

# How To Become a Totally Responsible Pilot

By Thomas White



Every pilot is aware of the importance of maintaining proper attitude while flying. In instrument training we learn to rely upon the instruments to tell us what our attitude is. In life, however, there is another type of attitude that may be as important to flying safely as the position of our aircraft. Let me illustrate.

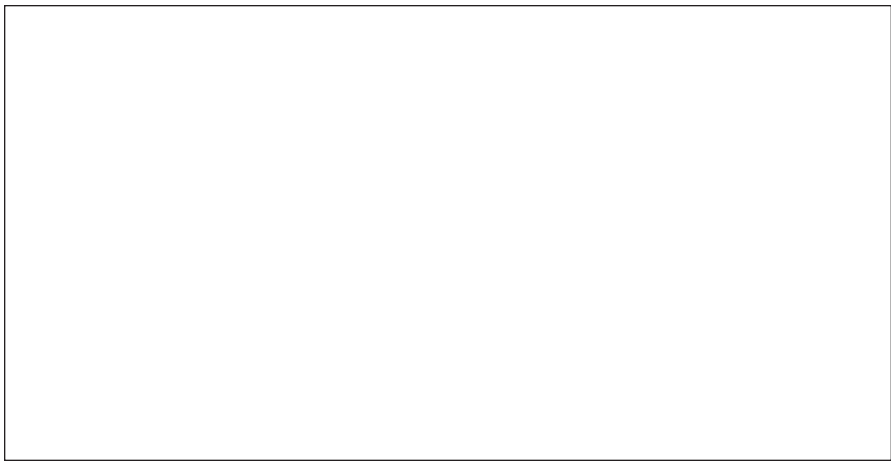
At Oshkosh I volunteered to do departure briefings. My co-briefer and I saw a pilot untying his plane and asked if he had received a briefing. His response, in a rather dismissive tone, was: "I've been coming here twenty years. You'd think that I'd know how to get out of here. Do I really need

this? Is there something new?" My colleague calmly gave him the details for departure and he left without incident.

On another occasion I flew a business trip into a small airport in the mountains of western North Carolina. Strong, variable crosswinds made for an interesting landing. The next afternoon

we were ready to depart. The surface winds were 15 knots, gusting to 25. We consulted pilots in the airport office. One, in his 30s, had flown a Cessna 172 in the mountain passes and valleys for years. The other, older pilot with over 5,000 hours also had extensive experience flying in the mountains. We discussed whether we should depart given the strong winds, the potential for severe turbulence and my unfamiliarity with flying in mountains. The younger Skyhawk pilot regaled us with numerous stories about flying in the winds and under the clouds in the valleys. He said, "If it were me, I'd go." The older pilot said that he would not go. We decided not to go, and spent another night in the mountains. Both passengers – my business partner and wife – were relieved.

So, what was it we noted about the departing Oshkosh pilot, and why did we take the advice of the older pilot in the mountains? Could it have been the attitudes they conveyed?





