What is the most-complex system on your aircraft? Which system is the most error-prone? If you are flying an airplane built in the last 40 years or so, chances are the answer to both questions is the same: the pilot.

The aviation world has done a marvelous job of improving the reliability of just about every system on the airplane, as is easily seen by our falling accident rates. Systems and procedures have made it easier for us pilots to be at the top of our game and pilot error rates have fallen dramatically. But pilot errors still exist, and they exist mostly because of complacency.

Merriam-Webster’s online dictionary defines complacency as follows:

1. Self-satisfaction, especially when accompanied by unawareness of actual dangers or deficiencies;
2. An instance of usually unaware or uninformed self-satisfaction.

When you fly a hollow aluminum tube at eight- or nine-tenths the speed of sound in an atmosphere that will not support life as we know it, it is pretty easy to become self-satisfied. We pilots are prime candidates for complacency and our vulnerability increases with experience, age and professional status.

If you are the chief pilot of a small flight department with more hours than you care to think about and more time in type than the rest of your pilots combined, you...