"VANITY VERSUS GRAVITY"

BY

JEROME LEDERER

CHIEF ENGINEER

AERO INSURANCE UNDERWRITERS

About 500 B.C. Polycrates, tyrant of ancient Greece bragged to the great philosopher, Pythagoras, that the Gods held him in very great esteem. His luck was so good, he boasted, that if he were to throw his ring into the Aegean Sea, it would be returned to him the next day. And so saying, Polycrates threw his ring into the water. Pythagoras expressed his doubts on the outcome. But true to the tyrant's boast, the ring was found in the belly of a fish served at his table the next day.

This manifestation of luck and power was too much for wise Pythagoras. After warning the tyrant, he hurriedly left the palace fearing that a man who would so tempt the Gods must surely meet a terrible fate. So it was. Before long Polycrates was crucified. He had tried the patience of the Gods and lost.

Gravity is the God of Aviation. It is omnipresent. It endeavors to destroy those who do not respect it; it never relaxes; it detests carelessness, exhibitionism or any other form of Vanity in the air. Obituary notices are its favorite means of publicity. The great God Gravity is aggressive, alert, quick to punish any lack of reverence.

What constitutes lack of reverence? Gravity answers grimly. Acrobatics at low altitudes, steep climbs or power turns near the ground, contempt for unfavorable weather, blind flight into squalls and fog or disregard for authority. Last year in private flying, several hundred airplanes were severely damaged and at least 150 people were badly hurt or lost their lives as a direct result of carelessness, bravado or exhibitionism. Over-confident pilots tempted their luck. Vanity in the air.

Here follows a case history. This pilot's life expectancy is long overdue. Gravity may be toying with him.

"He has been flying for about three years. He has never had his license revoked or any disciplinary action taken against him by the Government. He is regarded as a risky pilot and we know of daring incidents such as landing on the strand of a beach and in the backyards of friends. He has been known to fly low in cornfields, low enough to take the tops off the corn stalks to scare his friends. He has had one bad crash and on three other occasions he has cracked or broken propellers while landing or taking off. When a good friend of his was killed two years ago, he said he would not take chances again but his most serious accident occurred only four months ago. He was flying with a friend around a haystack seeing how close he could come without hitting it. He missed the haystack all right but struck a tree. He was in a critical condition for several days at the local hospital. Now he is
flying again but continues to loop and bank steeply over the business district."
That report is typical of the over-confident pilot. Heedless of warnings, Vanity
continues to grip his controls. Who can doubt the outcome!

Vanity in Aviation is not confined to rash pilots. Some engineers and
executives could confess many errors in judgment owing to self-complacency or the
desire to outdo a competitor. Such Vanity has been evidenced by indifference
towards uncertain factors in design like the danger of flutter, or by insufficient
attention to details as the improper location of a carburetor drain, creating a fire
hazard. Fatal errors have resulted from over-confidence instilled by past successes
or by obstinate prejudice against new methods of design and analysis. Examples of
this type of Vanity are numerous.

One well-known designer refused to provide adequate balance for the
elevators of his new ship contrary to the opinion of his aerodynamics expert, because
no previous designs of his had suffered from elevator flutter. Another refused to
admit that his mechanics or inspectors were infallible in spite of an expensive forced
landing due to the absence of a bead around an aluminum oil line. In an other instance
a high company official wanted to dazzle a nearby competitor with a new design. His
normally conservative pilot performed incredible stunts close to the factory of the
competitor, at noon, when all could see. Perhaps he had been instructed to show off.
We shall never know because he is dead, the victim of that Vanity.

Truly in the world of Aviation the meek shall inherit the earth because
the earth will inherit the others. But Aviation is fortunate. The preponderance of
engineers, executives and pilots yields to Gravity the respect it always deserves.
Modest and humble, the men who are making Aviation the safe industry it is today show
their reverence for this great God of Aviation by the utmost care and forethought in
everything they plan and do. As a result, our safety record is extraordinarily good;
over three million people flew last year, 99.99% of them safely. Records indicate
that airline flying is already as safe as travel by automobile. Accidents have been
avoided by a ready willingness to recognize the operating limitations of man and
airplane; by humility in the presence of uncertainty.

Humility is the antidote for Vanity. Thousands of distressing accidents
will occur and hundreds of people will be killed because pilots in an over-confident,
cocksure mood, do not pause to reflect that "Pride Goeth Before A Fall".

JL: PAT
2/28/39