Samaritan’s Purse in Alaska

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In early April we were in Soldotna, Alaska on the Kenai peninsula to complete the safety audit of Samaritan’s Purse. The winter season was just about over, the roads were not icy but there was snow piled up along the roads and in the parking lots.

Since retirement Diana and I have had the privilege to volunteer with Mission Safety International to help with aviation safety audits. We have seen many different organizations and many different uses of aviation to support ministry around the world. We have also had the opportunity to work with some really great people that are volunteering their time to assist MSI.

We were privileged to have Dan Gleason and Jim Redder help with this audit. It was both Dan and Jim’s first audit with MSI. Dan was a former Moody Aviation flight instructor and later retired as the Chief Pilot of Dynamic Aviation. Jim Redder worked in both general aviation and air carrier maintenance as a technician and quality assurance auditor. Jim recently retired as the Director of Quality Assurance for Alaska Airlines. Both Dan and Jim were valuable contributors because of their extensive aviation backgrounds.

For Samaritan’s Purse Alaska aviation is not the ministry, but the tool used to do ministry. The two aircraft hangars, warehouse and the aircraft including a King Air, 2 Kodiaks, (wheel and floats) Caravan, Turbine Otter (on floats) and the 2 CASA aircraft all are uniquely suited for their specific role for their ministry in Alaska. The Samaritan’s Purse staff all have extensive flight and maintenance experience and we observed a strong team bond and belief in their ministry.

While they fly year-round, the majority of their ministry flights are completed between May and early October. In the winter they mark off a runway on a frozen lake that both the Caravan and CASA wheel planes are able to land on. To enhance safety, they just recently developed and had a RNAV (GPS) instrument approach approved for Port Alsworth.

Samaritan’s Purse supports the local churches in the communities of Alaska by supporting work projects for churches. Their aircraft carry the building materials and they coordinate the work crews. However, the major part of their ministry is “Operation Heal Our Patriots” This ministry brings groups of wounded veterans and their spouses to a lodge north near Port Alsworth, Alaska, each week between May and September.

The following paragraphs from the Samaritans Purse website describes the goal and results of their ministry:

“Operation Heal Our Patriots gives wounded veterans and their spouses the opportunity for spiritual refreshment, physical renewal, and marriage enrichment. Couples participate in Biblically-based seminars that help strengthen their relationships with God and others and enjoy the beauty of God’s creation with outdoor activities at our Alaskan wilderness lodge. We continue to support these men and women after their initial stay, keeping their spiritual needs and marriages a priority.

Since 2012, God has been faithful to transform lives and rescue marriages at this wilderness outpost. More than 1,300 couples have come to Samaritan Lodge Alaska, and we praise God that 576 participants have received Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, 704 have been baptized by our chaplains in Lake Clark, and 674 couples have recommitted their marriages to God.”

It was a privilege for each of us to work with the team at Samaritan’s Purse. We were encouraged by their ministry and their dedication to what God has called them to do.
Who doesn’t like a good catch?

The inspiration for a recent MSI team event down South was a BASS convention in Savannah, Georgia. Even though we were right on the Savannah River, the BASS we were fishing for was the Business Aviation Safety Summit sponsored by the Flight Safety Foundation. These gatherings are always informative, but they are also the breeding ground for making and renewing relationships with the aviation safety professionals who attend such events. Relationships such as these often lead to presenters for our safety seminars and auditors for our safety audits. But ultimately, safety summits are where we learn new information and interact in meaningful ways with reps from industry service providers.

So, what were some of our BASS catches? Here are a couple of our big ones:

- Mental health issues in aviation are becoming both more of a problem, and more widely recognized. It was mental health awareness month when we gathered in Savannah in May, so the topic was already on many attendees’ minds. Still, the presentations about current mental health challenges were revealing. For example, prior to COVID, about 9% of the U.S. population was dealing with anxiety, depression or suicidal thoughts. Today, that figure is 30+ percent. Aviation being the macha/macho industry that it is, mental health is too rarely talked about and personal feelings too rarely revealed for fear of embarrassment or FAA enforcement action. Mental health problems stay conveniently hidden under our professional façade until they break out explosively in tragedies such as Germanwings flight 9525 or FedEx flight 705. It’s beyond time to spend resources on managing the mental health of our people as intentionally as we do on managing the well-being of our aircraft.

