



The “Option Play”

By Rex J. Alexander

Having had the unique opportunity and pleasure to help coach my two son’s pee-wee football teams (4th, 5th & 6th grade) for the past four years I have learned some very valuable lessons along the way.

- 1) Clear and specific instruction is rewarded by good performance.
- 2) Individuals will do exactly what you tell them to even when it’s wrong.
- 3) You had better explain which direction to run before the game.
- 4) Do not stand directly in front of a 4th grader when he says he feels sick.
- 5) If you didn’t teach it in practice you won’t see it on the field.
- 6) The option play can save your life only if you properly prepared for it.

Though all of these lessons can translate to the air medical industry, even number 4, I have found that the last one to be the most valuable in keeping people safe in the environment that we work in on any given day.

In flying as in football having an option available to you when your path is blocked by an unexpected obstacle or event can mean the difference between moving down the field unimpeded vs. getting hit from your blind side by the unforeseen or unplanned for. Options are those things that we as individuals and programs can create and take advantage of to help level the playing field when dealing with human error, complacency and the unforeseen. In many cases some options already exist, we just need to recognize them so that we can take advantage of them when needed. In other cases we supply our own options by building them into our daily routine in the form of good habits so that they in turn are always there just in case.

Many years ago when I first started to learn to fly my instructor gave me this advice: “In

flying there are three things that are totally useless to a pilot; the runway behind you, the altitude above you and the fuel you didn’t put on at the last stop.” In essence these things are there for you to take advantage and to help you stack the deck in your favor just in case something bad does occur. So what then can we do to build options into our every day routine as pilots to level the playing field and stack the deck in our favor?

WEATHER or more specifically the imposed minimums that we use are some of the most important items on this list that can significantly influence the options available to us. Sure you can go flying with 500 foot ceilings and one mile of visibility but when things do decide to go wrong you had better have the reaction time of a teenager. If you bump those minimums up just a little, let’s say 800 feet and two miles you now have a little more room for error. While 300 feet may not sound like a lot it can surely make a big difference.

FUEL is another option that we have control over. Too little and now you can’t safely circumnavigate that unforeseen weather, too much and now you don’t have the power margin to safely deal with that unforeseen downdraft on a rooftop helipad or that 400 pound patient on the scene. Taking the time to do your daily performance check can make a significant difference on how much fuel you decide to put on board and in turn how many options are available to you that day.

WEIGHT can significantly limit the options available to you. Just because your helicopter can hover at max gross weight doesn’t mean you should. Having that extra little bit of power margin can be the difference between aborting a landing or takeoff safely when something goes wrong vs. ending up just another statistic.

ALTITUDE or the lack there of, can mean the difference between a successful emergency recovery vs. one that gets you



listed in the NTSB's hall of shame. Sure in many cases you can fly at 300 feet AGL but given that even under the best circumstances many helicopters without power come out of the sky at around 1900 feet per minute that equates to about 10 seconds. Now if you just climb up to say 500 feet you will give yourself approximately 16 seconds or if you go up to 1,000 feet now were up to 32 seconds. Again this allows for more time to react plus the ability to get to a safer area.

TRAINING AND EDUCATION can provide a higher level of understanding and more information from which to base decisions on. This in turn allows you the ability to formulate and take advantage of options more rapidly and efficiently. Some of the most critical events that can happen during a flight may require a decision to be made in less than one to two seconds. If you have not practiced and prepared for an emergency situation you will probably find yourself behind the helicopter before you even begin.

SAYING NO can increase your chances of survival and give you additional options. Many of us want to please our customers, both internally and externally, to such a degree that many times we have a hard time saying no. Not learning when and how to say no though does a disservice to the people who trust us to make the correct decision. Just because you can doesn't always mean you should.

TIME itself allows for more options to be considered. Just the act of slowing down your airspeed 10 to 20 knots when the weather starts to deteriorate slightly or something just doesn't feel right can give you those valuable seconds needed to formulate a plan of action. Imposing a 5 minute liftoff time can conversely take away those valuable seconds to complete a thorough walk around or check the weather one last time before takeoff.

Now many of you will read this and say that none of this is new and that this is all

common sense stuff. I would agree with you, but the next time you have a few minutes take a look at the last 10 years of fatal accidents on the NTSB web site and with this list in hand see if you can identify any that could have been prevented given just one or two of the options listed above. As with any list there are many more examples that I could cite that would surely help increase the options available to you during any flight. The important thing to remember is that before, during and after every flight pilots and crews must continuously reevaluate their decisions and keep looking for options available to them in case something goes awry at any moment.