

Says he's only one with 'stall-proof system'

Prof has plan to prevent plane stalls

By KAREN CORNELISON
Airplane stalls caused 27 percent of the 693 fatal aircraft accidents last year. Howard Chevalier, a professor in the aerospace engineering department at Texas A&M University,

has come up with a solution. "The problem of airplane stalls has been with us ever since the airplane," Chevalier said. Stalls occur when the angle of attack — the angle at which the plane

fles relative to the air approaching it — reaches a certain level, and the airflow over the wing separates. This causes the plane to pitch down because of a loss in lift. A pilot usually can recover from this situation, but not always.

Presently, most airplanes have some type of warning system to alert the pilot when his angle of attack is near the stall level. Chevalier said he is the only person who has developed a "stall-proof" system.

Despite more sophisticated warning systems, the rate of fatalities caused by stalls has remained at about 30 percent, according to the Federal Aviation Administration.

"To reduce fatalities, you must eliminate the stall entirely," Chevalier said. "This is where I have differed greatly with other researchers."

Chevalier's system consists of a vane or "spoiler" on the underside of the plane's tail. When the airplane reaches a point near the stall angle, a sensor activates a tiny motor which controls the spoiler. The spoiler changes the airflow so that the plane cannot reach the stall angle. It also alerts the pilot.

"The spoiler system was the only way to mechanize the concept," Chevalier said. "I've been told for years there's a better way of doing it. It used to make me mad."

Chevalier first developed his idea when working for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration about 10 years ago, but he had no way to prove it would work. He researched and experimented on his own, without NASA's funding until October 1976.

Chevalier said there was little support for his research in the late '60s because of the public's interest in space flight.

"When we're shooting people to the moon," he said, "who cares whether people are crashing in airplanes?"

Chevalier has already tested his device on two airplanes, and said testing will continue in May with NASA's help in the wind tunnel at Virginia's Langley Research Center. He said he hopes to be able to develop the aerodynamics data needed to design an anti-stall device for all airplanes.

"This will probably be the first time I'll have on hand documented aerodynamic characteristics (of the system)," he said. More flight tests are planned for later this year.

Chevalier said a form of his anti-stall system could be put into use at any time.

"It would at least provide a stall deterrent," he said. "I haven't found the person that's willing to invest the time and money needed to put

this thing on a plane tomorrow. Then again, I don't go looking, either."

There is a lot of risk involved in putting a new device into use, Chevalier said.

"Right now, the anti-stall device is not a big sale item," he said. No one is willing to undertake production because the profits might not be worth the high cost of insurance which comes with trying a new device, he said. Some general aviation manufacturers are encouraging his work at Langley.

"If you have a stall-proof airplane," Chevalier said, "it's definitely going to increase the utility of the airplane."

"Many pilots don't feel they have the capability to fly next to stall speed (usually 60-70 m.p.h.)," he said. "If the fear of stalling were removed, pilots could use airplanes to their fullest extent."

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