

## ***Are You a Joiner?***

*By Chris Hope, Master CFI*

I have a lot of opportunities to talk to pilots, and that is fun. I enjoy hearing of other pilots' experiences, and I get a chance to learn from the mistakes of others. And one of the topics that often arises in fly-talk sessions has to do with AOPA and EAA and other national and regional flying organizations. Someone is always asking someone, "Are you a member?" and "So, what do you really get for your money?"

First of all, let's back up and talk about flying organizations in general. There are tons of them. And that's a good thing. There are organizations based on geographic areas: California Pilots Association, Virginia Pilots Association, and one in practically every other state. And these are great because they connect local pilots to one another and allow them to discuss local issues and share information about local opportunities.

There are organizations based on aircraft type, such as the Cessna Pilots' Association, the American Bonanza Society and American Yankee Association. For pilots and owners, or prospective pilots or purchasers of particular planes, these groups provide a wealth of knowledge about the quirks and maintenance issues of their particular planes.

And then there are flying organizations which are based on pilots' other interests or commonalities: International Flying Farmers, or the Flying Musicians Association, for example. And these can be fun because they allow us to combine two of our passions with other like-minded people.

When I started flying, many of these organizations probably existed, but not in my little world. And when I looked at my discretionary income, flying organizations always came up short. Looking back, I think that I was most aware of the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association, AOPA, but I did not see any value for my membership dollar. One of the advantages of continuing to live is that we have the opportunity to continue to learn, and over the years I have tried to take advantage of that opportunity.

About 30 years ago, I was feeling flush with cash (I guess) and this skinflint pilot decided it was time to invest in AOPA. And my reasons for doing so at that time are just as valid today, and have only grown over time. I had been picking up the AOPA magazine at local airports forever, but I only then became aware of the issues surrounding GA. Early in my flying life, I just flew. I assumed that airports would be available, that cheap gas (well, it seemed expensive then) would be around, and that my instructors would keep me safe, and that the FAA was my friend. But, like little kids, I grew up.

I learned that there was some truth to all of those statements, but all of them had a large “BUT” behind them. I slowly came to realize that to make these statements remain “true”, someone, or a more accurately a group of “someones” had to make them so. And it seemed to me at the time that largest group of “someones” with my General Aviation interests in mind was AOPA. So, I felt a responsibility to help the support my interests.

About five years later, in the mid-80s, I developed the bug to take the next step in aviation and buy an airplane of my own. But this was a time when the aircraft manufacturers were being pounded by litigation, and used-plane prices were relatively high. So, I am thinking, I could build a plane. That was becoming very popular, as it was then becoming possible to build a plane from a kit and not from scratch. But I soon found that the best way to learn about the choices available, and the help available, was to join the Experimental Aircraft Association and find a local chapter. And so my wife and I made our first trip to Oshkosh, paid my first year’s membership dues, and then found some like-minded guys back home.

Well, both of those organizations, and I, have grown up over the years. I am now a member of both AOPA and EAA, and because I am a flight instructor, I am also a member of the National Association of Flight Instructors (NAFI) and the Society of Aviation and Flight Educators (SAFE). So what do I get for my money?

Actually, each enriches my flying in their own way. Start with the magazines. All of them have articles on all facets of aviation, and all of the articles and columns are written by pilots – some new and seeing aviation from new excited eyes, and some with more experience and grey hair. But, there are a lot of flying magazines, and like me in my younger days, you can find back issues of lots of flying mags at the local airport. So, here is what you really get, as far as I am concerned.

Much of our flying is affected by the decisions of others – state, local, and federal governments. And while many of us bemoan the many lobbyists that stalk the halls of congress and our state houses, it is nice to have someone in your corner when you need to get your message to legislators. And I believe that flying organizations, both national and at the state level, are able to do that. I know that I certainly cannot get the attention of my senators or congressman or the FAA in Washington, but AOPA is able to do so.

So what else? Would you like to have someone hold your hand when you buy your first plane? Is it like buying a used car, or a new home? Well, somewhat. But I sure liked having the services of AOPA available when I bought my little Cherokee 140. And then, a few years later, when I was ready to put down money for a box of Lancair parts, it was nice to have my new-found friends in the EAA.

When is the last time your knowledge was challenged with weather questions, or Part 91 questions, or tidbits from the AIM? For me, the last time I was challenged was when I went to the AOPA - Air Safety Foundation website and took a quiz or a seminar. (I will not tell you how many times this long-time CFI does not ace an ASF quiz first time around.) Nobody else puts that information out for us and says, "No, you don't need to send any more money for that." (check that out at <http://www.aopa.org/Education/Safety-Quizzes.aspx> )

And for flight instructors? If you are serious about passing on your knowledge and skills to others, if you are serious about being the best you can be, you need to be associating with the top members of your profession. There are good people in both SAFE and NAFI who are willing to help you be your best, and who are able to talk to the FAA about the training issues and the regulatory issues that affect us and our students. Yes, I know that CFIs have no discretionary income. These are organizations who are working to change that, and give you the skills and knowledge you need to make you the most productive CFI at your airport.

So get out and meet your fellow pilots, both in person and electronically. Join your local flying organizations, wander out to the airport for a hamburger and share in some aircraft washing and polishing. If you own a plane, join the "type" club, and find out the best practices for keeping the plane looking and acting gorgeous, and the techniques for perfecting your landings.

And if you want your voice heard when the FAA and congress are deciding how and where and when you can fly, plop down some \$\$\$ for your AOPA and / or EAA membership.

*Don't just practice until you get it right. Practice until you don't get it wrong*

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