



We Have a
**No Crash
Policy!**

A pilot's life of adventure, fun,
and learning from experience

ADAM L. ALPERT

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AVIATION SUPPLIES & ACADEMICS
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We Have a No Crash Policy!

by Adam L. Alpert

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Color version of the watercolors and some of the photographs featured in this book can be viewed on the **Reader Resources** page for this title by visiting asa2fly.com/NO-CRASH.

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Dedication

Aviation, like all technical subjects, employs a special vocabulary of words, terminologies, and acronyms. There is also pilot-specific language used for communicating while flying, largely incomprehensible to those not trained and practiced. Taken together, the learning curve for anyone seeking even a vague understanding of the discipline seems insurmountably steep. Some aviators would have it no other way. Perpetuating the mystery is part of what makes the pilot persona appealing. There are others, though, like Captain Robert N. “Bob” Buck, Sr., author of *Weather Flying* and many other aviation books, who are only too happy to demystify the discipline in an effort to promote safety, utility, and better understanding.

We Have a No Crash Policy! is a personal memoir of flying stories from over forty years. It is also a meditation on a learning process made possible by people like Bob, and later his son Robert O. “Rob” Buck, an accomplished aviator in his own right, along with the many excellent instructors, mentors, and friends who helped me along the way. Their insight and generosity is what inspired me to write this book.

It is often said that adversity and error make for a great teacher, especially in hindsight. It has been, therefore, a guilty pleasure to write about missteps in planning, judgment, and all the things that went wrong. While bad decision-making in isolation can't be applauded, acknowledging mistakes, and the learning opportunities they present, suggests an interesting connection, especially for those open to questioning their own abilities.

While there are many ways to address novel and often complicated topics, I have found using relatable examples to be the most convincing. Many of the stories, therefore, stem from real life events. But the academic aspects should not be discounted. For every pilot who has inadvertently blundered into a strong, dangerous thunderstorm, there is, somewhere, a convective weather scientist standing by ready to deliver a postmortem on the con-

vergence of events. Together they offer the best opportunity to learn and improve.

Mostly, though, aviation is about romance. What other technology reveals the magnificence and beauty of the earth as seen from above while simultaneously providing expedited transportation across vast distances to faraway exotic places where opportunity and adventure await? Just the joy of guiding a light aircraft to a perfect landing on an unimproved grass strip is worthy of mention. The mastery of amazing levitating machines, plying the skies in glorious flying ships, is a form of magic.

My father, Norman Alpert, fought in the Philippines as an Army Lieutenant during World War II. He contracted hepatitis there and barely survived the nearly three years of hospitalization that followed. He went on to earn a PhD in physiology from Columbia University and became a world-renowned expert in heart disease. In his spare time, he started a small life science company, BioTek Instruments, that over time blossomed into a multi-million-dollar enterprise, all while raising three kids with his loving wife Laurel in rural Chittenden County, Vermont.

Dad also was a romantic in the sense that he viewed science and technology as vehicles for achieving a more renaissance appreciation of the world. For Dad, the pursuit of knowledge and truth was paramount. The process, as opposed to the end result, was his focus. While fact-based guidance is key to flying, Dad's approach to continuous learning is worth considering. Given that there is no flying school that can address all contingencies, and all circumstances, it is up to the pilot to figure out the rest.

Dad liked to say "Onward and upward." Those three words have influenced my flying and other pursuits for as long as I can remember. Ever the optimist, he was propelled to move forward and do better.

I dedicate this book to my father; not just a survivor, but also a doer of great things, a truly inspirational role model. We should all be so fortunate to have someone like him in our lives.

Acknowledgments

Writing a book and getting it published is a daunting task. Had I known the degree of difficulty prior to starting the project I never would have begun. So perhaps the notion ignorance is bliss deserves more consideration for those of us operating with less than unlimited willpower and drive. Likely more important to the cause, however, is the support and advice generously offered by others.

The story begins with Karen Jacques, BioTek's technical publications manager, who demonstrated much enthusiasm even while tirelessly editing the variably composed early trade journal articles that served as a practice forum for my writing of this book. It was also Karen who did the final review of the edited manuscript to make sure that my voice, with all its blemishes, was not accidentally removed in the course of professional editing.

Blemishes aside, I am most grateful to my editor Ellen Bartlett who reappeared in my life after a forty-two year post-high school hiatus during which she worked for many prestigious newspapers including the Boston Globe. She applied much needed continuity to the writing, fixing all the grammar (and spelling) problems known to plague C+ students through the course of their grade school, high school, and even college English writing courses.

Fellow authors Ken Adelman and Stephen P. Kiernan deserve special mention. Knowing the challenges associated with a first book effort, they helped me identify likely publishers and then craft the perfect query letter for submission. You are reading these words largely because of Ken and Stephen's generous contribution.

Much credit goes to my reviewers F-16 fighter pilot Lt. Col. John "Wily" Rahill, TWA Boeing 747 Captain and fleet manager Hobie Tomlinson, and Falcon 900EX senior captain Paul Middlebrook. Collectively, they assured the concepts described were both valid and relevant, claims factually correct, while also providing practical insight into a broader range of career-linked flying experiences.

Captain Robert O. “Rob” Buck, also mentioned in the Dedication, was very kind to read early versions of the first several chapters. His honest critique and guidance to properly identify the good, bad, and ugly helped shape much of the subsequent writing.

I thank my very talented illustrator, Christina Lesperance, for her infinite patience puzzling through all those many unfamiliar aviation scenarios depicted in the beautiful watercolor drawings dawning each chapter. Fortitude, an idea discussed in this book, comes to mind when I think about Christina’s contribution.

