



BY RICHARD MCSPADDEN
Executive Director
AOPA Air Safety Institute

Nine traits good pilots share

Do you have them?

“WHO’S THE BEST PILOT YOU EVER FLEW WITH?” This question, posed in one of my social media groups, stimulated some fond reminiscing about all of the pilots I’ve respected through the years and what made them so good, and then some probing comparison about what they all had in common. If you take nothing else from this column, do that—take some quiet time, either swirling a scotch or sipping a cup of coffee, and develop a list of the pilots you’ve admired through the years. Then think about what they all had in common.

I’ve had the good fortune to fly for decades in general aviation in training environments and corporate jets, and extensively in the military with fighter jocks and trash haulers. From these experiences, the best pilots I’ve flown with seem to have the following traits:

1. They think for themselves. They have the self-confidence to make their own decisions. This isn’t to say they disregard other people and don’t heed advice—quite the contrary. But they will make their own decision, factoring in their skills and their assessment of the situation. For example, at a gathering for a fly-out, where there may be some questionable risk factors, they’ll listen, engage, and attempt to influence. But in the end, regardless of what the group is doing, they’ll make their own decision.

2. They know a lot about the airplanes they fly. This knowledge helps them make good decisions, and when unusual things happen, they have an extra bit of insight that helps them out of a jam—whether it’s a difficult start, an unusual preflight item, or an emergency in the air. If they’re owners, somehow their airplanes seem to be more reliable, and fellow pilots around an “annual party” will peek over to see what things they’re inspecting and updating.

3. They take calculated risks. Flying requires risk management. Effective risk management enables good aeronautical decision making, a hallmark of good piloting. The best pilots I’ve flown with have surprised me on both ends of the risk spectrum, sometimes with a very conservative decision, and other times with a decision that seemed to involve more risk than I would have accepted. An in-depth conversation with them usually revealed a deeper level of analysis than I had undertaken, and I usually walked away with a few more nuggets to put in my risk-assessment tool chest.

4. They don’t mind you questioning a decision. Of course, this can be influenced by how you question their decision. If you approach them in an accusatory

and judgmental way, you may not find them receptive. However, if your intent is to understand the analysis and all that they were thinking about, you’re likely to find an enjoyable and enlightening discussion—and one in which they probe you back for your assessment of the situation, and what you would have done and why.

5. They are hard on themselves. When you fly with them, you’ll hear them acknowledge missteps or errors. In postflight or hangar-talk sessions, they don’t seem to brag a lot; they seem most interested in analyzing their mistakes and seeking knowledge or techniques that might help them. They didn’t become one of the best pilots you know by glossing over their weaknesses.

6. They enjoy being knowledgeable about aviation. It’s been said, “Do what you love and you’ll never work a day in your life.” The best pilots I’ve flown with delighted in quenching their thirst for aviation knowledge. Perhaps it stems from a love of aviation, so it’s not work for them to read up on the latest developments.

7. They’re good stick-and-rudder pilots. They can put the airplane exactly where they want it, especially in difficult circumstances. This kind of skill comes from a mindset of refusing to accept an unwanted deviation, and an approach to flying that has them constantly working to hone their skills. It’s a joy to watch them fly.

8. They routinely access safety information. The best pilots I’ve flown with learn from others, especially the mistakes of others, and they keep up with the latest accident analysis or advisory. Beyond that, they have a point of view on it and they’ll share it, seeking other inputs and analysis. Routinely accessing such information seems to allow them to gain some mental currency. Even if they aren’t actually flying, they’re thinking about it and chair-flying situations and decisions.

9. They’re calm under pressure. Perhaps this is a culmination of all the above, but the best pilots almost seem to have been waiting for the critical moments. They don’t panic; they aren’t shocked. They seem to go into a zone where they just matter-of-factly take care of business.

Are you on your list of best pilots? Are you on anyone else’s list? What is needed for you to master the skills and thought patterns to get there? Go fly, and embark on the rewarding path to becoming one of the best pilots you’ve ever flown with.

AOPA

RICHARD MCSPADDEN became executive director of the AOPA Air Safety Institute in February 2017.

EMAIL richard.mcspadden@aopa.org