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Chairman's message

EASA's challenging target?

Early in September, as a result of attending a meeting of the General Aviation Safety Council (GASCo) at the Air Accident Investigation Board (AAIB) at Farnborough on behalf of AOPA, I was fortunate enough, if that is how one can describe such a sombre occasion, to be able to visit the hangars where the wrecked remains of aircraft that have suffered a serious accident are gathered. This, for me, is pretty much an annual event, and a more thought-provoking and salutary experience can hardly be found for anyone engaged in general aviation. Just the previous week, participants at a GASCo Safety Seminar at the same venue were treated to the same visit.

Most of the wreckage on view involved fatalities, including the most recent, and it is hard to avoid the phrase "There, but for the grace of God, go I" entering one's head as you move from one pile of evidence to the next. Of course, all of us go to some considerable extent to avoid getting into such a situation in the first place, by careful pre-flight planning, staying current on type, honing one's navigational skills, maintaining a good look-out, checking the weather and so on, but nevertheless, there remains the feeling that the chain of several contributing factors and sometimes apparently random circumstances may gather together fatefully, despite the best precautions.

This, however, ignores the critical ability of the pilot to impose a basic flight safety discipline upon him or herself and operate within the externally established safety framework. The accidents represented by the evidence in the AAIB hangars are thoroughly and diligently analysed by the AAIB, at great expense if necessary, in order to report on the findings. Each accident is quite distinct in character but invariably it is possible to say in each case, if only this had happened or that had happened – that is, if just one link in the chain of preceding events had been broken, then the accident would have been avoided. Thus, it is AOPA's view that a target of zero fatal accidents in UK GA is achievable, and that it is the only truly acceptable target. EASA is the body having overall responsibility for aviation safety in Europe, and it should adopt the same objective, however challenging it may appear.

A parallel may be drawn with the state of the art of aeroelasticity as it was in the aircraft industry in the 50s and early 60s (my era as a new recruit into the industry). This is the engineering discipline that encompasses flutter and divergence; both these phenomena, if not designed out initially, could lead to rapid destruction of an aircraft within a matter of seconds. In those days there were many uncertainties, particularly in the understanding of unsteady aerodynamics in regard to flight flutter, so a variety of different approaches were used to establish the freedom from this phenomenon over the full range of normal operating conditions and somewhat beyond. Nevertheless, despite all the design and experimental work undertaken in this area, serious flutter accidents continued to occur.

Half a century later, knowledge and associated aerodynamic and structural modelling has moved on to such an extent that flutter is almost a forgotten term, it has been virtually eliminated from modern designs. Reverting to air accidents again, the careful analyses performed by the AAIB represent an ever-increasing stock of knowledge of contributing factors; even though these involve the relatively new area of human factors, a subject which deserves major future research effort, it seems altogether possible that a zero fatal accident rate could at some date hence be sustained for a considerable period, such as a year as is currently used.

These reflections naturally lead to what a pilot can do to minimise his or her personal risk factor. The AOPA Wings Scheme is a good place to start. It is aimed at helping pilots become better and safer pilots through a series of structured activities and achievements, and can be regarded as a sort of personal development programme. The scheme resulted through the work of the AOPA Instructor Committee, and particularly committee member Howell Williams. The documentation has recently undergone a facelift to improve its user friendliness, thanks especially to Mark Stock, a member of the AOPA Members Working Group, the activities of which have been recently reported in *General Aviation*. It can be accessed via the AOPA website on www.aopa.co.uk and I would recommend anyone who has not reviewed the scheme for themselves to do so, and seriously consider taking part.

George Done