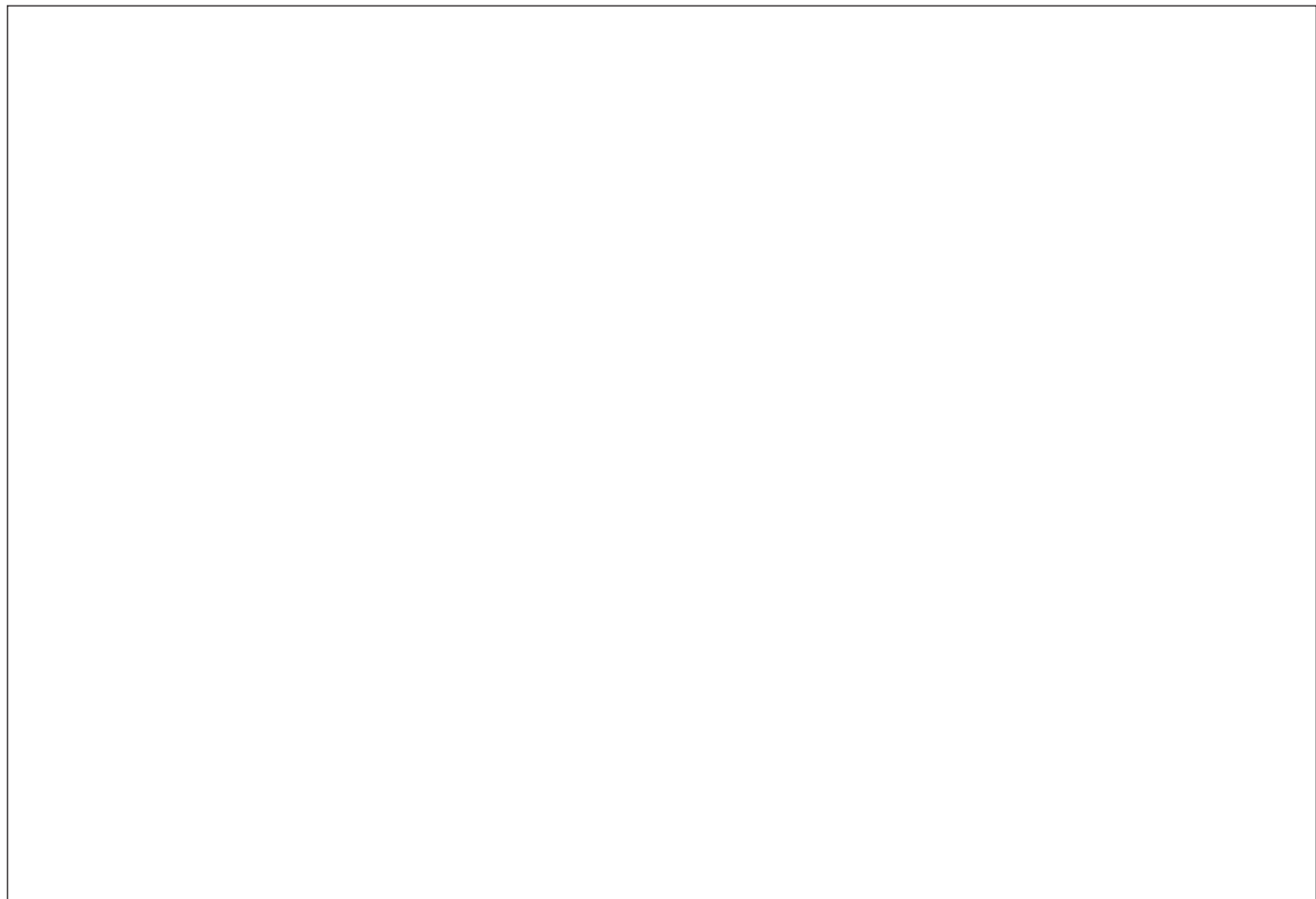
A lot of aviation training focuses on “safe” and “unsafe” *behavior*. Our inquiry, however, has taken us beyond behavior – to the motivation and attitudes that are behind the behaviors. Is there an attitude that supports safe flying, or contributes to unsafe flying? The answer to both is a resounding yes.

It is not unusual to hear pilots say things such as:

- Avoiding accidents is a matter of luck.
- No matter what I do, if I am going to have an accident, I will have an accident.
- We need to take off because the wedding is at 2 PM and my spouse wants to get there early.
- I’m a whiz at crosswind landings.
- Accidents happen, and there’s not a whole lot you can do about them.
- The FAA and ATC cause more accidents by their silly rules than do pilots.

The common thread running through these statements is that the speakers attribute things that happen to them as beyond their control and outside of themselves. They express the victim mentality. Psychologists refer to people who express this attitude as having an *external* locus (place) of control.<sup>1</sup> They are people who see themselves controlled by external circumstances, events, and other people. Their victim attitude is not related just to flying. Typically, they attribute everything negative happening to them as being somebody else’s fault. They can be heard to say more common victim statements like:

- Look what you made me do.
- That’s not fair.
- It’s the system.
- You hurt my feelings.
- I don’t need anyone to tell me what to do.



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Victims are less likely to consult checklists (they already know how to do things), less likely to make careful preparations for flight, and more likely to be enamored with and exaggerate their skills. They are more likely to push the limits of safety. Victims also tend to have less control of their emotions. They often react and fly off the handle.

Lack of control, and even negative tension, can significantly impair good judgment. Responsible people exercise self-control and manage their emotions. Good judgment and good decision-making is thereby enhanced. This is obviously an important safety component. Can we be calm when the door is not shut properly and our inexperienced passenger loses it? Can we keep our cool when the electrical

system goes out in IMC? Many of us have experienced these situations. How did we handle them? What could we have done better?

