



Arm Chair Proficiency

By Gene Benson

Aircraft crashes will never be eliminated. That is unfortunate, but true. Our mission therefore becomes the reduction in the number of those accidents. A good beginning is to address the most easily avoidable accidents. In other words, let's pick the low hanging fruit first.

A rather high percentage, and I would argue that it is the vast majority, of general aviation crashes result from a lack pilot proficiency in some area. So why don't pilots maintain their proficiency at a higher level? After having several decades of working with aviation safety, I believe there are three primary reasons. First, human cognitive biases cause some pilots to believe that they are as proficient as they need to be and no additional work is needed. Second is available time to devote to maintaining proficiency. Third, but not least important, is money.

The first group, the illusory superiority group, is very difficult to reach for any safety recommendations. Though they are a significant part of the problem, they are not part of the low hanging fruit. The second and third groups are largely aware of the importance of maintaining proficiency but have time, money, or both as constraints. So, what if we could propose some ways to enhance pilot proficiency that do not consume large chunks of time and cost little or no money?

Allow me to introduce "Armchair Proficiency." Though the concept is not new, a bit of formalization and a proper name can, hopefully put it into the mainstream. We now have a name, but before we begin the process of formalization, please allow me a bit of reminiscing.

I honestly cannot remember a time when I was not totally infatuated with airplanes and the idea of flying them. Probably around the age of six or maybe 7, I obtained an "airplane cockpit" by sending in a couple of cereal box tops and a quarter to some cereal maker. I set up the flimsy cardboard "cockpit" in my room. In front of it I placed a small chair and I liberated a croquet mallet from a set in the garage. The mallet was positioned on the floor and it became my control stick. I added imaginary rudder pedals and an imaginary throttle and I was ready to fly. I spent hours flying all sorts of maneuvers and going all over the world, virtually of course. Little by little I gained more knowledge of how an airplane was controlled. That information probably came from library books. I tried to practice the way I thought an airplane would be controlled. I think I continued to spend time in my imaginary cockpit well beyond what most people would consider to be age appropriate.

Fast forward to the age of 14 when I took my first official flying lesson in a Piper J3 Cub. I remember that flying the airplane was just as I had imagined it would be. At the end of the lesson, my instructor asked my parents how much flying I had done. He was very surprised to learn that this had been my first lesson. I firmly believe that my imaginary cockpit and my croquet mallet had helped me develop some flying skills.

I do not propose that pilots try to find an antique cardboard cockpit for sale on the internet nor that they sit in a chair with a croquet mallet. Being hauled off to a happy place by nice folks in white coats would be counterproductive. But I do believe in the benefits of mentally flying.

My vision of modern Armchair Flying involves a comfortable chair and plenty of imagination. It also involves having all the airplane's checklists handy. It would not hurt to also have the Pilot's Operating Handbook or Airplane Flight Manual handy. Make sure you can have at least a half hour without interruption and decide on some basic maneuvers to practice. It is fine to talk out loud to yourself. Run the appropriate checklists by moving imaginary switches or levers. Avoid just saying "flaps up." Reach out and move an imaginary flap handle just as you would in the airplane. Do the same with the throttle, prop control, landing gear, fuel selectors, avionics, etc.

Take the time to do a few of these thirty-minute sessions each week. Be sure to practice maneuvers that are not frequently encountered such as a go-around or the engine out for multiengine airplanes. Each time you practice a maneuver, you are resetting it in your memory. Be creative in building scenarios that might be encountered. As questions arise, and they will, take notes. The learning can continue after the armchair session by researching what you discovered you do not know.

I am not proposing this as an alternative to proficiency training in a simulator or an airplane. But, as a supplement, this method can provide substantial benefit to a pilot's proficiency with little impact on time or financial resources.

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