- Failure to perform a go-around following an unstabilized approach continues to be a significant problem. That “revelation” is nothing new; it has been a frustration for many safety and training departments for years, despite consistent training to the contrary. According to a 2017 Flight Safety Foundation study that covered a 16-year period, pilots executed go-arounds only 3% of the time when an approach exceeded stable approach criteria. The study concluded that pilots do not view stable approach criteria as credible and adopt an “I can fix this” philosophy (see https://flightsafety.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Go-around-study_final.pdf). So, if a well-trained and well-intentioned pilot fails to abort a landing following an unstabilized approach, you figure there has to be more to the issue than simply a training or discipline problem. Often, the “problem” is that pilots are good enough to rescue a poor approach. One or two successful rescues leads to purposely ignoring stabilized approach criteria and the start of “the normalization of deviance”. Other times, pilots are simply unaware that the approach failed to meet established criteria, whether due to a lack of awareness of the standard itself, or (more often) that the aircraft was actually outside approach standards. Perhaps it’s time to rethink how we evaluate and deal with unstabilized approaches.

Precourt, former astronaut and current chairman of the Safety and Education Foundation for the Citation Jetpilots Association presented the results of a study he led among Citation pilots about doing just that. By evaluating and making corrections at several “gates” along the approach path, Precourt’s team found that “rescuing” an approach can be done both reasonably and safely. But doing so also makes a progressively poor approach that much more obvious, so a decision to go around becomes easier to make before the approach gets too low and slow to abort it safely. Makes a lot of sense. A more in-depth look at Precourt’s study can be found at https://aviation-week.com/shownews/nbaa/go-around-decision-making-whats-best-approach.

All in all, seems like mighty good BASS fishing to me.
What a privilege it was to be part of the MSI Safety Audit team that visited SMAT toward the end of April. The team, led by Jim “JD” Dolgner (Bell Helicopters—retired), consisted of Pat Dolgner (Jim’s wife), Al Rice (Textron Aviation—retired), Aaron Varela (California Baptist U.) and Dave Shelly (MMS Aviation). The Lord surely assembled an audit team with a broad range of experience in aviation safety.

Here is a short SMAT overview:

SMAT is located in Ionia, Michigan on the Ionia County Airport. Arriving at the facility we instantly could see we were at a world class training facility. Not only is the facility world class, but the Lord has also assembled a faculty and staff that is second to none, with a broad spectrum of aviation experience built on a foundation of love for the Lord and mission service!

SMAT’s vision is to serve the Lord in missions by providing certified training in flight, aviation maintenance and related technical fields.

SMAT’s mission is to glorify God by providing professional aviation training to a high standard that equips individuals to serve God and others through aviation.

SMAT accomplishes this vision and mission through a 12 month Flight Training program and also a 12 month Maintenance Training program. As a testament to SMAT’s reputation, both programs are filled to capacity. And looking ahead, the 2023 classes are already filled, with students being turned away!

The last MSI Safety Audit took place in 2019. It was obvious that SMAT took the recommendations seriously, taking huge strides to improve safety throughout the organization. For about the last two years, Lyle Reffey, as the Safety Manager, has been building a safety culture that has paid significant dividends. As we conducted interviews, SMAT’s core values of caring relationships, stewardship, excellence and servant leadership came shining through.

Now the best for last . . . the students!! What a joy to see young lives devoted to the Lord and to the hard work necessary to complete their 12 month intensive program. These are truly the future of mission aviation worldwide! The faculty and staff at School of Missionary Aviation Technology are blessed to be used of the Lord to lay that technical and Godly foundation!

For me, one of the blessings of being part of an MSI audit was to see both sides of the audit process. In February we had an MSI audit at Missionary Maintenance Services (MMS) where I serve as the Safety Officer. What a joy to have friends come along side and point out blind spots in our program, areas that needed some attention. Likewise, as we headed to SMAT, it was not with the intent to play “caught ya!!” No, it is with a humble heart that we come along side to share areas of concern as well as areas of commendation. Sharing for the benefit of The Kingdom! Our organizations are not little kingdoms unto themselves, but we all serve the King of kings.
and Lord of lords! As HIS servants, we work together to be good stewards of the resources He has given us to care for.

