

The AOPA Air
Safety Institute
Leverages Regional
Fly-ins

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The AOPA Air Safety Institute Leverages Regional Fly-ins

By Mike Jones

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AOPA's marketing muscle boosted Akron's "Props and Pistons" fly-in in 2025, helping it attract more visitors, bigger sponsors, and more publicity. But AOPA doesn't participate in regional fly-ins just for good P.R. These people are on a mission to enhance aviation safety.

AOPA sponsored a large tent at the fly-in and offered a series of safety seminars which were highly relevant to the attendees at the fly-in. My friend Mike Ginter, Senior Vice President at the AOPA Air Safety Institute, delivered a thoughtful tale of a skilled pilot who became disoriented on a very ordinary

flight from Arizona to California. Most of us in the audience were puzzled by that pilot's inability to dig his way out of the box in which he had put himself. We'll never know the full story because, like so many of the Air



Mike Ginter speaks at the Pistons & Props event in Akron in 2025.

Safety Institute's tales, there were no survivors.

I chatted with Paul Deres, the vice president of operations at the Air Safety Foundation and a perennial "safety advocate." Deres earned his pilot ratings in college. In what must be one of the worst cases of bad timing, he got his first a full-time CFI job right before 9/11. Eventually he landed at AOPA, where his passion is the mission of saving pilots lives through education and safety initiatives. I asked Deres to explain AOPA's commitment in these small, community fly-ins.

[Editor's Note: Mr. Deres' comments have been lightly edited for space and flow.]

What does the Air Safety Institute do?

The ASI foundation has three principal areas of operation. They have a great data analysis program that quantifies the trends in G.A. flying. This is fundamental for the industry working groups including the General Aviation Joint Safety Committee and the Richard McSpadden safety report. The second focus is the flight instructor refresher course (eFIRC) which allows CFIs to renew their tickets on-line. The third area is our educational design development team. This includes all the video producers, writers, and editors at the ASI. This is the team that develops the accident case study videos, the "real pilot" story videos, and the safety videos for YouTube channel.

Are you making a difference? Is flying getting better or worse?

Aviation actually is getting both bigger and safer. The statistics are clear: flying hours have risen from 22 million to 28 million flight hours over the past decade while 2023 [the latest year for which data is available] was the safest year on record ever. So it's good news. We have a lot of positivity. We're growing the pilot population. Flight activity is healthy and growing. We know that we're in the safest era of G.A. ever. So that's a really remarkable accomplishment.

But poor decision-making accounts for about 75% of the aviation accidents. Usually it's not just one bad decision but a whole chain of decisions that led to the unfortunate outcome. But the causes of accidents are not changing, like VFR flight into IMC or fuel mismanagement. They're still making the same mistakes, year after year, decade after decade. Amazingly, it's not just for VFR pilots, because one-third of all aviation accidents are IFR-rated pilots.

So at ASI we ask, how do we get that message out to pilots and ask, how do we fly safer? How do we learn to NOT fly into IMC unintentionally? The truth is, pilots are just not proficient as they should be. We need to be honest and humble about our skills.

We all are very vulnerable to making these same mistakes. Flying safely requires humility; to acknowledge I am vulnerable, I must be always learning, I must always know my risks, know my limitations, and to be honest with ourselves. We can't improve if the culture is steeped in the mire of egos and pride. I think that's what going to improve flight safety."

Isn't the Air Safety Foundation "preaching to the choir"? How does AOPA reach the pilots who don't care?

That's the \$64 million question. How do you reach the unreachable? Because for the most part, we basically are preaching to the choir, to the safety-minded pilots. So yeah, the unreachable are a difficult nut to crack. One way (we think) is through our fly-in presentations. Another is creating more of these viral videos through accident case studies. It's sad, but it's true, that people are drawn to videos about death and dismemberment. If we hold their attention with a video on an accident, even pilots who otherwise would not go into a fly-in seminar might learn something new. So that's our hope of educating the broader audience, even to those who are categorized as the unreachable.

We need this [educational out-reach] because education can take the best of the regulations and clarify them, make them more meaningful, more practical.

Education reduces the burden of having “only regulations” to fly safely. That’s where the Air Safety Institute plays a key role. [Our educational programs] bring regulations into the real world and say, hey, this is what this looks like and how to apply it to your next flight.

Do you think modern avionics are helping the safety numbers? Are we losing old-fashioned stick-and-rudder skills?

I think it’s a two-edged sword. There’s no empirical data to show that modern technology and glass cockpits have actually improved safety, but it is enhancing situational awareness. You become more aware of the risks; we can see terrain and stuff. But are pilots now flying closer to the edge because of that technology? Maybe they’re flying closer to convective activity because they can see their way through storms? Maybe pilots are being less conservative because they have more information at their fingertips? We’re not sure. But anecdotally, we certainly think that it has made us safer. We think technology is part of the puzzle which is contributing to lowering the accident rates. It’s a collective



Paul Deres, the vice president of operations at the Air Safety Foundation and a perennial “safety advocate.”

success, across the entire industry, from the OEMs, new technology, manufacturers, education, the universities. It's a safety culture that's been gradually building over time. We're privileged to be part of that. It is a tribute to the collective efforts of everybody who contributes, not just AOPA.

The only thing if I could offer to your readers is that with all this technology and despite the fact that we can brag about our safest accident rate ever, we can't rest on our laurels. We cannot allow ourselves to sit back, relax, enjoy the convenience of all technology, and think that we're safer now. Because we're still human. As long as there is a human in the loop, accidents will still happen.

About the Author

Dr. Mike Jones is an entrepreneur who uses his business expertise to help G.A. airports across the country improve their governance and operations, speeding them on their way to more revenues, grants, and community support. He also helps protect them from avaricious developers and reverse the damage caused by ineffectual politicians. He's been writing for this magazine for nearly a decade, flown 800 Young Eagle missions, and put 4,000 hours in his logbook. He's always accessible at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.

