SkyCrane, they offered to take us out in the Cobras. Emmett said “I want to fly with someone who is not going to try and impress me.” That comment struck a chord in me and has stayed with me to this day.

When I cycled through my flying career, both military and civilian, that system seemed to work regardless of the situation. I had the benefit of knowledge and wisdom of those who had gone before.

As most of the inventive ways to damage aircraft or get someone hurt have already been tried, let us learn from those mistakes of the past. We want to make all the non-fatal mistakes while we call it training. There doesn't seem to be any valid reason to get someone hurt while we call it training.

Over the years, I have seen far too many pilots get cocky about their abilities. We are all guilty of it at times, or we probably would not be pilots in the first place. What we should strive for is to use superior judgment so that we don't have to use superior skills. →