Defeated by the System

The subject for the Kenya Wildlife Service pilots had been risk management for their special environment for over two hours. When I said, “Let’s take a break,” not one of the pilots left his seat. We had struck a nerve. These pilots felt that they had not had the tools they needed for risk management. Now that the subject had been opened up and they had a vocabulary to discuss it, they were full of questions they wanted answered.

Flying well and safely is never easy, but it can be made much easier if you have had proper training for the task at hand. The Kenya Wildlife Service pilots fly low and slow in Super Cubs and Huskys helping to protect and manage Kenya’s number one asset and source of economic hope, their wildlife. A major threat to the wildlife is Somali poachers who walk for hundreds of miles for precious elephant tusks and rhino horns. A successful trip means the poachers don’t have to work for the next ten years. The Kenya Wildlife Service considers the Super Cubs and Huskys to be their technological advantage over the ground-bound poachers. The problem is that far too often the planes are taken out of service by crashes.

It was our team’s job to help do something about that. The team consisted of my wife and fellow instructor, Martha, providing ground instruction and Patty Wagstaff and Rich Sugden providing flight instruction. We were all there as part of a Lindbergh Foundation project in behalf of our environment.

Our students were the pilots who had been selected for flight training from the ranks of some 3,000 wardens. They were the ones who were judged to be motivated and persistent enough to be worthy of the comparatively huge investment. They were unfailingly cooperative, polite, and attentive.

For the most part these pilots don’t have the advantage of the years of familiarity with mechanical equipment that most of us started with. For example, the Chief Pilot of the Kenya Wildlife Service, a wonderful fellow we knew as Anthony, grew up as a nomadic Masai. These are the folks you saw in your youth in National Geographic, standing tall and straight on one leg in front of their prized cattle. Their diet consists of blood and milk. They don’t eat their cattle since that would be the equivalent of killing the goose that laid the golden egg. When their cattle have depleted the grass in the local area, they just pull up stakes and move to a better grazing area. For his manhood initiation Anthony speared a leopard.

Most of the other pilots had similar backgrounds. To a far greater extent than for most of those who learn to fly, the skills and knowledge they needed for flying had to be given to them by the system—and that is where they have been let down. The Kenyan equivalent of the FAA is obstructive and bureaucratic and focuses on petty legalities rather than substance. For example, when you take a written or practical test in the Kenyan system they will just tell you whether you pass or fail. If you fail, they will not tell you what you missed or even what subjects you need to work on. Most people require several attempts to pass either the written test or the practical test.

Yet this system, which is so pedantic about procedure, rules, and regulations, fails to give these pilots the basic tools they need. The Kenya Wildlife Service pilots have only Private Pilot licenses, and at the Private Pilot level Kenyan pilots are not taught such things as ground reference maneuvers. So these pilots who make their living flying out of dirt strips in Super Cubs and Huskys to manage Kenya’s game reserves haven’t even been taught turns around a point, s-turns, and rectangular patterns, much less the concepts of pivotal altitude and pylon eights that U.S. Commercial Pilots learn, which would have been so helpful in their flying.
You could see the result. These pilots were inordinately leery of slow flight. When circling over a herd of elephants was necessary they would stay at cruise speed and build up g-forces as they banked steeply to keep the elephants under the wing. They were taught that if you turned downwind at low altitude you would risk a stall because of the increasing tailwind. Although the strips they flew out of did not have windsocks, they had not been taught to fly a rectangular pattern to judge wind speed and direction.

Although they were flying tailwheel aircraft, they had not been taught the reasons why they are unstable on the ground and why they are so vulnerable to landing with a tailwind.

Were these pilots unskilled? Not at all. They handled their aircraft with precision and skill. What they had been taught they did very well. In fact, I have the sneaky feeling that they did far better than I would have done under the same circumstances. They just did not have the advantage of a system that gave the insight and knowledge that would make their work so much easier—and safer.

For us instructors it was a goldmine. Here was a case where we could, with an easy transfer of knowledge, make a profound difference, and see the results immediately. The knowledge, skills and insight we had all gained from our system, when passed on to the Kenyan pilots, helped them be able to smoothly and safely put the airplane where they needed to and far better manage the risks that they faced every day.

For me it was a huge wake-up call. Even the most motivated pilots with superb skills can be defeated by a dysfunctional system. The relevance and quality of knowledge and training pilots receive does make a difference. And believe it or not, the experience made me more appreciative of the FAA. Compared to the rest of the world, the FAA is focused on maintaining a practical, safe, system that delivers utility.

But the FAA doesn't deserve a perfect score. They have allowed the knowledge tests which every pilot must take to become less and less relevant and out-of-touch with the real world of flying. For example, the Private Pilot Knowledge Test database has numerous questions about ADF and computing relative bearing, and virtually no questions about the practical use of GPS. This means training organizations are forced to prepare students to answer questions about what has become an archaic navigation system, reduced in practice to only historical significance, while the navigation system actually in place is getting short shrift.

Let's hope the FAA focuses its efforts to bring these tests, which drive the curriculum of every training organization in the country, up-to-date and relevant. It would be a shame if the best system in the world were allowed to gradually lose the relevance that enables it to deliver such safe, capable pilots.