

Ups and Downs

Pilots have developed many wise sayings and beliefs that have withstood the test of time. One of my favorites is, “There are old pilots and bold pilots but you’ll never find a pilot who is old *and* bold.” Another belief is that every pilot starts with two bags, one full of luck and the other with experience. The goal is to fill up your bag of experience before your bag of luck runs out. Every now and again, an event comes along that makes all of us at least momentarily question our foundational and core beliefs; that which we accept and understand as truth. My most recent challenge occurred the morning of August 28th, 2008. That day as pilot in command, I logged .8 hours (48 minutes) in my logbook that shook my most foundational belief that I will not die in an aircraft.

I was slightly hung-over and extremely drowsy from drinking the night before, and didn’t have time to brush my teeth, or wash my face. Upon arriving at the small rural airport, I went through the brain-dead routine procedures I had done a million times before. Not really aware of my own actions, I hurried to get through these tasks and escape the morning chill. A quick glance at the sky revealed an overcast layer of clouds, with dark gray bottomed tufts, allowing my depth perception to determine how low the layer actually was. The low clouds seemed low enough to adversely affect my flight; so that I went inside the musty old terminal and roughly checked the weather conditions for my route of flight. Legally, the conditions were too bad for flight where I was taking off, but would get better as I reached my destination. Three miles visibility and a thousand foot ceiling was the legal minimum I needed for the particular aircraft I had just prepared. Usually, as the sun rises in the morning, it burns off the haze, heats the ground, and makes the clouds rise. After takeoff I noted a five-hundred foot cloud ceiling, and

only two miles visibility. Nothing surprising; Ohio weather is characterized by two extremes of hot and cold, and the weather never cooperates with what it's inhabitants want.

I climbed as high as I could until my wings were hugging and skimming along the dark gray tarp above me. I was flying illegally at the time, due to the bad visibility, but everybody does it. Moderate turbulence poked at my airplane, requiring my constant attention and attitude correction. Crossing over Grand Lake made me feel nervous, because there was no horizon between the water and the sky in the hazy conditions. I hate haze; it makes things unclear and limits your visual perspective. Shortly after crossing, the cloud base and I were fifty feet lower than we had been. The clouds continued to gradually lower themselves. They finally got so low that I was roughly three-hundred feet above the ground and only two-hundred feet above the trees. Visibility had lessened to a hazy one mile. At that height, traveling 150 mph, things come at you pretty fast – especially the camouflaged gray towers. It began to rain, adding a pounding roar on the windshield to the loud hum of the engine. As the rain fell, so did the bottom of the cloud as it struggled to retain its saturation.

The world was gone and I had entered into a swirling, cream-colored limbo. My own wings had disappeared and I might have looked down to make sure my arms and legs were still there. Going lower was not an option since I would hit a power line or forest. Procedure calls for a one-minute 180-degree timed turn to fly out of cloud the way you came in. But these “procedures” are made in cramped office buildings by idealist people who are not pilots. Often, what they say you should do, only works in theories. I couldn't turn at this altitude without hitting some kind of ground obstruction in that intolerable one minute. Instantly, I banked ninety degrees and was going back the way I came, but nothing was appearing. The clouds had come down on me; with no option left, I tried to ascend out of the mire into the redeeming blue

heavens above. It felt as if the cloud and haze had come into the cockpit itself and invaded my mind.

Statistics reveal that “Low ceilings and reduced visibility kill more pilots every year than all other weather phenomena combined,” according to AOPA (Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association) magazine. I think we have all heard of typical survival stories usually characterized by pulling out some inner strength, having an extraordinary will to survive, or wanting to see a loved one again. They say your life flashes before your eyes and other sorts of visions occur. I can't say that any of that happened to any noticeable degree, and will refrain from the same cliché of telling you my experience so that you might make some sense of it for yourself.

After a few minutes, I had managed to climb roughly two thousand feet up, but realized within thirty seconds that my climb would only be borrowed time. My aircraft did not have the necessary instruments to tell me if I was going up, to the side, or upside down. Completely desperate, I tried to think of a way to figure out my orientation to the earth, using a compass, altimeter and an airspeed indicator. This was not enough, and so I might have looked at any gauge I could – amp meter, voltmeter, oil temperature, suction, engine rpm – but none of them or any combination thereof could help. I was sure that the turbulence in the cloud had been changing my pitch and bank angles and I watched as the needles on my altimeter started to slow their revolutions. The needle finally stopped, and I knew that in a moment I would be careening out of the sky and impacting the ground. I think I did a few flips and spins as I tried to keep the aircraft from breaking apart from the stress, and I expected to see a bright white light very soon. A revelation occurred as I began to brace for an all but inevitable impact. I noticed that one area of white spinning around was a few shades lighter, while another area was slightly darker. I tried to maneuver the aircraft so that it would be ready to recover, assuming the darker area was where

the ground was at. When I broke out of the cloud layer, I had already started putting the nose towards the darker shade which I assumed to be the direction of the earth. The ground was directly 90 degrees straight down from my left window when I first saw it, and I had already kicked in left rudder to get the nose to a darker shade. I managed to pull out below tree level next to a forest and tightly circled over the corn field, until I decided I would at least try to get it to the next closest airport in Lima, Ohio.

Although sayings and beliefs are comforting, they won't save you; and even less comforting is the fact that sometimes you can't save yourself. Bureaucratic institutions try to deter pilots from flying in bad conditions by stating that crashes are almost always the result of a chain of bad events, not one single event. Experience has shown me that I can formulate a long chain of reasons not to fly for every flight, and thus the chain rule although true, is negligible. After my whole ordeal, I was angry that no one would be able to understand what had just happened, and even worse no one had witnessed my perfect landing afterwards. All I know is that it is another day, I'm still bold, my bag of experience is growing, and I still search for resolution. When people ask me how flying is going, I simply respond, "It has its ups and downs," for lack of a better answer.