A JUDGMENT CALL

PROFICIENT PILOT

BY BARRY SCHIFF

My son, Brian, a first officer for TWA, is part owner of a magnificently restored Aeronca 7AC that is hangared at Creve Coeur Airport on the outskirts of St. Louis. (At least, it was hangared there until the Missouri River got too big for its banks.) He derives a great deal of joy from the fabric-covered taildragger and often calls to chat about his flights of fancy.

"Dad," he began not long ago. "I really had a great flight today. One of the best. The wind was sweeping across the grass runway and offered a perfect opportunity for me to practice crosswind takeoffs and landings.

"It was a little rough taxiing out, though. The wind kept shoving the Champ in one direction while I struggled to go in another. Just as I was about to add power for takeoff, a strong gust side-swiped the Airknocker' and began to lift a wing. When things settled down, I turned to my passenger, shook my head, and taxied slowly back to the barn."

"I don't get it," I said. "What did I miss? I thought you told me that you had a great flight."

"I did, Dad. It was great. It was great because it left me feeling so good about not going. It could have been a bad flight, a really bad flight."

Had I taught him that kind of wisdom? Probably not, I concluded. Either a pilot is blessed with good judgment, or he is not. In aviation, judgment is the ability to assess a series of variables, weigh them against possible risk, and determine the safest and most practical course of action. It is the stuff of which good pilots are made.

Famed aviation author Ernest K. Gann once told me that he regarded sound judgment as the ability of a pilot to maintain options. This, he claimed, is because a given situation becomes more critical as the number of options declines. "Accidents most often occur," he said, "when options dwindle and a pilot is left without choice."

According to regulation, the "exercise of sound judgment" also is the stuff that pilots are supposed to demonstrate when taking an FAA flight test. This seems logical. After all, those incapable of exercising sound judgment should not be allowed to fly as pilot in command.

Unfortunately, determining a pilot's ability to exercise judgment is easier said than done. A pilot under observation is on his best behavior. He knows that questions involving judgment during a flight test are largely theoretical, and he responds to them with conservatism and relative ease. He takes no chance with an answer that might jeopardize his passing a flight test.

This makes it almost impossible for an examiner to appraise the applicant's ability to exercise judgment. He has no way of knowing how a newly rated pilot will behave when beyond scrutiny and confronted with real-world imperatives.

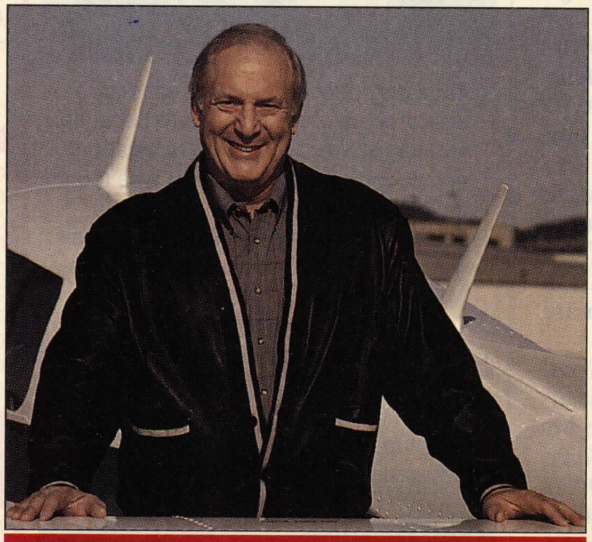
It is noteworthy that pilots often are more concerned about not doing something wrong during a flight test than they are about doing something dangerous during a normal flight.

Anyone who doubts this should consider that pilots taking flight tests never overload the aircraft; they never scud run; they never run low or out of fuel; and they never buzz their friends' houses. Some will, however, commit these same potentially lethal acts during the course of a normal flight. They do it because they think they can get away with it. But the annual report of accidents published by the National Transportation Safety Board clearly proves that many do not get away with these lapses of judgment.

One of the best pilots I know is not a particularly skillful pilot. This may seem paradoxical but is not. Although not unusually adroit with "stick and rudder," she is acutely aware of her limitations and stringently abides by them. As a result, she is one of the safest and, therefore, one of the best pilots I know. I would rather trust my family to her care than to a more skillful pilot who lacks her judgment.

A technique that almost assures the exercise of sound judgment and enhances safety is for a pilot to operate a flight as if there were an FAA inspector in the right seat watching every move, grading every decision. This attitude alone would probably prevent most accidents.

A fellow TWA pilot, Robert Pastore, claims that it is almost impossible to operate a flight exactly by the book. He challenges those who disagree to prove him wrong. It rarely takes them long to learn that Pastore is correct. They also discover—thanks to Pastore's incredible knowledge of the FARs—that it is almost impossible to conduct a flight without violating at least one regulation or another.



General aviation pilots who believe that they can conduct a flawless operation should hire an instructor to point out all errors. It can be a humbling, educational experience.

Finally, perhaps we can all benefit from the philosophy that my son taught me: Some of the best flights are those that never get off the ground. □