

LOOK AWAY NOW

Let's hear it for anyone who knows when it's time to turn a blind eye.

When I went for my first medical as an enthusiastic private pilot, I had difficulty reading the bottom two lines of the eye chart. So the empathetic aviation doctor led me right over to it and said: let's just check your ability to memorise things, such as these small letters. Back across the room, no probs reading them – and he passed me fit to go and commit flying. Of course, he had to be immeasurably more rigorous with professional flyers – often unpopularly so, given that livelihoods were at stake.

A similar medic must also have had the same attitude with Stuart Keith-Jopp. During WWII, he was one of the many elderly pilots in the all-civilian Air Transport Auxiliary, yet managed to ferry 1600 aircraft.

With only the right eye available. He'd lost the left in WWI. Try closing yours and imagine you're landing a Spitfire on a small unfamiliar airfield in pouring rain on a dark December afternoon.

Oh, did I mention that Stuart was also missing his left arm? So now: imagine gripping the Spit's control column with your knees while working other bits in the cockpit with your one remaining hand.

But how about landing with your eyes tight shut?

In the Korean War, Navy jet pilot Ensign Edward Jackson was left sightless by flak. His colleagues turned a blind eye to the option of him bailing out into a winter sea. Wingman Ensign Crow radioed directions back to the aircraft carrier Philippine Sea. There, Lt LK Bruestle talked Jackson down by radio on to the small and rolling deck. The 100mph landing was described as "normal". When they pulled him out of the cockpit and cleared the blood from his eyes, the first person Jackson saw was the carrier's doctor.

Incidentally the 1200 men and women ATA pilots were amazing and unsung volunteers (and how they were organised and managed is an inspiring study in people management that has much to teach senior executives today.

Take the 50-year-old Doug Fairweather – fondly nicknamed “Poppa Foulweather” because he flew the air ambulance in conditions when birds were happy to sit things out. An appraisal noted he had “a most likeable personality which is undeniably complex and not uncoloured by guile”.

Though he had to wear glasses to see things in the cockpit, Doug knew his way around Britain by sight, and never bothered with a map. Then a more senior officer insisted – not knowing that with someone as valuable and talented as Doug there are times to turn a blind eye.

Next flight with this fusspot on board, Doug puts his glasses on, pats his uniform and duly produces a map of the UK. The back page of a Letts pocket diary. Much expostulation by the officer. So Doug patiently unfolds a large map, which almost fills the cockpit. That's better, says the officer. Then smiles a smile of absolute zero. It's a map of Roman Britain. Not uncoloured by guile.

See what I mean?