The Real Heroes of Aviation

Now it may seems strange heading up an article about aviation with pictures I took at yesterday’s British Touring Car Championship races, but as I watched the mechanics working to get the damaged car in the picture ready for the next race I realised that the real heroes of automobile racing are the mechanics. Yes the drivers are the ones who get the public’s attention and have the skills and take the risks to win, but without the mechanics there would be no car to drive, nor any performance advantages that helps the driver win a race.

It then occurred to me that the same applies in aviation. Yes the pilots have the skills to fly the aircraft, and attract the public attention, but without the highly skilled mechanics and engineers there would be no aircraft to fly, nor any aircraft to fly safely. A couple of years back I was privileged to work alongside the Royal Air Force Aerobatic Team – The Red Arrow – and it was obvious at their RAF Scampton base that the Engineers – the “Blues” were seen as integral a part of any display as the incredibly skilled pilots – the “Reds”. Yet in commercial aviation, the human factors and safety focus often seems to be exclusively on pilots.

This is very apparent in the area of aviation in which we at Core Aviation Psychology work – mental health and wellbeing. Most of the activity generated as a result of the 2015 Germanwings accident has been – quite understandably – focussed on pilot mental health and support mechanisms The EASA opinion issued in 2016 almost exclusively applies to pilots and, although it uses the term “aircrew”, the context appears to exclude engineers and other support staff who have an equal part in the safety process. Following on from that the CAA issued an information notice in early 2017 on “pilot support programmes” that requires the setting up of a pilot peer support programme as part of an operators safety management system. A further initiative sponsored by the European Cockpit Association and aviation medical and psychology
institutions – the European Pilot Peer Support Initiative (EPPSI) – is based on the German Stiftung Mayday operation that provides peer support to pilots and aircrew and their families for mental health and other issues. A recent textbook has appeared that again reinforces the emphasis on pilot – its titled “Pilot Mental Health Assessment and Support”. All of this is, of course, essential as it recognises the key role that pilot mental health plays in safe flight operations. However in placing the emphasis mainly on pilots there is a real danger that another highly safety-critical group who might also show mental health issues – aeronautical engineers – are not provided with the same level of activity and support.

Aircraft repair and maintenance staff experience rates of illness and injury that are possibly higher that the national workforce average. As they work on aircraft, they often must lift heavy objects, operate power tools and handle chemicals that can be dangerous. Noise and vibrations are common, and they also may work up in the air on scaffolding or ladders so they can reach the aircraft. Mitigating measures to ensure physical safety are in place in most MRO’s. However many engineers regularly work non-typical hours, so experience the personal risk that comes from the physical and psychological stress that is a common result or work-related schedules that disrupt a worker’s biological wellbeing such as sleep, and their psychological wellbeing such as social life and relationships. Engineers work under time pressures, often with added organisational pressures, and are expected to be meticulous in their work at all times. An engineer distracted because of mental health or personal issues is as big a risk to safety as a pilot experiencing the same. However no initiatives focusing on mental health and support for engineers are mandated in the forthcoming EASA rules. I raised this issue at the EPPSI launch seminar in Cologne in February 2017, but it did not receive much attention – it seemed to be that the EASA focus was fundamentally about pilots because of the concern generated by the Germanwings accident and subsequent EASA task force report. The real heroes of aviation – the people who ensure pilots have aircraft fit and safe to fly – are in danger of not having their mental health needs identified and addressed, and not having the same support systems that will be mandated for other aircrew.

At Core Aviation Psychology we are working with a North Sea helicopter operator – CHC Helicopter – to raise awareness about mental health and wellbeing. The sessions we have been providing include all staff – pilots, engineers and support staff – and focus on recognising the sings and symptoms of poor mental wellbeing, and offering ways of recognising and supporting others in the workplace who may be experiencing this. The voluntary uptake at a number of bases has included many engineers, who individually now recognise the impact of mental health and wellbeing on safety. The initiative has received praise and recognition from one of their key clients in the UK and Australia. At CHC Helicopter there are plans for all staff to be involved in CRM, not just aircrew, and mental health and wellbeing will be part of human factors knowledge and training given annually.

For more information contact us at www.core-ap.co.uk