

"Flying is not safe."

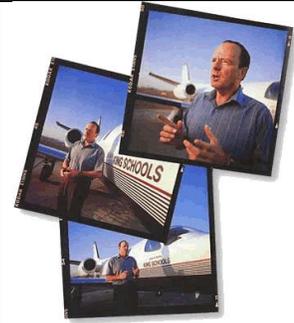
It's the kind of statement one might expect from a non-flying spouse or friend. But the person speaking is one of the most well known aviation ground

school instructors in the country. [John King and his wife Martha](#) have taught over 15,000 pilots in ground school classes. They are also active pilots who fly their Cessna Citation 500 all around the country.

Battling the "Big Lie"

John King's Crusade to Change Aviation's Culture

Interview by *Flying's* Lane Wallace



So what is possessing someone with that kind of experience to go around preaching the hazards of flight? According to King, it's a belief that we are doing ourselves a grave disservice by looking at flight as a potentially safe activity.

By denying the fact that general aviation flying is a risky activity-even if performed by intelligent, capable, achieving people-King believes we hamper our ability to manage or reduce the risks we face every time we take an airplane into the sky.

"We don't have a liability problem in general aviation," King says. "We have an accident problem." And what's needed in order to reduce that accident rate, according to King, is nothing short of a cultural attitude change that recognizes and acknowledges the risks inherent in all small airplane flying and encourages a more careful, conservative approach to managing that risk as best we can.

Flying recently spoke with King about his views of risk, flight and the cultural change he thinks the general aviation community needs.

Where did your attitude about the risks of flying come from?

It's evolved. We used to teach ground school classes, and through the years, we've taught 15,000 people face to face. And you can't be involved knowing that many pilots without some of them, people you respect and admire, people whom you think are competent, bright people and achievers, going out and hurting themselves, which is a euphemism for killing themselves and their passengers in an airplane. We used to read articles about pilots who had accidents, and we thought, well, you know, what they did was stupid, and I'm a smart person, so I'm probably exempt from that. But what you find is, when you know the people, that they're not stupid people. They're bright, achieving people, because that's who general aviation tends to select.

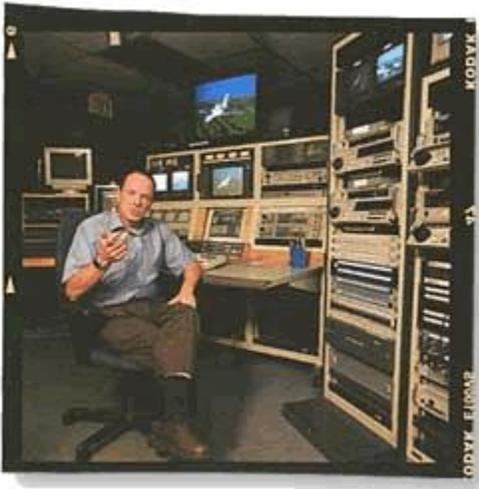
So what conclusion did you draw from that?

Through the years, we've gradually come to the conclusion that the problem is pilots don't do a good job of assessing the risks that they're taking. And our feeling is that one of the reasons for that is that we in aviation have had a long-standing culture of telling people that

aviation is safe. **We have used the old line, 'the most dangerous part of this trip was the drive to the airport.' But statistically, it's not true. You're seven times more likely to have a fatality in a general aviation (GA) airplane than you are in a car,** per mile.

People say, well, per hour is what counts, so, okay, say 3 1/2 times as likely, because an airplane is twice as fast. The point is, you're more likely to have a fatality in a GA airplane than in a car, traveling the same distance.

Airlines, on the other hand, are 49 times safer than GA per mile. So cars are seven times more dangerous than airlines. So where that old song came from are the airlines. The airlines have a phenomenal safety record. They have turbine equipment they're flying standardized routes, with more than one pilot, dispatchers to help them out, etc. That's why they're safe. General aviation planes don't meet that record. A Bonanza does not have the same kind of guarantees that come with a transport category aircraft.



Where did this culture come from?