The other blessing that comes from the MSI audit process is meeting people—people that become lifelong friends. Friends that you can call on when you are still stuck on a problem after you have already scoured the entire MSI website! Within the first four months of 2022, I have been involved in two audits, one as the auditee and the other as the auditor. And because of them, I now have a friend at SMAT, a friend at JAARS, two friends at United Indian Mission (UIM), and two flight instructor friends with tens of thousands of hours between them. I did not know any of them at the beginning of 2022! Now I have resources that are more valuable than a Google search! You know why? Because they are all people who love the Lord and care for His glory in the world, not just their little corner of it. I hope I can be as much of an encouragement to them as they have been to me!

Would you like some friends as I have? Get involved with an MSI audit on either side. I guarantee that you will come out ahead, whether you are the auditee or the auditor. Let’s keep working together to do things that make HIM look good!
It’s About Time

Finally! After two years of delay, postponement, alternative arrangements and frustration, an in-person session of the IAMA annual conference finally happened. It was about time—and worth the wait!

Through no fault of its own, the International Association of Missionary Aviation (IAMA) had to postpone the last two editions of their in-person annual gatherings in favor of COVID inspired on-line events. While good as a stop-gap measure, the Zoom meetings left a lot to be desired. As everyone who has ever attended an IAMA conference knows, the “real” reason for showing up is to hang out with fellow aviators who know what it’s like to work in a missionary aviation context. Often referred to as the “missionary aviation family reunion”, IAMA gatherings are where one shares stories, secrets, insights, tips, resources, and knowledge. Sure, the agenda has a full list of member showcases, safety briefings, spiritual lessons, and business topics, but the most animated and spirited conversations take place during breaks and in between sessions. No other event has the ability to bring together so many missionary aviators from so many organizations for a time of sharing, growth, education and encouragement.

U.S. based member organizations typically host the conferences on a rotating schedule. LeTourneau University was on tap for the 2020 postponed event and Moody Aviation for the 2021 gathering, which would have coincided nicely with their 75th anniversary celebration. However, Moody graciously doubled down and committed to hosting this year’s conference. With an extra year to prepare, their welcome and accommodation were exceptional. The meetings were held in the Parkwater Aviation/Moody Aviation venerable former Air National Guard hangar and the banquet in the Historic Flight Foundation hangar right next door.

As a veteran of numerous IAMA conferences, I am here to tell you that the presentations this year were exceptional. Member showcases, where selected organizations provide a peak into their operations and ministry, were among the best ever. The spiritual insights delivered by Moody Bible Institute President Dr. Mark Jobe were all one would expect—and more. And central to absolutely every IAMA conference is an MSI safety briefing. Jon Egeler did the honors this year, giving an overview of recent missionary aviation accidents, incidents and trends. After all, without a safe operation, no organization would have anything to showcase, story to share, or interaction to grow from.

So, if you’ve never been to an IAMA conference:

Next year

May 17-19
Longview Texas
LeTourneau University
Be there!
It’s about time.
We, of course, have no idea what the state of the Ukraine War will be when you get around to reading this. But here we are several months into the conflict and the battle rages on. When Russia launched its mass offensive in the direction of Kyiv on February 24, I fully expected their troops to be in the capital city by the end of the month. There was a 30 mile convoy of Russian soldiers who expected the same thing. Didn’t happen—not by a long shot. How could an army with such an overwhelming advantage in numbers and equipment fail so miserably?

When developing war plans, military strategists speak of the need to get the “tooth to tail ratio” right. In other words, for every front-line soldier doing the actual fighting (the tooth), there have to be many more support personnel in place (the tail) to make it all work. In the case of the bogged down Russian convoy, there weren’t enough mechanics to keep the trucks running, too few tow vehicles to get damaged tanks off the road, and not enough leadership to sort everything out. It was an embarrassing failure for a major world power.

