

“Where have all the flowers gone?”

As many of you already know, a dear friend and former student of mine, Eilon Krugman-Kadi, died while performing an aerobatic routine at the Titusville, Florida air show in March. Eilon was fairly new to Warbirds but he was one of us, and I know he will be sorely missed.

The Pilot

Eilon started his flight training with the Israeli Air Force many years ago. I believe he once told me that when they discovered he needed eye glasses they wouldn't let him finish pilot training. Not one to be put off, Eilon finished his college degree and private, instrument and CFI tickets at Embry Riddle Aeronautical University.

He flew as a flight instructor and did some commercial flying until someone told him they thought he'd make a great lawyer. So off he went to law school but aviation was still in Eilon's blood. In fact, his office's motto was “We fly to meet your needs.” Eilon specialized in aviation law but has always been an active pilot, flying his Aerostar and a number of corporate jets.

Eilon came to me about a year and a half ago looking to purchase an L-39. I helped him find one, get it refurbished, and trained him for his rating. We also did plenty of aerobatic training as Eilon had a strong desire to perform in air shows. He then started flying with a number of pilots in North Florida and eventually trained for, and received, his low-level ACE card.

With 28 years of instructor experience in the USAF, airlines, and with jet and prop Warbirds, I can say without question that Eilon was a very capable pilot. He was knowledgeable, aggressive and precise, and he insisted on thorough training. We did aerobatics, all the visual area maneuvers you'd expect, instrument approaches, night landings, and normal, no flap and SFO patterns ad nauseum. Eilon knew how to fly the L-39 very well.

The Circumstances

So what happened at Titusville? First of all, I would remind everyone that Eilon was new to aggressive maneuvering at low altitude. As many a fighter pilot will tell you, the ‘probability of kill’ [PK] of the ground is nearly 100%. I flew the A-10 for three years and we *lived* below 500 feet, and yet there were a number of times I came close to packing it in.

Secondly, the weather conditions on the day of the crash were not conducive to aerobatic flight. When I spoke to the insurance investigator, he told me there was a crosswind of 40 knots at 2000 feet that day. There was also a broken cloud deck between 2000 and 3000 feet. A vertical maneuver like a loop or Cuban Eight in an L-39 typically takes 3000 feet or more.

I've seen two different videos of the crash showing that the cloud cover was definitely a factor. As most of us know, the Thunderbirds and the Blue Angels always plan and practice a 'low show' for just such low-ceiling conditions.

Lessons

My purpose here is not to place blame, but rather to bring to light the lessons that all of us can learn from such a tragic event. We all know a number of highly skilled and experienced pilots who are no longer with us. My observation is that they either made a bad decision or they were trying to do something new. I believe both these concepts played a factor here.

For those of us who want to do something new such as formation, aerobatics, or air show performances, we need to get *very* good training and then take things in a logical, stair-step approach. It takes time to get good at a new, demanding skill. In the A-10, over the course of a year or two, we were checked out to 500 feet, 300 feet, and finally 100 feet. Even in a Warthog, things are smoking along at 100 feet and 300 KIAS! The point is that after we're trained, it never hurts to have someone competent in your pit to keep an eye on you.

The second point, which seems to have bitten a number of our members over the years, is the importance of making smart decisions based first, and last, on safety. Based on what I saw in the videos, the weather at Titusville that day was a definite factor. Every airshow performer should have a 'low show' already planned and practiced. And if the conditions, the pilot, or the airplane are not 100% that day, then we need to have the courage to say, "I'm not going up today."

Cameras, Lights, Action

A friend has told me many times that the most dangerous thing we can do in an airplane is fly in front of a camera or a crowd. I think he's very right. The pressure from a public appearance and the—let's call it ego—that goes along with it, can be devastating to safety.

A popular song from Peter, Paul, and Mary once asked,

"Where have all the soldiers gone?"

"Gone to graveyards, everyone."

"Oh, when will they ever learn?"

"Oh, when will they ever learn?"

I hope everyone will be sobered by what has happened. But more so, I hope everyone will learn the lessons presented here so you won't go out and make the same mistakes. We work our whole life long so we can afford to own and fly our Warbirds. Be patient, take your time learning new things, and make safety your *highest* priority.

Fly safe and always remember to 'check six' ...

Richard 'Mongoose' Hess