I think it came from the barnstormers, who wanted people to go fly with them in an airplane held together with baling wire. They'd tell their customers, like all hucksters would, that it was perfectly safe. And at every stage in the game, we, as an industry, have tried to convince people that aviation's safe.

Do you really think pilots believe that flying is perfectly safe?

If you go tell any general aviation pilot, by and large, that aviation is risky, they will argue with you. They'll tell you, oh, that's not true; it's safer than driving. It's not that they're macho. **It's just that we've told this big lie so long that we ourselves believe it. So we've gotten to the point where the whole industry has told this big lie, and we all believe it.** And it's not true.

And the danger you see in that is what?

I do not believe that we should use the word "safe" in general aviation. If you look up what the word "safe" means, it says "without harm or risk." And I don't believe it's possible to fly a general aviation airplane without risk. What I would say is there's either more or less of a degree of risk. I think we should not even have an Aviation Safety Program. I think we should have an aviation risk management program. The reason I don't like to use the word "safe" is that it focuses on the wrong thing. It focuses on the absence of risk. And there is no such thing as the absence of risk.

So what is it you think we ought to do?

I think we need to make it part of the culture that we first, identify those risks and second, create an environment where you aren't considered a wimp for recognizing that risk exists and that you want to manage that risk. We need to get a little more cerebral about what we're doing and say that this is a risk management activity.

Other industries do this. You go to rent a horse, and you have to sign a three-page form that says this is a risky activity, there's a good chance you could get killed, or at least maimed, and if you do, we told you so in advance. This is not a turnoff to people. It's intuitive. You know that riding a horse is risky. Likewise, it's intuitive to students who come in to learn to fly that taking this aircraft thousands of feet in the air and flying it around and bringing it back down to earth again has some risks involved. And yet we're in the mode of telling them, 'Oh, no, it's perfectly safe.' That isn't honest and not even credible to a new person. I think we'd do a lot better by telling them, 'Yeah, you're right there ARE risks involved. But what you're going to learn to do is manage those risks. We're going to give you the tools to do that.' To me, that's more comforting to a student than to deny the risks.

What, specifically, do you think makes flying a risky activity?

Is it the risk of mechanical failure, or the fact that all pilots are human or something else? I think you can break the risk down into four categories:

- the pilot,
- the aircraft, and the
- environment, which includes weather and conditions, and
- external pressures, which are some of the most insidious factors of them all.

What do you mean by "external pressures"?

Well, for example, one of the external pressures is GA pilots' desire to prove that they can do this, to prove that they're skilled, that the airplane has utility and to show everyone, finally, that they're not such a damn fool for learning to fly. And that all the money they spent on it, buying and maintaining an airplane, is worth it. I mean, if I can't get utility out of this airplane, why am I flying it? Everyone wants to talk about get-home-itis. I don't think that explains why people continue, for example, to fly an airplane VFR into worsening weather conditions. I think what explains it more adequately is that we're goal-oriented people. In order to become a pilot, you had to be goal-oriented. You went through extensive training over an extended period of time, which required a great deal of commitment. Flying self-selects goal-oriented people. We set a goal, for whatever reason. It can be completely arbitrary... even, 'I think we can make Wichita a fuel stop,' and from that point on Wichita becomes the goal, and come hell or high water, we're 'going to Wichita, just because we don't like to give up on goals.

That attitude is one of the big risk factors involved. So what's the antidote to that? That there are days when the airlines don't fly. There are a lot of days that people don't do what

they planned to do because ifs just not the day to do it. And it's not a shame to say, 'No, tonight we're going to go to a hotel.'

So you are promoting more conservative go/no-go choices?

Yes. And also going with an understanding of your options and being more cautious when you go and the circumstances in which you go. For instance, you may choose a different route if the weather's bad, or some days you may not go at all, and that's all part of risk management.

At the end of the year, then, you will have made more no-go decisions.

Correct. Or will not have tried to do things that intrinsically are just not safe. On any particular night, you might say it's not a safe operation to do "x" type of flight, so if I'm going to make this trip, I'm going to go the next morning. Did I fly less? No. I probably moved the flight to a different time.

