

Samurai Airmanship

Bushido - Developing An Aviation Code Of Ethics
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Miyamoto Musashi, one of the greatest samurai swordsmen of feudal Japan, approached his assailant--an enemy of the emperor. Unsheathing his sword, he inched toward his foe, ready for the brief but deadly encounter. Suddenly, the assailant spat in Musashi's face. Composed, yet stunned, Musashi resheathed his sword, calmly turned and walked away. The moment spittle hit his face he felt rage. But the samurai never takes a life in anger. It is against their Bushido.

Bushido means "code of ethics." The Samurai lived by such a code and many people still do. It delineates acceptable and unacceptable behaviors. It emphasizes what is valued most and prevents these values from extinguishing with time. It is a personal code of conduct, allowing individuals to survive, to thrive, to find meaning in their existence. Pilots, without such a Bushido, are unlikely to do any of these.

Over the years I've come across several pilots that stand out in my memory. Each had one thing in common: they conducted themselves by an aviation code of ethics. They knew what was safe to do and what was an unacceptable risk. These were aviators of strong conviction, refusing to breach their self-imposed limits and violate their personal code of conduct. When frequently spat upon by the enemy's of safety--peer pressure, ego, pride--they followed their Bushido. In short, they were the safest of pilots.

Good pilots live by a Bushido. Ask any aviator whose been around long enough and you'll hear similar tales about their code. "I never make IFR takeoffs in zero-zero conditions, it's not safe and I just don't do it, end of story," says one seasoned aviator. Another might say, "I never use my airplane for business trips unless I can afford to miss the meeting. If I can't miss it, I drive or take the airlines." I have even heard one pilot say, "If it doesn't feel right, I don't go! I just listen to my gut." These are all examples of a pilot's code of conduct.

Don't for one minute think these pilots aren't tempted by those dark and evil forces of "get-home-itis" or "impress-the-passenger-itis." All pilots are to some degree. The difference is that pilots, with a defined Bushido, are more likely to resist the temptation of these unsafe impulses. This code of conduct makes it easier for them to make safer decisions. It frees a pilot to just say, "No."

A friend recently took three of his business associates on a short, but very important business trip in a Piper Warrior. Inclement weather moved in making the third and final leg of the trip unsafe for a "VFR-only" pilot. Turning to his passengers, he said, "We don't fly." "What?" said one of his associates, "We lose the deal if we don't fly." "Then we lose the deal," said the pilot, "We knew this might happen and we accepted the risk before the flight. That's my decision and it's final." Despite the frustration of his associates, his Bushido forbade him to fly in such weather. No further justification was necessary. Infidelity to his code was out of the question. Faithfulness to his Bushido was justification enough.

But what about a pilot without a Bushido, a pilot who doesn't feel justified in saying "No"? Have you been in a similar situation? Maybe you flew even when you knew it was unwise. Perhaps you felt pressured by passengers to fly home without refueling. Then, when approaching the destination airport, and finding it was weathered-in, you proceeded to an alternate with little but fumes in your tanks. You made it, but it was close.

When the flight was over, and you were safe, you felt extreme frustration or anger at your decision. Perhaps you said, "I'm never going to do let myself do that again, no matter what the pressure." If you had to make the same decision over again, under similar circumstances, you'd proudly and forcefully say, "No, I won't do that." It took the frustration and anger of this situation to produced a genuine expression of some deep, personal value.

Why can't we feel justified in saying "No" to peer-pressure and get-home-itis before having these frightening experiences? We can, but only if we don't forget the emotion accompanying the events that scared us. Unfortunately, time often extinguishes the intensity of our feelings. Therefore, we find ourselves in similar situations, time and time again, saying, "I'm never going to let myself do that anymore."

Think back to all your "I'm-never-going-to-let-myself-do-that-again" experiences. The more frustrated and angry you were at the time, the better. Building a Bushido starts with these situations; and they don't have to be aviation related. Any situation where you felt unsafe or vulnerable is excellent grist for this mill. Remember, you felt strong enough about saying "No" then, so why not reinforce that experience and make saying "No" easier later on?

A code, based on these experiences, has the power of personal conviction. You'll find great comfort in this Bushido. Musashi may have been angry about being spat upon, but he surely must have been proud of his adherence to the Samurai code.

Don't, for one moment, imagine the majority of others will think less of your for following a rigid code of conduct based on accepted safety practices. Experience doesn't support this assumption. Strangely, even those in our culture (past and present) who hold alternative beliefs are often respected if they adhere to a Bushido. If this weren't true we wouldn't tell our children about a homeless thief and his band of thugs, living in the woods and stealing from the government -- Robin Hood! He's a hero because his code of conduct gives him honor -- steal from the rich and give to the poor (I suppose if he existed in modern times he might steal from sports super stars and give to CFIs).

Start now! Define a code of conduct to fly by. Then be prepared for a wonderful "spin-off" benefit: passengers, even the frightened and nervous ones, will be more willing to fly with you. Why? Because, in their mind, you demonstrate integrity and purposefulness. They know what you will and will not do. For them, there are fewer unanswered questions: Does he fly fatigued? Will she take chances? Does he press on in bad weather? These are the concerns weighing heavily on a back-seaters psyche.

We respect people of conviction. And no one would deny that airline pilots, adhering to their personal code of conduct, are respected. When an airline captain say, "Ladies and Gentlemen, we can't go, it's not safe," most people are disappointed, some are even angry. But not one person jumps up and says, "Hey, what's a matter buddy, are you chicken?" They respect the captain's decision, because they know he or she is guided by a Bushido.