



The Hero Trap: The Five Hazardous Attitudes and Volunteer Pilot Risk

Dear Volunteers,

The FAA teaches five hazardous attitudes that can degrade pilot decision-making. These come straight out of aeronautical decision-making (ADM) training and are highly relevant to safety—especially in emotionally driven missions like philanthropic flying. We will continue, therefore, from previous articles on the path of Threat and Error Management, but specifically as it pertains to the 5 hazardous attitudes.

FAA Hazardous Attitudes:

1. Anti-Authority

“Don’t tell me what to do.”

- Risk: Ignoring regulations, SOPs, or ATC instructions
- Antidote: Follow the rules—they are usually right

2. Impulsivity

“Do something—quickly!”

- Risk: Acting without thinking through consequences
- Antidote: Not so fast—think first and prepare with appropriate departure/arrival briefings

3. Invulnerability

“It won’t happen to me.”

- Risk: Underestimating risk (weather, fatigue, aircraft issues)
- Antidote: It could happen to me

4. Macho

"I can do it—I'll show them."

- Risk: Taking unnecessary risks to prove skill
- Antidote: Taking chances is foolish and unbecoming of a professional aviator

5. Resignation

"What's the use?"

- Risk: Giving up in abnormal/emergency situations
- Antidote: I'm not helpless—I can make a difference

The "mission" on the app, or on the blast email/text, urgently requesting a volunteer seemed particularly important. A volunteer pilot had agreed to transport a person/family to a specialty medical appointment quite far away. The weather wasn't ideal—ceilings were trending down, and the forecast called for deteriorating conditions along the route. But the mission mattered. Someone was counting on that flight.

That's where aviation safety can begin to blur—not because of a lack of skill or training, but because of something far more human: *intention*.

The FAA's five hazardous attitudes—anti-authority, impulsivity, invulnerability, macho, and resignation—are familiar to every trained pilot. They're taught early, tested often, and easy to recite. Yet in the real world, they rarely present themselves in obvious ways. Instead, they emerge subtly, often disguised as confidence, urgency, or even compassion.

In philanthropic flying, they can become especially difficult to recognize.

Volunteer flying organizations perform extraordinary work. Pilots donate aircraft, fuel, time, and expertise to transport individuals, families and assist communities with limited access to care or transportation. These missions represent some of aviation's finest traditions: generosity, service, and humanity.

But those same qualities can unintentionally create what may be called "the hero trap."

The hero trap occurs when the desire to help begins influencing operational judgment.

Unlike a recreational flight, a philanthropic mission carries emotional gravity. There is often a person in genuine need. Canceling feels consequential. The pilot may begin to internalize responsibility not

only for the flight itself, but also for the outcome of the passenger's situation. As that emotional investment grows, risk assessment can quietly shift.

The dangerous part is that it rarely feels unsafe.

A pilot experiencing invulnerability may rationalize deteriorating weather with thoughts such as, "I've handled worse conditions before." Macho attitudes may emerge not as arrogance, but as a subtle desire to prove reliability or competence. "I can make this work." Impulsivity can appear during rushed preflight preparation, abbreviated weather reviews, or pressure to depart before conditions worsen further.

Even anti-authority may surface in less obvious forms. Regulations are rarely ignored outright; instead, pilots may bypass personal minimums, stretch fuel reserves, or accept narrower margins because the mission feels morally important.

The flight becomes emotionally different from every other flight.

That difference is precisely what makes it dangerous.

Professional pilots understand that external pressures are among the most powerful threats to sound decision-making. In volunteer flying, those pressures can be amplified by empathy. No pilot wants to disappoint a passenger awaiting medical care or delay an animal rescue already coordinated across multiple states. The urge to "complete the mission" can become psychologically stronger than the objective conditions warrant.

History has repeatedly shown that accidents rarely begin with a conscious decision to be unsafe. More often, they begin with a series of reasonable justifications made under emotional pressure.

The antidote is disciplined objectivity.

Effective Aeronautical Decision-Making requires separating the importance of the mission from the safety of the operation. A worthy cause does not improve weather conditions. Compassion does not reduce icing. Good intentions do not lower terrain.

The most effective defense against the hero trap is establishing non-negotiable standards before emotion enters the equation. Personal minimums must remain fixed regardless of who occupies the passenger seat. Weather criteria, fuel reserves, fatigue limitations, and alternate requirements cannot become flexible simply because the mission feels meaningful.

In fact, the more emotionally important the mission becomes, the more rigid those standards should be.

The FAA's PAVE checklist—Pilot, Aircraft, enVironment, and External Pressures—is especially valuable in this context. Equally, in past articles we have discussed the need for a threat briefing. We summarized the threats as: Personal, Environmental and Technical.

<https://angelflightwest.org/news/april-2023-safety-report/>

Volunteer pilots are often highly proficient in evaluating aircraft performance and environmental hazards, yet external pressures may receive less scrutiny because they are internalized as positive motivations rather than operational threats.

That mindset deserves careful examination.

Wanting to help is admirable. Feeling responsible is natural. But neither changes the physics of flight.

One of the most important cultural shifts within philanthropic aviation is normalizing cancellation and delay. Saying “no” to a mission should not be viewed as letting someone down. On the contrary, it reflects professionalism, discipline, and respect for the larger purpose of safety.

The safest volunteer pilots are often the ones who cancel most conservatively.

That statement may sound counterintuitive until one considers the true measure of mission success. A successful flight is not merely one that launches or arrives—it is one conducted within safe operational margins, without compromising judgment, procedures, or standards.

Sometimes the most professional decision a pilot can make is refusing to depart.

This principle is well understood in airline operations, military aviation, and advanced crew resource management training. The challenge in volunteer flying is that emotional investment can quietly override the normal cues that warn pilots when risk is increasing.

The hero trap thrives in silence.

It appears when pilots feel they alone must solve the problem. It grows when passengers express gratitude before the engine even starts. It deepens when pilots tie personal identity to mission completion rather than sound judgment.

And it becomes most dangerous when pilots stop recognizing it altogether.

Don't forget that even as a “pilot type” mission assistant, you may be able to recognize those 5 hazardous attitudes on the PIC well before they do.

The solution is not less compassion—it is greater awareness.

Volunteer flying remains one of aviation's most meaningful contributions to society. It demonstrates the extraordinary generosity of pilots willing to use their skill and resources to help strangers. But those missions must always be governed by the same principles that define professional aviation everywhere else: discipline, risk management, and adherence to standards.

The pilot who cancels due to weather has not failed the mission.

The pilot who delays because of fatigue has not shown weakness.

And the pilot who declines a flight because conditions exceed personal minimums is not abandoning responsibility.

That pilot is exercising the highest responsibility aviation demands: the discipline to place safety above emotion.

In the end, the true hero in aviation is rarely the pilot who "gets it done."

It is the pilot who knows when not to.

I hope that you found this report helpful and I always welcome your feedback.

In Safety,

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