STANDARDIZATION

By Rick Wheldon

I believe that good pilots do everything possible to minimize the risks associated with flight. Let's face it…flying can be dangerous. Good pilots recognize the risk and take steps to minimize the danger. I read a great interview with instructors John and Martha King last year in which they discussed risk management. They stated that pilots all too often are encouraged to ignore the risks associated with flight. When a pilot contends that "the ride to the airport is more dangerous than the flight," he's dismissing the risks. It becomes easy to let one's guard down.. Good pilots recognize the risks involved and take steps to deal with them. One tool to accomplish this is standardization.

We fly a single pilot aircraft. Why should we be concerned about standardization? I have an old airline flight manual that gives a great justification for standardization. THE USE OF STANDARD PROCEDURES AND TERMINOLOGY REDUCES THE BURDEN OF PLANNING AND PROMOTES CONFIDENCE AND PRECISION. To me, that says a lot. It says that most operational issues can and have been addressed on the ground before flight. It says that, if I know the standard procedures cold, I am better prepared to address the changing conditions of a flight.

Standardization in a single pilot operation might be regarded as adherence to AFM procedures, FARs, and to training provider guidelines. Beyond that, standardization can be achieved when a flight department determines its own Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) or when a single pilot operator puts some thought into how he wants to handle a particular situation. An example of a SOP that I use would be the pre-takeoff briefing, which I conduct before every takeoff. My brief includes a review of the clearance, including initial altitudes and headings, etc.; a review of the radio setup, ensuring that they are tuned, identified, and the HSIs are set to the proper radial; and a review of critical emergencies, including engine failure just before and after liftoff. A checklist item "takeoff brief…accomplished" might be added to your taxi checklist as a reminder. Similarly, an SOP might be added for an approach brief, to review radio setup, altitudes and approach courses in some standard systematic order, anticipating a missed approach. Finally, a single pilot can still make standard callouts out loud, including transition altitude, 1000 feet prior to an assigned altitude, 1000 feet above the airport, 200 feet above minimums, etc.

It is well documented that airline crews and corporate flight departments enjoy a lower accident rate than general aviation. It is true that those pilot groups are "professional" pilots, but that is not an adequate explanation for the differences in accident statistics. The true difference, by in large, is that those groups fly in a "professional" manner. Their stick and rudder skills may not necessarily be substantially better, but their habits and thought processes are certainly better than the average general aviation pilot. They are held accountable to certain high standards. Unlike general aviation, those standards are clearly defined, usually in writing, and are universally understood. In general aviation, to achieve the same level of safety, the pilot has to develop his own standardization program, which involves some thought and effort.

Single pilot risk management involves a great deal of self evaluation, since no one is around most of the time to critique the performance. I have yet to fly a perfect flight, although it remains my goal, and I try to mentally review my performance on each flight. With an honest self-evaluation, I develop SOPs to enable me to prevent a recurrence of my mistakes. Once the SOP is ingrained into my habit pattern, I become a better pilot.

Over the years I have seen a number of pilots who thought that the rules and procedures only applied to somebody else. While it is not true that all of those pilots experienced accidents, it is true that, in a huge majority of accidents, the pilot broke or ignored a number of rules and procedures. Developing a set of SOPs is one tool used by professional flight crews which could be adopted by the general aviation community to improve our safety record.