

Getting Along

*Newsman-pilot points out a way for local flyers
to assist reporters in coverage of local
events such as aircraft accidents. He says
deadlines present special problems but
that newsmen want to be fair and accurate*

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■ ■ It seems ironic that with all the trouble general aviation claims to have had with the news media, the adversaries have been forced into a sort of kinship-in-purpose.

The shaky alliance comes about in the face of threatened additional government regulation. The broadcast media, not newspapers, are licensed by the government, as are pilots and aviation facilities. They are in positions of extreme sensitivity to political whim.

If general aviation, through such advocates as the AOPA, believes the government is gradually sapping life out of flight freedom, it should consider the words of National Radio-Television News Directors Association President Bill Roberts, the Washington bureau chief of Time-Life Broadcast.

Roberts told the Indiana Associated Press broadcast members that each attack on the news media is "as clever a piece of demagoguery as you've ever seen." He went on to say that the deluge

was a "denunciation that could fit any group." Roberts then gave other examples of government moves to stifle reporter enterprise and concluded, "It all adds up to a climate of growing attempts to manage the news."

Obviously, the news media, as well as general aviation, have their problems with Washington politicians. It would seem that mutual benefit could be derived from a more cooperative atmosphere between the two. Both sides have more to lose than to gain by a continuance of any level of hostility.

I believe AOPA President J. B. Hartman, Jr., has a point in an appeal he made to members for more support to guard against further government curtailment of general aviation's freedom. While I can appreciate his position, I would propose alternative methods for dealing with one aspect of his mission.

Emotional charges seldom shed light on more than one side of an issue. In accusing the news media of capricious

action in the reportage of general aviation accidents, the AOPA has stated only its position as the alleged wronged party. Using a well-established American principle of allowing both sides to enter evidence, I feel a look at the media's camp would give some perspective to a regrettable situation.

The aviation enthusiast ready to condemn the press should understand something about the newsman's ambience. It's important to remember that, to provide the American public with the information it demands about virtually all activities of the day, the evening newscast or paper deals in a highly perishable commodity. There are deadlines around the clock and the competition is fierce.

Newsmen make mistakes, just like the AOPA and general aviation. Nevertheless, the majority, I feel, are not inflated by the sound of their own voices, or by their pictures on the tube, but are serious about the information they release. The newsman is responsible for what he says—and anyone with such weight on his shoulders deserves a hearing.

The press was in for one of its heaviest attacks from general aviation after the midair collision involving a DC-9 and a *Cherokee* just southeast of Indianapolis [Nov. 1969 *PILOT*, page 62]. While I won't be put in the untenable position of defending any but my own news organization, it should be pointed out that printed and broadcast headlines, indicating that the light aircraft hit the airliner, were taken from the direct quotes of eyewitnesses to the disaster.

Three persons were interviewed by newsmen from my stations, and all gave similar accounts. They watched the tragedy from the steps of their mobile homes, looking up into sunny, fall skies. There is no way to blame the media for what these people said they saw. They repeated their testimony at

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the NTSB hearing which followed days later. No one in the WFBM newsroom had an axe to grind with the "little guy." They reported the information obtained from the only living witnesses to a terrible event.

During the ensuing NTSB inquiry into the crash, it was pointed out by the technical panel that it appeared the DC-9 rammed the *Cherokee*, instead of the other way around. This information was immediately broadcast.

A simple fact of life is that there are more automobiles than airplanes. A car is a common tool used daily by an immense number of people in our society. To legally drive an automobile takes substantially less training, capability, and physical ability than to pilot an aircraft. In short, cars are too familiar to be considered novelties. Auto accidents, though a national disgrace and major life-taker, are not nearly so rare or spectacular as those involving aircraft.

The public feels a tremendous emotional impact when an object falls from the sky. For these reasons, virtually all aircraft accidents will be reported, when dozens of auto accidents will not. It is simply a matter of newsworthiness, and let us all hope the situation never reverses.

General aviation has put forth the argument that unqualified people write and broadcast derogatory articles concerning the industry. It would be ridiculously easy to lower this treatise into a "tit for tat" travesty, and reduce what could be, hopefully, a constructive dialogue into petty bickering by asking general aviation how many of those accusing the press of wrongdoing have newsmen's credentials.

Not wishing to degrade either side in the matter, let me attempt an answer to this charge which will clear up possible misconceptions. Legion though automobiles may be in this country,

how many publications or broadcasting stations have personnel assigned specifically to automotive coverage? At best, a Sunday column or two can be spotted, though cars touch many more lives than does general aviation.

It is my experience that those newsmen involved in aviation willingly give their own time to see that the industry's position is presented fairly. There is simply not sufficient popular demand, in many areas, to warrant a man for aviation. Any conscientious newsman attempts to gain as much knowledge as possible about the subjects on which he reports. We consider it incumbent on us, in our position, to maintain as many inputs as possible.

As a member of the general aviation community, I can easily understand the concern over press relations. It is here that I hope to offer those who share this view a constructive program for gaining more fair representation in the media.

A serious handicap affecting objective news coverage of items related to general aviation is the difficulty of finding persons articulate enough to present the industry's views to the media. There are far too many complex and overlapping issues tied to general aviation to allow the industry to keep its head in the clouds, reminiscent of a world when general aviation consisted of taildraggers, farm fields, and few rules.

Now everything in the business affects practically everything in the community. The AOPA can't be everywhere at once. Being nationally based, it can't speak to a local situation. The media want comments from people with the facts. It is therefore necessary for general aviation advocates in every community to band together and choose their spokesmen.

I would suggest that this is not an impossible task. All around the country, aviation groups stage fly-ins, recrea-

tional trips, and safety meetings. For spreading the word, the general aviation grapevine is among the best. But it will take positive action, not simply wishful thinking.

It is obvious that, for the good of the entire aviation community, the views of the general aviation majority need to be made public on any controversial issue. Choose a spokesman and aid him in spreading reliable word on the operations of general aviation. Don't ever be bashful about contacting the media—no other special interest group is. But be sure that when a request for coverage is made, the spokesman is in a position to answer direct questions about how the general public will be affected by the aviation event.

Any serious newsman will listen to all sides before writing his story. General aviation must be sure its side is readily available. By this method, the local media can gain another news source which will work to benefit both aviation and news coverage.

The AOPA, GAMA, avionics manufacturers, and other organizations that profit from the prosperity of general aviation should do all in their power to assist local flyers in establishing a press office. The AOPA, for example, could send interested inquirers the names of flying lawyers, or other prominent citizens in their areas, for possible contact about being available to the media for comment.

The media have a responsibility to search out the truth, but a good portion of better general aviation representation is up to the industry itself. Cries have echoed nationwide that fairness has not prevailed, and that immeasurable wrong has been done. I submit that it is not too late to change the course of events, but without constructive activity the situation cannot get better. The news media may be warmer allies than you thought. □