



SUSAN PARSON



Checked out from the Members Only Library
Society of Aviation and Flight Educators – www.safepilots.org

Postflight



All Available Information

Weather conditions were nearly perfect for the night flight my friend Mike and I wanted to make. With flight plan filed and preflight complete, we hopped into the DA-40 Diamond *Star* and started the engine. Within seconds, we noticed a big red X across the G1000 primary flight display's transponder.

Uh-oh. No transponder means no-go in the airspace near Washington DC. When the obvious troubleshooting techniques failed to resolve the problem, we shut down.

But all was not lost (yet). A sister ship – a DA-40 we affectionately call the “Steam *Star*” because of its conventional analog “steam gauge” panel – was available, so we re-filed our flight plan, transferred our gear, and started the preflight inspection.

Uh-oh. The last pilot had not ordered fuel, and there clearly wasn't enough gas to fly to our intended destination. No problem. We called the FBO to order fuel.

Almost 45 minutes later, the sunset was long gone and we were still waiting for our number to come up on the fuel truck's top-off list. But our

mutual sense of unease was growing, and it didn't take much discussion for Mike and me to conclude that our scrub-the-flight number *had* come up.

We both subscribe to the policy that if a flight accumulates three strikes, it's out.

Now that may strike you (so to speak) as irrational or superstitious, but let me make the case for why neither is true, and why pilot professionalism – our focus in this issue – includes such policies. First, there is nothing irrational about sticking to a three-strikes policy for scrubbing a flight or, for that matter, some part of a flight. Consider the example of what happens when a pilot flying an instrument approach in solid instrument meteorological conditions (IMC) reaches decision altitude and flies the missed approach. Strike one. She requests vectors to try again ... only this time, fuel is a little tighter and knuckles are a little whiter. Strike two.

Is there anything rational about attempting a third approach? Tensions will be higher, fatigue will be greater, and chances for a bad outcome will multiply.

As for superstition, people in general and pilots in particular take pride in being reasonable. Decisions should be based on facts, not funny feelings, right?

Not so fast.

Though not personally known to me, I count author Malcolm Gladwell among my mentors because I have learned so much from the piercing perceptions and keen insights in his body of work. One of my favorite Gladwell books is *Blink*, which explores the reasoned underpinnings of so-called snap judgments and gut feelings that a narrow definition of reason would compel us to dismiss.

With apologies to Gladwell for oversimplification, *Blink* contends that human beings take in a great deal more information than we can consciously, or “rationally,” process. Nevertheless, other parts of the brain do note, process, and catalog information that might eventually be served up in the form of eye-blink conclusions, or in the kind of diffuse but gnawing sense of unease that gripped my friend Mike and me on the ramp that night.

As you enjoy the rest of the summer flying season, don't forget that *all* available information might well include those instant “doesn't look right” observations, and that listening to the “doesn't feel right” instinct might be key to safe flights and happy landings.

Susan Parson (susan.parson@faa.gov, or @avi8rix for Twitter fans) is editor of FAA Safety Briefing and a Special Assistant in the FAA's Flight Standards Service. She is an active general aviation pilot and flight instructor.

There is nothing irrational about sticking to a three-strikes policy for scrubbing a flight or some part of a flight.