



SUSAN PARSON

# Postflight

## Practicing What I Preach

“Uh-oh.”

These are not words you want to hear at any stage of a flight. In this case, I had scarcely unlocked the left-side door when I heard them uttered by a friend and co-owner of the Cessna 182 *Skylane* that we had flown to Florida for Sun ‘n Fun 2012. Dropping the bags I was about to load, I zipped around to see what prompted that ominous-sounding “uh-oh.”

I wasn’t even able to say that much. The right side of the airplane was streaked with a combination of dried, drying, and dripping 100LL. The fuel drain itself was dry, but avgas was seeping and weeping from every metal seam around it. The pungent odor of essential (and expensive...) blue fuel permeated the humid Florida morning.

For a few long seconds, all we could do was stare in shocked and silent disbelief. When my brain started to clear, it crossed my mind to marvel at how the universe had just served up an opportunity to practice everything I had preached the day before in my “Science of Situational Awareness” safety seminar. Here’s how we needed to be AWARE that day:

### Airplane

The airplane had been fine when we landed at Tampa Executive (KVDF) just a few days earlier. In addition, it had a newly-overhauled engine and a freshly-signed maintenance entry for annual inspection. What on earth could have happened between Wednesday afternoon and Saturday morning? Though it took a few days to get an answer, we knew the airplane was bleeding, and our priority shifted to making maintenance arrangements.

### Weather

Weather would have been a challenge even without the maintenance problem. With wicked thunderstorms forecast to arrive by late morning, we had planned an early-morning departure from KVDF and carefully briefed on a variety of options for en route diversion. We watched that forecast change quite a bit faster during the hours we spent organizing repairs and alternative transportation. I realized (again) that weather prophecy remains an inexact science.

### Alternatives

Although I generally use this “A” in my safety seminars as a hook for discussing awareness of airspace, on that particular morning it plainly represented the need for awareness of good alternatives. A healthy stock of frequent flier miles and hotel points enabled execution of our inevitable “abandon-the-airplane-for-now” decision. It also helped that we had based the bird at a well-equipped GA airport just 15 miles from KTPA.

### Reality

It is both amusing and amazing to watch thoughts in the “this-cannot-be-happening” genre tumble through like a series of waves on the beach. Still, the reality of a fuel leak (deemed “impressive” by an FBO staffer) was perfectly obvious, and we both knew in seconds that we weren’t going anywhere via *Skylane*. Recognizing and quickly accepting that fact cleared the way for us to direct our energy to more constructive pursuits, like arranging repairs and figuring out how to get home.

### External Pressures

Few, if any, flights are arranged and operated without some kind of external pressure lurking, threatening to lure you toward a poor decision. In this case, both of us had important Monday-morning commitments back home. The stress was reduced by having Sunday available as a buffer. It was a good planning decision.

Now for the rest of the story: On Monday we learned that the *Skylane*’s 12-year-old fuel bladder tank had ruptured at the fuel sump, possibly because missing stabilizer clips had allowed it to move too much and, over time, weaken. Thanks to a genial mechanic named Howard and his very reliable aviation repair shop, the C-182 was ready for return to home base by Friday.

And, for the record: Notwithstanding the inconvenience, it was still a lot more fun to fly via *Skylane*.

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