Mere Fear

By Rod Machado

Fear.

It's a nasty little word that most pilots treat like someone's bad toupee. Don't think about it; don't speak of it and, if it attracts your attention, pretend you don't notice it. We often try to ignore fear and, in the process, we deny what it represents. In fact, a little fear, properly interpreted, is essential to our survival.

Standing near the twin runways at John Wayne (Orange County) airport years ago, I observed several first-solo landings by my student Vic in his Ercoupe. As a recently retired Green Beret, Vic was a mega-tough hombre (the kind of fellow who *liked* departure stalls).

Unbeknown to Vic, a Boeing 737 approaching a close parallel runway commenced a go-around. During its climb, the 737 drifted to the left, its vortices descending on the Ercoupe.

At first, Vic had no idea what hit him. He hadn't noticed the go-around. Otherwise, he would have immediately turned away from the jet's climb path, as I taught him to do.

All Vic knew was that his airplane had rolled beyond the vertical.

Instinctively, he tightened his purchase on the yoke, twisting it to the limit of its travel. Fortunately, Ercoupes faithfully obey their large and very effective ailerons. Rolling upright, Vic landed, taxied back, idled the engine, slid the canopy aft and yelled something like, "I hope you got the name of that guy because when I get my hands on…."

If Ercoupes had jet engines I'm convinced Vic would have chased that 737 down.

No doubt about it, the experience scared Vic (it scared me too!). Yet, it was a pivotal moment that had a positive effect on him.

Apparently these Special Forces guys don't look at fear the same way the rest of us do. To them, fear isn't a strange bedfellow. It's something they've come to accept as part of their training and their mission, not something they seek to avoid. In Vic's case, fear became part of a mental game he played.

He did this by animating the experience, giving human-like qualities to the inanimate object (or event) that scared him. After all, there's an advantage in attributing intelligence to a *perceived* opponent, be it animal, vegetable or mineral. It's a bountiful deception which tricks the mind into reflexively producing defensive strategies.

Which explains why**,** from then on, Vic spoke of jets as the *enemy*.

As we flew the pattern Vic would say, “There’s Charlie. Got my eye on him.” Sure enough, he did. He spied large aircraft the way a highwire walker might observe a frayed line. The metaphor aroused his tactical sense. It gave him greater respect for wake turbulence and its hidden dangers (and, to this day, I suspect he’s still looking for the 737 spatula that flipped him).

Vic’s military experience provided the template which permitted him to find meaning in the things that frightened him. I’ve seen others, with comparable training, respond in similar ways.

In his autobiography, General Chuck Yeager said:

I was always afraid of dying [in an airplane]. Always. It was my fear that made me learn everything I could about my airplane and my emergency equipment, and kept me flying respectful of my machine and always alert in the cockpit.

Pilots like Vic and Yeager leveraged fear to their advantage. For them, it was a productive, although not-too-cozy alliance that fostered personal safety.

On the other hand, many pilots find it difficult to meaningfully interpret those scary events they encounter in airplanes. For some, experiencing fear aloft represents a personal weakness. It symbolizes a deficiency of the fabled “right stuff.” And that, my friend, is just plain goofy.

Believing that you can fly without ever experiencing a little fear is like believing that the purchase of deep fried pork skins will allow you to reassemble the pig at home. It’s not going to happen. If you fly, you will eventually find some way to spook yourself in an airplane. Probability says so. Unanticipated turbulence, gusty crosswinds, lackluster navigation, an inattentive scan or engine burps can all do the dirty deed.

So what? That’s the way life is at times. Granted, one day the meek may inherit the earth. That doesn’t mean, however, that the cockpit is always a relaxing place for meeks.

Like Vic and Yeager, it’s important to interpret your aerial fear properly. Why? Because pleasure flying is an option. Failure to find meaning or value in the events that scare you may lead to a reduction, if not complete elimination of your exposure to airplanes. That means giving up flying. And that is a tragedy.

So what purpose does fear serve?

It keeps you *honest*.

That is why I’m not inclined to trust a pilot who’s never been frightened in an airplane.

If you’ve had a good scare or two, you’re more likely to recognize your limitations; and by default, your capabilities.

Suppose you scare yourself by nearly stalling the airplane during a steep turn from base to final. As disturbing as the experience is, it demonstrates an aerodynamic limit. It also identifies your limits. Now you're *likely* to add another element to the list of things you won't, can't or shouldn't do in an airplane.

Scary events like these often provoke moments of honest self-reflection where you say to yourself, "I won't do that again." No doubt you mean it. The problem is, will you mean it in the morning?

Mother Nature has a way of protecting us from ourselves. She uses time to dilute our vivid recollection of events that once scared us. Were it not for this, we'd probably end up living in a constant state of dread.

Suppose it's been five years since you've eaten at the Sum Good Chow oriental restaurant. At that time, the last thing you remembered was a paramedic yelling, "Clear! Clamp! Hemostat! We're losing him!"

Fortunately, time works to dilute unpleasant memories. Most likely, you lost your recollection of how scared you were and how bad the chow was. Which explains your willingness to return and give the Wanton Wellington another try. This is called *fear extinction.* It's Mother Nature's way of helping reduce the emotional intensity of those disturbing events from your past.

What a shame it is to be frightened in an airplane and lose whatever value the experience offers. Yet this is exactly what fear extinction does.

Suppose you nearly run your airplane out of fuel trying to make an appointment. You're scared. After you land, you say, "I won't do that again." You mean it, at least for a while. For now, your conviction is bolstered by the emotion supporting it. Are you likely to repeat this and similar experiences again? Not if you sustain the emotion on which your "I won't do that again" convictions are based.

So plumb the depths of your emotional memory. Find those experiences that scare you or once scared you. The ones where you attempted to stretch your fuel, flew fatigued or merrily pressed on into bad weather. Recall that lump in your throat and the conviction it forged. Use your mental flip-flop button. Return this conviction to active memory by recalling how emphatic you were when you made it. This is the secret of using fear to your advantage.

Does this mean you must have scary experiences from all areas of aviation (stalls, landings, fuel exhaustion, etc.) to survive in an airplane? Absolutely not.

As Yeager suggests, it was his fear that helped him fly *respectful* of his airplane. Flying respectful implies a generalized effect. It's not unreasonable to assume that a single scary event might compel you to act a little more wary, a little more cautious and

ask a few more questions during any and all your activities. It's even a good bet that you already have an adequate collection of these events which may help further define your capabilities and limitations.

Speaking of the pilots who transport him, a friend of mine once said, "A little yellow makes be mellow." He likes his pilots to be proud and competent, but not fearless. Unlike Clutch Cargo or Jet Jackson who seem immune from fear, the Vics and Yeagers of the world use it to their advantage. Perhaps you'll do the same.

.