



SAVING FLIGHT CAREERS

THROUGH IMPROVED HEALTH AND FITNESS

By James Careless

Health and fitness is one of those topics pilots would prefer not to talk about — specifically if there are problems with their personal health and fitness that could affect their flying status. But not talking about health and fitness poses risks to pilots, the people they fly, and the aircraft they operate. If pilots suffering from serious health/fitness issues manage to stay under the FAA's radar and keep flying, they could experience a physical crisis in the air.

Addressing pilot health and fitness in a positive, career-saving manner is what Delta P is all about. Based in Port St. Lucie, Florida, Delta P helps pilots and their employees deal with aeromedical safety, aerospace physiology, and other human factors that can compromise pilot performance.

"Ninety percent of all aviation accidents are related to human factors and human performance," said Dudley Crosson, a physiologist who founded Delta P in 1988. "Yet whenever pilots go for training, the great majority of their training is focused on system failures. We need to start taking human factors more seriously because they are causing most of the accidents."

A LIST OF PROBLEMS

It is well-known that the global aviation industry is short of pilots. Moreover, this shortage just keeps growing as more rotorcraft and fixed-wing aircraft enter service, and more pilots of Baby Boomer vintage retire.

One reason older pilots retire is the injuries they suffer from years of flying. "I deal with

people who have to quit due to years of neck and back strain caused by wearing helmets and night vision goggles," said Crosson. "Add the years of sitting in cockpits without getting enough exercise, and it adds up. I want pilots who retire to be able to lift up their grandkids, but often this isn't happening."

Another reason pilots quit is because years of constant fatigue catch up with them; compromising not just their health, but their interest in the job. Then there's the stress that a flying career can create, which some pilots and aircrew members attempt to dampen through self-medication. Over time, it all adds up.

Sometimes pilots and aircrew members are forced to retire due to medical conditions that could be effectively treated and reported without destroying their flight

status. Unfortunately, the fear of losing their careers due to medical conditions, and not knowing how to navigate the FAA's bureaucracy safely, keeps some pilots from dealing with health issues until it is too late.

The takeaway is: Some pilots are retiring sooner than preferred due to human factors. Others remain flying at lower performance levels than the job demands. Either way, none of this is necessary. No pro sports team would expect its players to do their best without competent physiological and psychological support, so why should pilots and aircrews be held to an unrealistic higher standard?



SOLID SOLUTIONS

Crosson tackles all of the issues cited above – not just for pilots, but for anyone who works in the air – by serving as their employers’ aeromedical safety officer (AmSO) for a fixed term or an ongoing basis. In this role, Crosson visits aircrews at their bases on an agreed schedule, talking to them about their physiological challenges and looking for ways he can help. Crosson also helps other clients by training their aviation safety officers to do this work on an ongoing basis.

The services provided by Delta P include:

- Dealing with physiological issues developed by flight crews.
- Helping resolve problems caused by using aviation life support equipment (ALSE) and personal protective equipment (PPE), including specialized equipment such as NVGs.
- Helping with human factor issues related to flight operations, including workplace design and equipment ergonomics.
- Accident and mishap investigations.
- Crew Resource Management (CRM).
- Reducing fatigue and other issues related to crew rest procedure.
- Training courses.
- Mitigating hearing loss.
- Reducing work-related neck and back pain.

LISTENING COMES FIRST

Crosson certainly has the credentials to provide all of these services. In addition to running Delta P for 31 years, he is the aeromedical liaison to the medical community for the Airborne Public Safety Association (APSA), and a member of both the Aerospace Medical Association’s Aviation Safety Committee and Aerospace Human Performance Committee. He is also an advisor to the Commission on Accreditation of Medical Transport Systems (CAMTS) Aviation Advisory Board, and a member of the U.S. Helicopter Safety Team (USHST).

This said, Crosson’s approach to helping pilots isn’t built on impressing them with his resume, but rather taking the time to get to know them, listen to them, and build trust.

“I don’t want to visit aircrews for a Chamber of Commerce promotional tour; I want to sit down with them and share a meal when conditions are bad,” said Crosson. “And I want to be there enough so that they learn that they can trust me and tell me their issues in confidence and let me help.”

Sometimes the fix is quite simple. “A pilot can be getting headaches and feeling nervous in flight, only to have me remedy the problem by getting them to sit differently,” Crosson said. Other times it may require changes to the pilot’s lifestyle, diet, and exercise regime – or lack thereof. Add in health and fitness training for his aerospace clients, and Crosson improves their ability to do their jobs safely and live with their careers.

TESTIMONIALS

The best indicator of any business’ performance is the willingness of customers to write testimonials on its behalf. Delta P’s website (delta-p.com) is full of such testimonials. Two of the company’s clients even took the time to personally write *Rotorcraft Pro* to attest to Crosson’s effectiveness in addressing human factors and human performance. They write:

“Dr. Crosson has been our consultant for over three years and his academic/institutional knowledge combined with his individual people skills has allowed him to become a valuable asset to our Aviation Bureau as a whole and to each of our team members at the personal level. His focus is on human performance aspects as it relates to everything in aviation, from SMS to AME questions and issues. His valuable insight into aviation safety has greatly enhanced the overall safety culture of our crew members, both collectively and individually. His consulting service and personal dedication is valued and represents first class service to our organization and the aviation community.”

— Deputy Commander Brian L. Amos, Arizona Department of Public Safety Aviation Bureau.

“In 2000 I had to have a stent placed and was diagnosed with cardiovascular disease. I have been dealing with the FAA Aeromedical Division ever since. It was a long, hard battle for my medical certification; not necessarily because of the requirements, but because there was NO ONE, including the Aeromedical Division, that would explain the steps necessary. No one in the pilot world would discuss it either, mostly because of the fear of the FAA. I even had professional pilots tell me that my first mistake was reporting it.”

— Aircraft Commander Robert L. Crumley of the Seminole County Sheriff’s Office in Florida.

In 2016, Deputy Sheriff Crumley had a new stent installed due to scar tissue that had formed around the old one. This grounded him again, with no one (including the FAA) helping Crumley regain the flight status he was legitimately entitled to have. Then he was introduced to Crosson, and everything changed for the better. “(Crosson) got the answers and helped me through the process,” Crumley wrote. “If not for (him), I am certain that would have been the end of my career.”

This happy outcome is in contrast to the fate of Crumley’s friend, who was also a deputy sheriff/pilot. Worried about his health yet fearful of the FAA Aeromedical Division and what admitting to problems would do to his career, this friend stayed quiet; choosing instead to privately “try to make some changes and start getting in better shape – or at least that was what his wife said at his funeral,” wrote Crumley.



AFTERWORD

In preparing this profile of Delta P and Crosson, *Rotorcraft Pro* magazine did not set out to endorse his services or burnish his reputation. Still, the high quality of both have become apparent as this article was written.

This said, the lesson of this tale for pilots, aircrews, and their employers is that human factors matter in aviation safety and job performance; they can be addressed positively by medical professionals such as Crosson. Whether a company selects Delta P’s services or someone else’s is a matter of choice. But taking action to deal with these human factors is something the aviation industry needs to do now, without exception.



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