

Complacency

"No problem, I've done this before."

This article is about a much too common and perplexing problem. This is a problem that has been identified as the root of many mishaps and "close calls" over the years. It is a problem that affects not only flyers, but all of us.

Complacency. Merriam-Webster's Dictionary defines it as, "**self-satisfaction accompanied by unawareness of actual dangers or deficiencies.**" Everyone who flies has had, at one time or another, an instructor or fellow pilot, drill the negative effects of complacency into his or her head. We are all subject to its effects. This however, does not deter us from glossing over a complex and dangerous task by using the excuse "No problem, I've done this before"? This "cocky and over-confident" attitude could quickly lead to an incident with possible dire consequences.

Those of us involved in flying, in support of fire suppression activities, go to painstaking depths during mission planning sessions, and crew briefings to ensure that every aspect of our impending mission is reviewed and understood. Then we fly the mission as planned, or as close as we can. Obviously, circumstances arise where we must deviate from the plan and select other options. But in these situations, we revert to our training and press on. Making the best decisions we can, relying on our training and past experiences. Granted, many missions during fire fighting can become routine in themselves, and we all must admit that familiarity and complacency can become a problem. The thought of failing to complete the mission successfully or having a mishap has been perceived to be enough to remedy that problem. Past experience has proven that it is not. Vigilance, concentration, and attention to task are the only proven antidotes.

Mission currency and task training is a completely different matter. An average week for most aerial firefighters is two, sometimes three, days without any mission flights. Sometimes this interval will encompass a week or more. Then a dispatch comes in and the pilots are expected to perform at the highest levels. This is an unrealistic expectation. The need for pilots to maintain "Mission Currency" is another matter but may have some relevance to the complacency problem. A different point of view is that the missions themselves contribute to pilots falling into a routine that breeds complacency. Repetition of tasks creates a condition where the pilot becomes overly familiar with the mechanics and thought processes. The mental and physical workload becomes less difficult and the feeling of easy competency takes over. Some people have identified this phenomenon as being in a state of "unconscious consciousness." How often have we all driven home from work on a familiar route, and when we arrive home have no recollection of the drive? Same physiological experience. We have all heard the saying that "Familiarity breeds contempt." Perhaps this should be changed to "Familiarly breeds complacency."

Most missions during fire suppression activities have an element of redundancy to them. After flying these missions over and over, pilots can get into a "zone" where they are able to deal with the influx of information, and visual stimuli, and perform with little or no trouble. Perhaps this is

where the problem lies. A pilot can become careless, glossing over those items that seem less threatening. The onset of this phenomenon provides no easy identification for the pilot and may only become evident after the fact, when it may be too late.

Our day to day activities also contribute to complacency. Routine and the repetitious recital of mundane tasks and information can become tiresome and fails to attract the attention of the aviators being given the briefing. This often times breeds a care-less attitude. I see this attitude at nearly every base of operation I visit during the fire season. It's inevitable that I glance up during the briefing and notice that one or more pilots are looking elsewhere, completely detached from the information being shared. On more than one occasion, the pilots have been engaged in a separate conversation, usually discussing dinner plans or days off getaways. At this point, the entire crew is to blame, pilots and briefers alike. Each and every one of us reaches a stage where we know the mission so well, backwards and forwards, that we dismiss the information as useless.

This careless attitude is prevalent in every firefighting discipline, not just flying. Obviously, flyers are scrutinized more for their complacency because it often leads to the greatest damage or loss of life. But everyone suffers from it. We all become so desensitized to our daily routine that we can't see the forest for the trees. All too often, we resort to the idea of "blood priority," which, simply stated, is correcting a problem only after someone has died as a result. Or we hold the belief that "it can't happen to me." This is when we must stand back and reevaluate our jobs. It may be an old cliché, but we must treat each day as if it is the most important of our lives. For a flyer, that means planning and briefing a mission as if it is the first day of a major campaign fire; no flight planning task, or checklist item should be left out. Safety, in all its forms, should be a proactive endeavor. And it should be an everyday occurrence. The next time you witness someone making a careless mistake or oversight that could result in injury, speak up. Remind them of the consequences.

Obviously, not every mishap is a result of complacency. Sometimes parts fail. Sometimes systems malfunction. We have very little, or no, control over these occurrences. But if we take the few extra minutes to be thorough and complete in our responsibilities, we can greatly reduce the number of accidents that never should have happened. And it may just be the life of a friend or colleague that you save. Or your own.

**A large portion of the above article, and some of its' content, was derived from an article written by Air Force Captain James R. Moschetti*