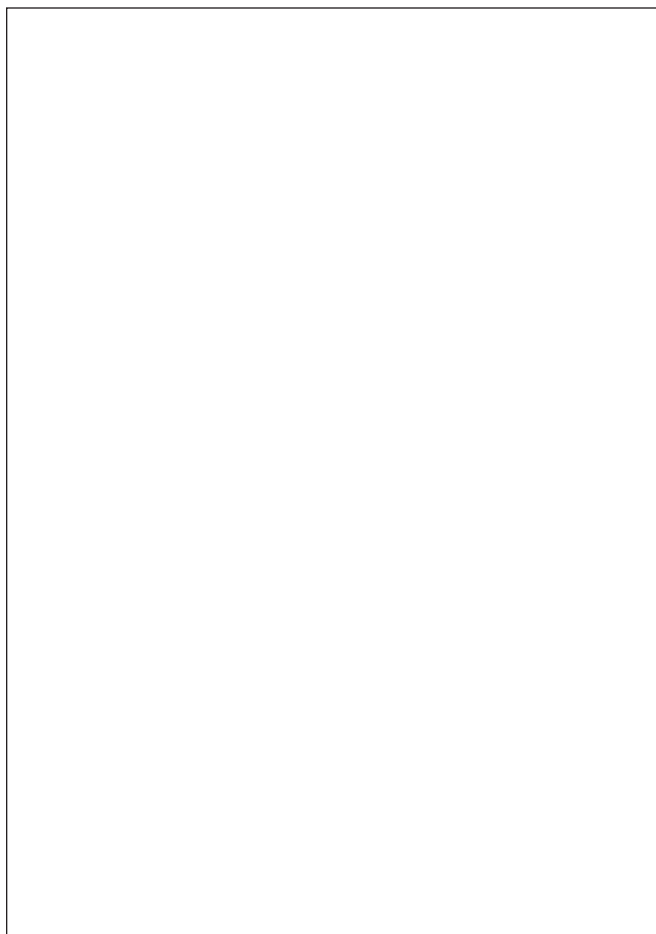
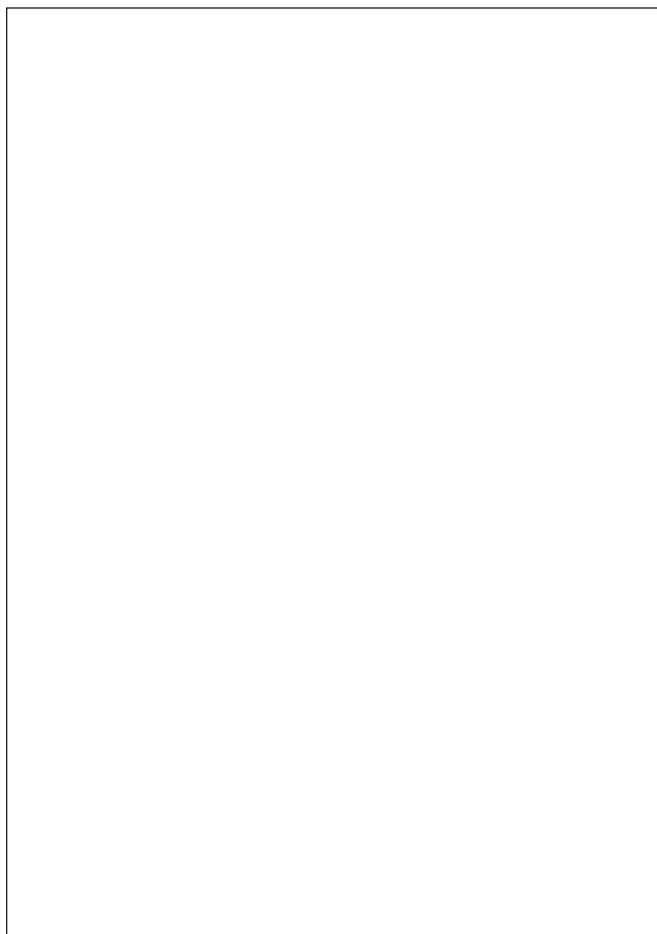
So how can we develop the responsible attitude? First, let's examine the attitude of the Totally Responsible Pilot who says:

- I am in control of my life and I control my own destiny.
- If I get into a difficult situation, it is my own choices that determine the outcome.
- I can avoid accidents.
- I am careful to do a thorough pre-flight before every trip.
- When I make a mistake, I take responsibility for it.

The Totally Responsible Pilot exhibits an *internal* locus of control, seeing whatever happens as being related to his/her own efforts. He or she treats such events as opportunities for learning and growth. Emotions are managed effectively. There is no blame or criticism directed towards others for what happens.

The evidence is clear that persons with the responsible attitude, and an internal locus of control, have fewer accidents and are safer than victims.

The second thing we might do is to assess where in our lives we tend to fall into that "victim mentality." Study it, think about it, and develop self-awareness of our victim tendencies. We all have them. Then make a conscious choice of more responsible



behavior – to thoroughly follow the checklist, double-check the weather, be open to feedback from those who attempt to warn us, and recognize how we are sometimes victimized by our ego, which tends to exaggerate our capabilities. It requires stepping back, taking a deep breath, and being willing to expand our self-awareness. If we do that, our attitudes will change and improve, and we'll become safer pilots. *The responsible attitude results in responsible behavior.*

We have examined attitude and behavior. Now, let's go one step further and examine what's behind attitude. When we carefully plan a flight, do a thorough preflight and think of our passengers' comfort and safety, we are exhibiting a trait of character. It might be *respect* for our passengers. Or, *responsibility* for not putting people or machines in harm's way. Could it be *caring* about our spouse, grandchildren, and other loved ones?

It can be any of these and more. Ultimately, whether we are safe and successful pilots is often dependent upon the same foundation that makes for a successful life – our character.



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**ENDNOTE:**

<sup>1</sup> For more information re safety and "locus of control" go to [www.avhf.com](http://www.avhf.com) maintained by David Hunter, Ph.D., who, prior to his retirement from government service in 2004, was the Principal Scientist for Human Performance at the Office of Aerospace Medicine, Federal Aviation Administration, Washington, D.C.