

DISTRACTION MANAGEMENT

Many federal and state laws have been enacted to combat it. Several public service announcements (PSAs) have been produced to raise awareness about it. Many bumper stickers have been printed referring to it. What are we talking about? Texting while driving? Somewhat. This article is not completely about “Shut up, Hang up, and Drive!” but it does touch on that. I’d like to talk about the broader issue that surrounds texting and driving: Distraction Management.

Here are some examples of distractions and ways to combat them. Effective distraction management can be the difference between a great “war story” at the pub and a tragedy ¼ mile off the end of a runway. And yes, these examples have happened to me.

There we were, EAA AirVenture some years ago, preparing to fly in the afternoon air show. As the warbird area was being cleared, I – err, I mean our intrepid aviator - was preflighting the warbird. A spectator interrupted to ask questions about the airplane. Now our hero would never wish to appear or be rude, so he stops what he is doing and accommodates the spectator. After the individual’s questions were answered, the pilot resumes the preflight inspection. As crank time approaches, our hero climbs in, straps in, confirms external power cart is plugged in, posts the fireguard, and conducts the pre-start checklist down to engine crank. All is well. He is just waiting for the crank time and congratulating himself on his superior time management. As he waits and reaffirms how great he is, he (finally) notices that the pitot tube cover is doing a magnificent job of

covering the pitot tube. Sigh.... Crap! Definitely Sad Face. So what does our aviator do? Well, there are several choices: Ignore it and fly the air show in front of 500,000 of his closest friends with a self-induced clogged pitot tube. Hmmm... Probably not a good idea. Ah! Turn on the pitot heat and burn the cover off! Brilliant!! Sigh... Not a good idea, either. Admit that you screwed up, unstrap, get out and remove the cover like you should have done earlier. Obviously, the third choice is the best choice. But what else did our intrepid aviator miss on the preflight inspection? That question alone can haunt a pilot and become a distraction. The lesson here is that our hero tolerated a distraction that caused him to miss a very important item on the preflight checklist. Could that have been fatal? Possibly. The items are on checklists because they are important.

Here's another example: A highly professional airline crew is at the gate performing the "Before Engine Start" checklist. Done it thousands of times. Somewhere in the middle of the checklist, Ms. Pretty and Pleasant Flight Attendant walks into the cockpit and asks if the pilots would like a beverage before departure.

"Why sure! Thank you! How nice of you to offer!" Checklist is resumed where we thought we left off... We've been flying this thing for years – what could possibly go wrong? Think the engine might like it better if the fuel pumps were turned on? Think the "Low Fuel Pressure" lights might extinguish if the pumps are activated and providing pressure? Probably. Airliners have crashed because crew members were distracted at a critical phase of flight. Flaps and slats not set correctly, landing gear either not retracted or extended, altitude crossing restrictions missed. All of these have occurred,

fortunately not all by me, but they have happened. And they happen to trained professionals.

Another example: cell phone buzzes or chimes with a text message from your buddy, asking for the meeting time at the hangar. Because you're stopped at a traffic light, you elect to answer him quickly. You're not moving. You can handle this. Next thing you know, the light is green, all the traffic except you is moving, and the car behind you is impatiently honking his horn. We've all done it. We know better, but we've still done it.

Not all distractions are obvious. Distractions can be insidious and seemingly benign, but distractions are a reality in life – especially in aviation. Distractions are everywhere! How distractions are mitigated is as much personal technique as it is a discipline. Distraction management could also be called “Division of Attention”. Regardless of what you call it, how distractions are managed is vital to a safe flight.

Some suggestions: Prioritize. That's obvious. We prioritize all the time. Sometimes we prioritize without even realizing it. But prioritization is worthy of a reminder. Is this distraction worth of taking my attention away from my current task? It might be. It might not be. Choose wisely. Checklist discipline. Interruptions are inevitable. Do you “pick up where you left off” or start over? What does company (or your) policy, procedure, or Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) say about that? What role do common sense and “best operating practices” play? Are you protecting the 30 minute window before a flight? If one is available, perhaps a crew member can be assigned to walk the preflight

inspection with you at that air show just to prevent spectators from distracting you.

These are just some things to consider...

Whatever techniques you adopt, the goal is to conduct the safest operation possible – every time. No exceptions. To paraphrase that old aviation safety poster: “Aviation is not inherently dangerous. But it is very intolerant of mistakes or omissions.”

Be safe out there. Keep ‘em flying – safely!