When Pilots and Controllers Clash

TRY TO GET PAST CONFLICT TO ENSURE FLIGHT SAFETY

U sually, I try to write about something to help pilots use our air traffic control services, or to learn about our procedures and equipment.

This time, my thoughts have been wandering toward another aspect of ATC, and of piloting — the particular culture shared by both endeavours. That culture is focused on authority and responsibility.

I remember the first time I was handed the key to an airplane, nearly 30 years ago. Along with that key came a reminder that sounded ominous to me at the time. "As the pilot in command of an airplane, you are ultimately responsible for the safety of the aircraft, the people on board, and the people on the ground,

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if something goes wrong."

From the start of flight training, that sense of responsibility was repeatedly impressed upon me, like the weight of the world on Atlas's shoulders. The pilot in command of an aircraft has the responsibility for the safe conduct of the flight, and the authority to direct those in his or her charge as necessary to accomplish that goal.

A few years later, I was accepted for ATC training. One of the first statements I heard in the classroom sounded eerily familiar: "You're ultimately responsible for everything that happens in your airspace on your watch."

It was déjà vu. The pilot in command has certain responsibilities. But if something goes wrong in my airspace, investigators will look at me and my actions, as well.

ILLUSTRATION KATH BOAKE

When you consider that a controller's responsibilities require performance that is as close to perfect as possible, and also consider that we're all human and make mistakes, tensions can run high if one side feels they're performing and the other isn't.

Pilots and controllers both are often the famed Type-A personality. When both of them are told they are "ultimately responsible" and given authority under regulations to accomplish their tasks, is it a wonder that sometimes pilots and controllers get frustrated with each other?

Of course, some people are more prone to conflict than others. I've seen such conflicts develop from both sides of the radio. I've watched pilot colleagues from the cockpit attempt to give a controller a piece of their mind, and I've heard controller colleagues talk down to pilots.

One thing I've learned is that an argument cannot be won by either party over a radio. Time is wasted, and both the pilot and the controller, regardless of which side claims victory, are now distracted from the primary duties each are required to perform in the name of aviation safety. Such distractions are often huge. They are almost always pointless, at best, and potentially dangerous, at worst.

While it may be difficult to set aside the difference of opinion, I believe both parties should attempt to do so. Whatever transgression may have occurred and whoever may be guilty, moving past the situation is a must. Both parties need to get back on the same page in terms of communication and get back to the tasks at hand.

This is easier said than done, of course. Compartmentalizing can help, if that's something you can do. Accept that you can't change anything about what happened. Put aside the "What ifs" that didn't happen. Realize that there is still an airplane to fly, or still aircraft to direct. Give yourself permission to step out of that moment that has gone by and live in the current one. Acknowledge that you can revisit it in your mind later, instead of trying to do it right now.

Then, once you're out of the situation, you can go back and analyze it. The best folks I've met in aviation have looked for lessons in any bad situation. What can be learned from what happened? Can it be prevented next time? Although some stories can be entertaining in the future, this really is the best purpose for reliving such moments.

Sometimes it's hard for pilots and controllers to see that we really are working for the same purpose: To move aircraft from Point A to Point B, safely. If we can accept that sometimes things don't go the way we want them to go and that sometimes people make mistakes, it may just help us move past the conflict and keep safety the high priority it must be. Acknowledging these realities might help take away a little of the stress faced by both controllers and pilots.