

10 things “real pilots” do

Air Facts Journal

John Zimmerman

Have you ever met a “real pilot?” I sure haven’t—at least not the ones some aviation experts talk about. According to them, real pilots only fly taildraggers, real pilots don’t use GPS, real pilots don’t cancel flights, etc. Apparently, like many things in life, the new generation of pilots is a bunch of sissies.

But I have a different definition of a real pilot. It starts with someone who is smart enough to stay alive while flying, and it ends with someone who has fun doing it. So with apologies to those experts (you know who you are), here’s my list of 10 things real pilots do:

1. Real pilots help a fellow aviator when in need. While the extent of a pilot fellowship can be debated (we’ve done it here at Air Facts), I do believe real pilots go out of their way to help a fellow aviator. Whether it’s helping to tie down an airplane in the rain or offering to share operating expenses, most pilots recognize that our group is a small one and needs all the support it can get.

John Wayne pilot



Is this what “real pilots” look like?

2. Real pilots don’t get into arguments on CTAF. Is there anything more pathetic than listening to a couple of arrogant pilots arguing about who cut the other guy off in the pattern? Real pilots know that such arguments only make flying more dangerous, so they avoid them. Even better, real pilots fly a standard traffic pattern if it’s busy.

3. Real pilots are not afraid to cancel a flight. There is no purple heart in aviation, in spite of what some NTSB reports suggest. A real pilot feels no shame in canceling a flight, whether it's due to weather, mechanical issues or just not feeling up to it. Unless you're in the military, no flight is worth dying over.

4. Real pilots are also not afraid to push themselves. Just because real pilots are humble enough to cancel a flight does not mean they lack confidence. To keep improving, they have to deliberately—but safely—push their boundaries. That means taking on a 15 knot crosswind when the time is right, or opting for annual recurrent training instead of the minimum BFR.

5. Real pilots embrace new technology, but never become slaves to it. There is no extra credit for completing a flight without a GPS. Sure, it's a fun thing to do in a Cub on a beautiful day, and real pilots know how to fly without the latest gadgets, but only a dyed-in-the-wool contrarian would suggest that a KX170B is better than a GTN 750. Likewise, nobody is impressed if you don't use the autopilot. Real pilots use all the tools at their disposal.

6. Real pilots are polite to FBO staff. Some pilots step out of their flying machines as if they are John Wayne inspecting the crew of a World War II battleship. Real pilots know better. Line techs and FBO staff are partners, not employees, and just might bail out a needy pilot one day. Best not to burn that bridge.

7. Real pilots fly the right airplane for their mission, skills and budget. One of my least favorite phrases in all of aviation is, "I only fly a Cessna 172." Real pilots don't care if they are flying a fancy new King Air or a well-loved Skyhawk. Both are excellent airplanes, depending on the mission, and both require real pilots to fly them. Likewise, the position of the third wheel does not determine the skill of a real pilot.

8. Real pilots view ATC as a friend, not an enemy. Air Traffic Control, far from being the aerial police, is an invaluable resource for anyone willing to use it. Real pilots aren't afraid to ask for a controller's advice on weather or to request progressive taxi instructions at a big airport. Amateurs try to fake it; pros ask for help.

9. Real pilots are humble. Mother Nature, gravity and Murphy's Law are constantly working against a light airplane. Real pilots understand this, and appreciate the fine balance that's required to complete a flight safely. That means they never overestimate their abilities or their airplane's performance. It also means they are open to criticism, whether it's from a flight instructor or from themselves during a post-flight debriefing.

10. Real pilots act like ambassadors for personal aviation—all the time. Just like a professional athlete or a politician, pilots are "always on," at least in terms of representing personal aviation to others. Real pilots don't brag about breaking the rules or tell dare devil stories at a cocktail party. Real pilots share the honest truth about flying: that it's hard work and involves risk, but that it's immensely rewarding and incredibly powerful.