

Unusual Attitudes



BY MARTHA LUNKEN

A Tale of Two Pilots

ATIS "TANGO" WAS advertising 43 degrees C when we landed Sunday afternoon. Although I'm "mathematically challenged" I think that works out to about 110 degrees F, which might explain the eerie quiet on the Lunken tower frequency. David Zombek had just flown an outstanding private pilot check ride in the 172. He'd worked

running Wright-Patterson Air Force Base recently "vaporized" the base's military aero club — the oldest in the country; Dayton's Phillipsburg Airport is for sale — airplanes, buildings and all — for \$550,000; and today, when I landed at or flew over fields at Moraine, New Lebanon (Dahio), Brookville, Versailles and Mad River, Ohio, they looked like ghost towns.

I just can't accept the idea that it's due to outrageous airplane, insurance and fuel costs. OK, \$150 per hour to rent a Cessna 172 is obscene, but if you're realistic about inflation it's not all that out of whack. When I rented a Cessna 120 in the '60s for \$7 per hour (wet) I was making \$100 a week and paying \$100 a month for an apartment, and life was good — well, as long as there were boyfriends around to buy dinner. But even if the cost of flying has outpaced inflation, it's like any discretionary activity — skiing, mountain climbing, racing sports cars and motorcycles, keeping horses or needlepointing hand-painted canvases — people who want to do it find ways to make it happen. "It's too expensive" has always ranked slightly behind "There's my family to raise" and "I just can't find the time" in cocktail party talk about abandoned flying ventures.

Then, for a time, I thought maybe it had to do with the complexities of airspace and regulations — people's anxiety about compliance and the consequences of violating the FARs. And, of course, there's the challenge of mastering the array of glass cockpits, autopilots, GPS boxes and a never-ending stream of sophisticated electronic devices. But, heck no, that's not it; my 12-year-old grandniece is an ace on Flight Simulator and gives me tips on navigating my iPad. Sure, the "rules of the road" are complex, but learnable; you can fly from one end of this country to the other without talking to a soul or you can talk to a controller all the way. And amazingly affordable and portable navigation aids and weather displays make flying infinitely safer and simpler than ever before.

Recently I talked about this to longtime AOPA President Phil Boyer (yeah, I'm dropping names), and he alluded to a generation of young people who are simply not all that



>>> Goodbye to the flying club, the camaraderie, the fun, the fly-in breakfast runs and the search for an airplane to buy alone or with a partner.

long and hard to earn the certificate and was appropriately proud and excited; it sure called for a celebration, but the flight school — hell, the whole airport — was as deserted as it had been four hours earlier when we'd met.

The noticeable general aviation "malaise" in my part of the world puzzles and worries me: Blue Ash Airport is shutting down; some lady general

The only chatter over 123.0 on this warm, sunny July afternoon was from the ^\$(&#;@^*% parachute droppers at Middletown and a few traffic pattern calls.

Why? What's behind this downturn in student starts, number of certificates issued and airplanes sold and the increase in airports falling prey to bulldozers?

interested in flying airplanes because they can get the same thrills with computer games and virtual “experiences.” At first that sounded crazy, but when I chewed on it (a lot) it started to make sense. The more I thought about it — the impact of sophisticated apps and 24-hour “linked-in” technology on our culture and our values — it made more sense, and then, my friends, it began to scare the hell out of me.

See, I think flying airplanes is, at its core, about freedom and developing self-reliance, about making informed decisions and taking responsibility for yourself and your actions, about independence and energy and hard work. And I’m not sure those “virtues” are popular, important or even acceptable

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these days. I worry that we’re abdicating core American values and becoming a dependent people for whom risk-taking is unacceptable. We’re teaching a generation that it’s not our responsibility but rather the role of government to protect us from injury even if we don’t use reasonable caution and common sense. Like sheep we accept mandated seat belts, car seats, air bags, texting, smoking, baby crib design and bicycle helmets. We criminalize parents who own homes where teens party too hard, fast-food restaurants that serve trans-fat fried potatoes and too-hot coffee, schoolyard bullies and people who own too many dogs or who, however briefly, leave a kid at home or in a car to run into the grocery store. Yeah, I know all these laws and regulations can save lives, but where does it end?

What scares me is the thought that the downsize in general aviation is a byproduct of what’s happening to America, to a people whose hallmarks were once fierce independence,

the quest for innovation and a willingness to take risks to do great things. It seems we’re relegating those tasks and values to a military we send off to fight in remote corners of the world while we invite government to take over more and more control of our lives — to “protect us” from ourselves, each other and Mother Nature.

Flying certainly isn’t as risky as being a Marine in Afghanistan, but as American Airlines’ former president C.R. Smith famously said, “Aviation is not unsafe, but like the sea, it is terribly unforgiving of any carelessness or neglect.” Learning and becoming a pilot demands discipline, hard work and some risk-taking. That’s just the way it is and always will be, politically

correct or not. Academics and bureaucrats who think pilots can be trained from the get-go in the safety of a simulator and that flying itself is best left to computers need to re-evaluate those ideas, especially after accidents — air carrier and general aviation — in “fly-by-wire” airplanes with “magenta line wonders” at the controls.

Maybe another reason lies in the social aspect. I think about how different things are today at “my” airport, with every hangar and ramp behind an eight-foot fence, electronic gates, “Citizens on Patrol” cars policing the road, “warning” and “do not ...” signs all over the place and the subtle but real aura of suspicion that greets a new face. Pilots don’t hang out like they used to on Saturday afternoons, and I guess the “geezers” telling tall tales at the local FBO on Sunday mornings have all gone west.

Today, after a student surmounts the hurdles to enroll in a flying school, he’s electronically “buzzed in” through a gate in a high fence when he comes

for a lesson (which he scheduled online). He meets, one-on-one, with his instructor in a private area and debriefs there after the flight. He studies for the written online at home (precious few weekly ground school lessons exist anymore) and only occasionally may come across another student to talk to and compare notes with at the airport. Finally, like David Zombek, he completes the requirements and takes the test — and then, what?

Where’s the camaraderie, the fun, the friendships, the good-natured teasing and competition, and the plans for fly-in breakfast runs or overnights to Put-in-Bay or maybe the search for an airplane to buy alone or with a partner? Where are all the flying clubs?

Thank heaven there still are people like David and Clara Ling Jia Ang, a lady with very different experiences and goals in aviation but who is no less passionate or committed. This pretty, diminutive 20-something learned to fly a Diamond in Cleveland and, at 90 hours, came to me for her Private Multiengine in the Duchess (BE-76) at Tim Epperhart’s Flying Emporium in Middletown, Ohio. (It has a longer, more formal name, but it’s a good flying school at Hook Field.) Clara recently graduated from the University of Dayton and is off to work on a graduate degree in aeronautical engineering at the University of Michigan — not too shabby.

I have to confess the oral was, well, perfunctory: pretty much limited to “rite of passage” questions about VMC, drag demonstrations, systems and performance charts. I was mildly intimidated (yes, *moi!*) by the certainty that Clara could make mincemeat out of me in any discussion of aerodynamics. I have no earthly idea why airplanes fly except that it’s magic, and I usually find myself saying that very word every time I come off the ground.

Not only was the oral outstanding but the ride was also a joy. Clara’s already a pretty good pilot and will probably be commanding a Mars mission one of these days. But you know what? I’m certain that when she comes back down to Earth she’ll be right back to flying “little” airplanes just for (as Amelia would say) “the fun of it.” ✈