Letters to the Editor

The editorial board continues its effort to improve the quality of the journal. In pursuance of this aim a panel of referees has already been set up for reviewing the articles. We also invite our readers to send us letters voicing their opinions, criticism, suggestions i.e., on the quality and content of the articles published as well as issues which need to be addressed or deliberated upon. Effort will be made to incorporate the replies, if received, from the respective authors.

Editor

Controlled Flight into Terrain during VMC is a Reality - A case report
Dear Editor,

Having retired a few years ago, I do not have frequent access to your journal but when I read the article ‘Controlled Flight into Terrain during VMC is a Reality - A case report’ by Wg Cdr Ajoy Krishnamurthy set me thinking. Though the type of aircraft has not been specified in the article, (it is not very relevant) I would like to highlight some points for consideration.

There are quite a few pilots who switch off their radio altimeter especially when they are doing ultra low level flying as it tends distract pilots attention. The radio altimeter is also switched off when it tends to hunt and the audio warning comes on in a random manner though the aircraft is well above the danger height selected by the pilot. It is rarely that an aircraft is taken off line if the radio altimeter hunts in flight. In this case, it is not known whether the radio altimeter was switched off or was fully functional. May be we should reconsider our attitude towards radio altimeter.

There are a lot of individuals who can only focus on one thing at a time and have no ‘residual intelligence’ to pay attention to other aspects. For example, if there is an emergency this pilot’s total attention is taken by that emergency without realizing that aircraft has still to be flown. Such pilots are bound to come to grief when confronted with a complex situation. It is therefore essential that pilots showing low level of ‘residual intelligence’ be weeded out at the earliest to less demanding assignments. I do believe the quantum of ‘residual intelligence’ cannot be increased with experience.

The normal procedure in the IAF, when a pilot returns after leave or long break, is to give one dual check and a few handling sorties and then presume he is proficient to undertake any mission. The USAF does not follow this procedure. Their approach is somewhat different. A pilot is not considered fit to undertake all sorties till he has followed a certain syllabus. For example, when pilots who were based in Saudi Arabia and were flying to enforce ‘No Fly Zone’ in Iraq prior to the Gulf War II, they had to do refresher training. This involved about 25 hours of supervised flying. In this case, the pilot should have done low flying, low level tactical and some solo range mission before undertaking low level strike involving lay down attacks. Unfortunately, his first two attacks did not go well and he probably devoted all his attention to the weapon delivery without paying attention to his altitude. The ops directorate need to ponder over this aspect.

Air Marshal Bharat Kumar (Retd)

Air Marshal Bharat Kumar retired as AOC in C Southern Air Command IAF. The editorial board thanks him for his comments.

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Dear Editor,

Reference is made to the case report CFIT during VMC published in Summer 2003 edition of IJAM.

The author has made a comprehensive analysis of the accident and left some food for thought prior to concluding his article. Having some experience in investigating aircraft accidents, I would like to offer some inputs into the conduct of such inquiries and its impact on flight safety.
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Could this accident have been prevented? This is one of the objectives of the Court of Inquiry (COI). Accidents are never accidental and they invariably are manifestation of the continuum. When comprehensive analysis into all factors is done, the answer to this contentious issue automatically comes forth. Personal perception may colour analysis of some factors, which the author has rightly brought out as ‘lacunae in the system’.

Lacunae in the system (Organisational Factors) are one of the important factors in accidents causation ‘holes by default’, more so, if this factor has an overbearing impact on the cause of the accident. I agree, taking on the system as individuals can be kept out of the purview. However, as an institution, we need to assert more to see that such factors also are deliberated. Thanks to bodies like CHIRP, NTSP etc, that we get to read about such factors also being the cause of accidents.

When the analysis of triad of ‘what-how-why’ factors are done, it is the ‘why it happened’ that falls short of accountability. Accidents are just a manifestation of the ‘effect of a cause’. The actual cause at times becomes the bone of contention. LSA is also the smoke of the unknown fire. Hazardous attitude, as exhibited by the pilot seem to have been inadequately addressed. Socio-cultural ethos of people helps develop an attitude, which is modifiable and highly cultivable, unlike personality traits. The ‘man’ in the report was described purely from his operational/occupational aspect, which is part of the ingredients that help in aeronautical decision-making. Such factors also decide how one responds to training and instruction. The system does not permit probity into such factors, more so, when it results into a fatal accident. Nevertheless, analysis of such factors is above all the emotive feelings and serves the main objective of the inquiry. At times, members of the COI harbour apprehension of running a risk of disturbing the social equation, if such issues are raked.

To circumvent such possibilities, I would like to offer some suggestions.

The scope and jurisdiction of the COI must be widened and the members must derive some immunity in making such revelations. The Aero Medical Society can help further assert in this direction actively.

Loss of Situational Awareness and breakdown in Airmanship in a fighter single seat cockpit issues have now been included in the gambit of CRM, contrary to earlier belief. It is time that our aircrew must be given some formal training on this aspect to improve on issues of management and social skills.

A copy of the Cat I/fatal COI must be sent to Institute of Aerospace Medicine, Bangalore for detailed and comprehensive evaluation of all possible human factors. A feed back to the member must be sent on the analysis. The trainee at IAM must be exposed to such analysis and ultimately results in augmenting the learning curve. This would then pave way to formulating the HFACS from the Indian perspective and maintaining a data bank on such issues of human error.

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