The star of the show, however, was my wife Gisela. Not only did she provide unending encouragement during the course of a project that seemed at times to be unending, she also lent herself to be the subject both in fact and as part of writing for many of the stories told. For this, she has my enduring gratitude.

1 A Child's Dream



The three of us struggled to get the glider through the sliding door that led to the second-floor balcony at Eric Neunmann's house, in our Hyde Park, Chicago, neighborhood. Eric's parents had left for the day, assuring final assembly and testing could be completed undisturbed. This would be our first flight, and my younger brother Briar, the test pilot, age five, was willing but also apprehensive. Knowing he was the lightest of the three of us and therefore the obvious choice somehow wasn't reassuring. The one-story drop loomed large—the Grand Canyon, for all practical purposes. Fortunately, Briar had his big brother and friend there, to provide encouragement. Eric and I, being all of eight years old, were exceedingly confident.

The aircraft itself had been constructed out of discarded cardboard boxes, cut to size and taped together with packing tape. It was a delta wing design, tapered wings, narrow in front, expanding to a width of nearly eight feet at the back. Each wing had a tail, located at the wing tip, extending vertically about one-foot high. The small pilot's seat, also cardboard, was set on top, at the center point of the aircraft. Various creases running lengthwise provided rigidity, much like the creases in a conventional paper airplane, on which we had based our design.

The plan was simple. Eric and I would lift the aircraft onto the balcony railing. We would balance it, prior to flight, while the test pilot seated himself. When all was ready, Eric and I would provide the necessary forward propulsion—a shove—for takeoff.

Of course, looking back on this fateful day there is a temptation to ask the question: what could go wrong? The design team, consisting of Eric and me, had no formal schooling in aerodynamics, structures, or propulsion. Neither of us had worked on an aircraft of this size, let alone designed to carry people. Briar, the pilot, had no pilot training. Nor had he, at this point, ever been in an airplane. There had been no wind tunnel tests, or really any testing at all. The aircraft had no safety systems, not even a seat belt. To the

extent that we did have experience with model aircraft, even the carefully-constructed balsawood toy planes we had flown prior to this mostly ended up crashed and broken, or caught in a tree. Yet, at the time, it all seemed reasonable—a reoccurring theme in many aircraft accidents, as it turns out.

The harsh reality is that accelerating from a fixed position to flying speed requires more than a shove by two eight-year-old boys. Rather than gliding gracefully to a soft landing on the lawn, the aircraft, with my brother on top, nosedived into the prickly bushes below, sprawling the branches in all directions. Eric and I ran downstairs to render whatever aid we could.

The intensity of the crying that greeted us ensured that we would not be the only ones at the scene for long. Neighbors from the adjoining units converged, along with others who had witnessed it all from the adjacent



Adam and Briar, “the brothers,” ages six and three-and-a-half.



Early entrepreneurs—the brothers establish a stand to sell home manufactured balsa model gliders.

playground. It was a hard landing, for sure. Fortunately, the bushes had broken the fall. Briar emerged from the crumpled glider scratched, bruised, and furious, but otherwise okay.

Any possibility of a cover-up ended on our return home to Mom and Dad, my brother in need of antiseptic, multiple bandages, and vengeance. It became clear that someone would have to pay—me.

The exact nature of my punishment is a bit hazy after all these years, but it almost certainly was a record. I remember my mother being particularly upset, going so far as to restrict access to toy airplanes for a while. Much later in life, when I asked for a loan to attend flying school, she turned me flat down, saying she didn't want to finance the vehicle of my death. It also took many decades before Briar regained sufficient confidence to be willing to climb into one of my airplanes.

In the years following the cardboard glider adventure my enthusiasm for flying never waned. I built and flew hundreds of small model airplanes. Those flights were precarious for a different reason. Due to the lack of safe places for children to play in Chicago, much of the flying took place over busy city streets. The family's move to Vermont in the mid 1960s marked a huge improvement in flying safety, just due to the availability of open space and the absence of fast moving automobiles.

Vermont also brought about an even more exciting aviation development. Much to the consternation of my mother, my father, who had taken a few flying lessons during our time in Chicago, decided to go in on the purchase of a Cessna 172 airplane with several of his University of Vermont colleagues, in order to pursue his private pilot's license. I was delighted, of course, but my mother would have nothing to do with it. And she made it clear to my father that under no circumstances would the children be allowed to fly with him.

Buying an airplane wasn't the only thing Dad did that upset my mother. Soon after the plane, he surprised her with a giant St. Bernard named Ski Puppy—175 pounds with an enormous head exuding drool down to the floor. On winter days, the drool would freeze forming drool-cicles, perfect fun for the children who liked to invite the chronically damp dog into the house to play. Immediately upon



Ski-Puppy.

About the Author

Innovative aviation author Adam L. Alpert holds FAA commercial certifications in glider, single-engine airplane (land and sea), multi-engine airplane (land and sea), and helicopter. He also is type rated in all Cessna CE-525 Citation Jet aircraft.

His personal fleet includes a Boeing Stearman biplane, Cessna L-19 Bird Dog, Grumman G-44 Widgeon, Cessna 180 Skywagon, Cub Crafters X-Cub, Bell 206B JetRanger III helicopter—and he has experience flying over 40 other types.

Alpert served as vice president of BioTek Instruments, Inc., (www.biotek.com), a large multinational life science tools company, until his retirement in 2018, and holds B.S. degrees in computer science and mathematics from the University of Vermont, 1981.

He lives with his wife in Delray Beach, Florida.

