Complacency: The Grim Reaper of Aviation

By Rory Rieger (IHST team member)

October 2012 is on track to become the worst month in 31 years for fatal helicopter accidents in the United States. That grisly statistic is downright frightening. As is typical of many general aviation accidents, most of the helicopter crashes that occurred this month involved qualified, experienced aviators flying properly operating machines. In cases such as this, a pilot's complacency is an important consideration.

While helicopter pilots tend to be cautious by nature, they still can become complacent. It's spooky, but the more experienced and skillful a pilot is, the more likely he or she might fall victim to complacency. It often acts like a ghost, lurking in the shadows, usually not identified until after a catastrophe has occurred. Pilots must recognize this false sense of security and attack it head-on. Current training, staying focused, and common sense are useful tools in this struggle. Proper planning and execution will defeat complacency.

Keep in mind, it does not act alone. Among its cohorts are weather, mechanical malfunctions and, of course, the laws of physics. Weather might not always be a problem and proper maintenance can keep mechanical failure at bay, but the force of gravity never takes a holiday. Perhaps that is why it is called gravity, since it is of grave concern. Gravity doesn't care if you are a good pilot with thousands of hours, if your helicopter is new, if you really want to get home, or if your family will miss you after you are gone. Gravity doesn't play favorites. When you mix it with complacency, the result can be a deadly witches' brew.

No pilot wants his next flight to be his last, so this Halloween season (and beyond) bury complacency and leave the gruesome events to haunted houses and trick-or-treaters.

The International Helicopter Safety Team (IHST) promotes safety and fights complacency. The organization was formed in 2005 to lead a government and industry cooperative effort to address factors that were affecting an unacceptable helicopter accident rate. The group's mission is to reduce the international civil helicopter accident rate by 80 percent by 2016.

More information about the IHST, its reports, its safety tools, and presentations from its 2011 safety symposium can be obtained at its web site at www.IHST.org and its Facebook page at http://www.facebook.com/pages/International-Helicopter-Safety-Team-IHST/150529738351608

Rory L. Rieger is an aerospace certification engineer in the FAA Rotorcraft Directorate. He has served as a fixed- and rotary-wing pilot for the U.S. Navy and Navy Reserve for 27 years. His career has included duty in more than 20 combat operations.