The tooth to tail ratio also holds true in the missionary aviation context where it takes a lot of tails to keep the proverbial tooth supported. To wit:

1) Two of the core needs for missionaries and church workers on the front lines are safe personal transportation, and the reliable delivery of goods and supplies. In many remote or insecure parts of the world, that means an aviation ministry must be present to provide support. When I was serving as a mission pilot in Africa, travel from one side of our church conference in the Congo to the other was measured in days by road, but mere hours in a plane. Our aviation program was the tail that kept the front-line workers serving in ministry.

2) By the nature of the work, aviation ministries are usually located in very remote areas of the world to support life-changing outreach. Too often, that means operating “at the edge of the envelope” in terms of aircraft and human performance. The temptation to go past that edge to get the job done is very real. That’s where MSI comes in, assuring that pilots and mechanics operate to good standards, personnel stay mentally and physically fit for duty, and that a good safety culture is in place. Contrary to what our name might imply, MSI’s goal is NOT to make aviation ministries safe as such. After all, the world’s safest airplanes are the ones which never fly. Our goal is to help make ministries successful—promoting both safety and effectiveness so the job gets done in a safe manner. MSI is the tail which helps keep aviation ministries doing ministry.

The conclusion of the matter? We are all part of the body and we are all needed in order to fulfill the Great Commission and the Great Commandment. If you’re a tooth, Bite Hard. If you’re a tail, Wag Heartily!

MSI
Confidence or Foolishness

Most of us have probably heard the saying “Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.” The point is that there are those who foolishly rush into situations or doing things without considering the risks or consequences. On a recent trip to Germany, I was struck by the difference between drivers on the autobahn—some were driving very cautiously at 80 km/hr on the unlimited sections while others flew by doing 180 km/hr or more. Yes, some of that might be related to the capabilities of the car, but often the slow cars were very capable ones, too. Were the fast drivers foolishly taking chances? Or is there more to it than that?

Confidence is an attribute that is essential in those operating aircraft. Taking a machine into the air while knowing that your life depends on it and your skill is not for the timid. But what is the difference between confidence and over-confidence or foolishness?

It all has to do with what the confidence is based on. A properly trained pilot with recent experience taking a properly certified and maintained aircraft into the skies is not a risky endeavor, and can be done with a lot of well-placed confidence. But throw in a number of variables such as poor maintenance or adverse weather or poor training, and that confidence is not so well-placed. A wise person evaluates all of the variables and makes risk evaluations and assessments and does what he is supposed to do before putting his life on the line. A foolish person blindly proceeds without considering what is at stake, perhaps because he has done it before or seen others do it.

Our world today has many uncertainties and reasons to make us fearful about the future. Rising prices, climate change, deterioration of morality, wars—the news seems to get worse with each passing day. How can we remain confident instead of fearful about it all? It all comes back to what we place our confidence in. God is in control, and He cares about us. If we believe that, and do what He tells us to, we don't have anything to worry about, but can go about our lives with confidence. Honestly, most of the crises that fill the news are way out of our control anyway, so why do we worry so much?

So, let's all relax, do what we are supposed to do, and live our lives with well-placed confidence, knowing that ultimately it is God who helps us

Make Safety a Way of Life!

Jon Egeler
President/CEO

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FOQA/FDM—Using Data for Safety

In November, MSI hosted a Missionary Aviation Flight Operations Quality Assurance (FOQA)/Flight Data Monitoring (FDM) Summit in Waxhaw, NC. The purpose of the meetings was to explore the possibility of developing a cooperative program where we could capture data from aircraft in operation and use that to take safety to the next level. This has been occurring in commercial and military aviation for some time now, and they have seen major improvements in the safety of operations. By developing a cooperative program, we hope to pool our resources and make it affordable for missionary aviation in terms of money and personnel.

The first summit in November was successful, and working groups were formed to work out some of the details and report back their results to the whole group. Since then, we have had two more virtual summits, in February and in May. Progress is steady (it will take some time to do it right), and we are planning to meet for a fourth time on August 23.

If you are not already a part of the meetings and would like more information or are interested in participating in any way, please let us know.