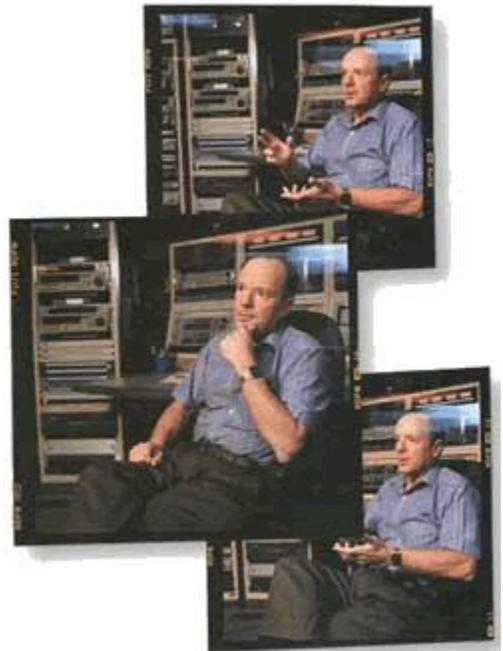
Eighty-five percent of all accidents occur with a perfectly good airplane ... as a result of pilot error.

With a perfectly good airplane that's trying its heart out for the pilot being dashed into the ground by a judgment error. Even crosswind landing accidents are a result of the fact that some pilot accepted this crosswind when he could have gone to another airport with another runway. Why do people accept this risk? I think part of the answer is because it's part of our culture to minimize the amount of risk involved. And we need to reverse that. We should change the culture to accept the risk, talk about the risk and take pride in managing it as opposed to pride in beating the odds.

Do you think that's possible?

It's going to be a slow thing. But if you look at all the other things where we've changed our culture in the United States in the past 30 years, it's just absolutely remarkable. We've changed our attitude toward integration and civil rights. We've changed our attitude in the American culture toward safety. Cars, in the 1960s, did not have seat belts. We've changed our attitudes about smoking. We've changed our attitudes about drinking and driving. All of these things are dramatic cultural changes. And we can change our culture and attitude in aviation, too.

I think that if we want to continue as an industry, we have to admit to ourselves that we don't have a liability problem. We have an accident problem. The insurance companies and the rest of society will no longer accept the accident rates that we've historically had in



general aviation. In order for this industry to thrive, we absolutely have to cut down our accidents. And the way to do it is to change the culture of general aviation.

But even if you "changed the culture," as you say...a pilot could do an excellent job of risk management and do everything right and still get killed.

Yes. And someday you can get struck by lightning. But you can also minimize your chance of being struck by lightning. We used to say when we took off in the Cessna 340, in which if, at the moment of takeoff, you had an engine quit, the chances of doing that successfully were small. We'd say, 'Lord, give me 60 seconds.' If I can keep this thing going for 60 seconds, I can probably extricate myself. Well, there's going to be times when the engine quits within that 60 seconds and you're just going to have a bad day. Just like there are times, driving a car, when a drunk driver comes out and hits you head on. So there are some risks that you just can't control. But there are a lot of risks that you can control. I'm willing to accept those risks that I cannot control in general aviation, but I'll also say that there are a lot of things that we can control, and what we should not do is tell ourselves that general aviation is safe, because then we're ignoring the risks that we can control.

Changing a culture, or even changing how we talk about the safety or risks of flying, is a tough challenge.

What's motivating you to put so much energy into the effort?

The thing that drives me to be passionate about this subject is that I think **people who fly are magnificent**. They are willing to take on risk and stress, they're willing to do something that requires an extended commitment, over a long time. And then, after months and months of effort you finally take someone to see your airplane, and they say, 'What, only one propeller? You expect me to get in that?'

So you don't do it to impress other people.

You do it because it makes a profound impression on *yourself*.

It changes the way that you look at *yourself* forever.

It changes how you identify who you are, forever.

These are wonderful people. These are special people.

It wouldn't bother me so much if people I thought were complete idiots went out and hurt themselves.

But these are capable, achieving, responsible people.

And that's why I want to change the culture of general aviation.