AIRPORT CULTURE

NOT AN OXYMORON

No, we're not talking about opera (or disease) here...we're using the term to describe the prevailing attitude among the people who hang out where you keep your airplane. Over the years, we've visited hundreds of airports and sat around and shot the bull in many, many hangars. It is usually apparent in the first few minutes just what kind of "culture" prevails. Some airports seemed to be social centers, where there's lots of talk but little flying. Others are testosterone pits, where macho flying and he-man airplanes are valued. Some seem to populated solely by cautious, thoughtful sorts who think carefully about airplanes, flying skills and maintenance. The culture at your airport can be an important safety factor.

The "Sailplane Safety" column in the July 1998 issue of the Soaring Society of America's *Soaring* magazine investigated the topic of "Airport Culture" and its effect on flying habits of pilots. Though this article was directed towards soaring clubs and centers which are more structured than other general aviation groups, I feel that much of its content relates to the flying we do. *Soaring* has graciously agreed to let me quote portions of the article as a foundation for my more specific conclusions.

Over the years, researchers studying the dynamics of group behavior have begun to view organizations as complex living structures. Not unlike an individual, organizations exhibit a basic personality which is, in many cases, a reflection of the attitudes of the group's most dominant members. Furthermore, organizations establish objectives and goals. Typically, these objectives are related to production or producing profit as would be the case in a commercial venture. On the other hand, the goals of an organization may be as simple as providing the facilities needed for members to participate in a specific activity.

The predominant culture within an organization is important because it defines acceptable patterns of behavior for individuals within the group.

It is worth noting, however, that while every organization within the aviation industry is created to achieve some defined objective, safety is seldom the primary goal.

In recent years, however, research into the influence of organizations on individual behavior has begun to illustrate the importance of organizational culture in preventing accidents.

Generally, the beliefs and attitudes that are shared by a majority of the membership define the culture of an organization. This group culture is a strong motivating influence, and one which affects individual behavior and structures a person's attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs. Culture is also the one factor that distinguishes one human group from another.

This prevalent behavior is considered normal for group members. Within a group, normal behavior is enforced by the expression of disapproval of individuals who deviate from accepted practices. The level at which members of an organization express disapproval for deviation from expected behavior is an indication of the importance attached to group norms.

Group influence is relevant in other ways as well. A number of studies relating to the dynamics of group behavior have concluded that a decision made by a group is likely to involve a greater element of risk than a decision made by an individual. A number of possible explanations have been proposed for this modification of individual judgment toward risk. One possibility relates to the diffusion of responsibility within a group. All members of the group share the blame for a decision to act in a particular manner. An individual may rationalize that because everyone else is behaving in a certain manner, the observed behavior is normal and acceptable.

Whether we are beginner pilots or the old hands, we can relate to these ideas...even though we might express them in less flattering terms as "Monkey see: Monkey do." I doubt if there is one among us who cannot recall examples, both positive and negative, of the influence of group behavior on flying safety practices. Within the homebuilt aircraft community, group behavior relates to safe building practices and flight testing practices as well general flying practices. Typically, the higher performance (than small production airplanes) of our aircraft opens more opportunities for extreme flying, and thus more opportunities for choosing good or bad practices.

Regardless of your experience level, you need to be observant of the virtues and vices of group behavior. Individual roles are not always well defined and consistent. For example, outstanding builders within your group may be marginal pilots, and therefore could have an adverse effect on group flying practices. Some persons with a group, through force of personality, may over-represent themselves while others have talents masked by their humility. We must carefully observe and emulate those setting the best example by practicing the highest standards.

Pilots who are approximate equals sometimes challenge each other to advance. This can be an unspoken competition to do the fastest and lowest buzz job with the steepest pull up, or it can be a quest to fly the most precise landing pattern with the smoothest touch down. Which behavior pattern have you observed within your group?

I remember one time about 35 years ago. I was still in the USAF, stationed in northern Michigan. I was flying my recently rebuilt Stits Playboy with its then powerful 125 HP engine. Sault Ste. Marie was a windy place so their airport had a small alternate runway (27). The first several hundred feet of this runway coincided with the parking ramp right by the hangar office. Often, I would take off easily within the length of the ramp and then pull up into a steep climb as I reached the start of the gravel runway. My little Playboy was the most impressive airplane on that small field, so everyone watched when I taxied out to fly. Then one day I saw a solo student pilot demonstrate the same show-off procedure with a Cessna 172. It was not impressive -- actually, it was scary to watch. It wasn't hard to imagine what or who had inspired this stunt. This was one of my early lessons in the responsibilities of being a role model. It also caused me to think—if it was a dangerous procedure for a student in a 172, it was not the safest practice for this semi-hot pilot in his semi-hot homebuilt airplane.

One positive aspect of airport culture which we have come to accept and respect is traffic pattern procedure. For non-controlled airports, where the majority of our sport flying takes place, traffic patterns promote safety through orderliness and predictability—we know where the other planes will be and what their intentions are. From my own unofficial observations, gyroplane and ultra-lite pilots sometimes seem to disregard established traffic patterns. Whether or not their approach and departure practices are inherently less safe is not mine to say. However, I believe that it is just this sort of deviation from the accepted norms of the general aviation culture which has caused them to be, at times, viewed with disapproval.

We must all be aware of the effects of our flying culture and the manner in which we affect this culture and are affected by it.