



When Intuition Fails

By Parvez Dara, MD, MCFI

It failed on that fourth Saturday of May. The night was pitch-black. No clouds, but no moon either. The land below glowed intermittently with lights. It was a 150-mile flight and somewhere in the 148th mile the gremlins of disaster stepped in.

Suddenly there was a chilling, spine tingling hiccup from the engine. The pilot-induced airport lighting glowed in the stark linear converging lines of the runway. There was a faint glow from the street lamps arcing around the airfield but the rest was a large black of nothingness.

The second hiccup from the engine followed the first within moments and the airplane hesitated as the thrust was removed momentarily. It felt like hitting an invisible cloud of resistance. The engine monitors showed little deference to the malady imposed by the firewall forward motor. The propeller blades momentarily lit up from the aircraft landing lights as the RPM decreased. The rabbit lights now flashed the lead in to the runway.

The third and final hiccup came at 600 feet above the ground and $\frac{3}{4}$ mile from the Runway Touch Down Zone (TDZ). Everything went silent. The hiccups stopped, the propeller continued wind milling in front of the windshield, each blade visible in the reflection, but the drone of the engine was gone. The MP and the RPM needles sank to rest on their pegs.

The pilot felt he could make it to the runway. The aircraft swooned forward without the benefit of thrust from the engine. The pilot instinctually pulled back on the yoke. The aircraft nose rose in the air and momentarily the wing accommodated the request and the vertical speed went from -600 to 0 FPM.

The airspeed indicator had unwound from the 120 at cruise and now hovered around 70 knots. The best glide speed was around 78 knots or so. Somewhere the pilot recalled the minimum sink glide speed was a bit slower than the best glide speed, but he was not sure now what that number was so 70 knots felt good. The soul of the needle vibrated within its shell, trying to hold true to the number 70 on the white arc. It vacillated wildly as the vestiges of the remaining thrust from the receding momentum of the aircraft and the unchallenged rising drag made the weighty metal of the aircraft yield to the forces of gravity.

He was now over the Rabbit lights and the approach end of the runway and even the runway boundary lights were visible. The altimeter read 300 feet. He could make it with just a little more pull and nudge of the yoke. The airspeed needle was bouncing between 60 and 65 knots. The aircraft was still flying but



sluggishly, slowly the nose felt heavier needing more input decisions from the pilot.

Streams of sweat poured down his back. He felt the cold chill of reason advising the consequences of a botched attempt. If he forced the nose to the ground, he would most certainly crash and destroy the aircraft. It would cause a big deal with the insurance company and might mean he wouldn't be able to get coverage again. If he could just tweak the aircraft gently and let the main wheels hit even before the runway, it would be a controlled crash and he would be home free. The silence was deafening and he could hear his pulse in loud waves crashing within his ears. He kept reminding himself to do the first thing, "Aviate." Fly the plane! But the airfoil aerodynamics were testing the lower limits of the flight envelope and the aluminum aircraft was threatening to suddenly turn into all aluminum.

After all he had some 6000 hours of flying behind him and experience had taught him something. The sweat of doubt kept pouring while the chill of fear clutched at him.

The speed decayed to 59 knots and he was 200 feet above the ground with three of the last remaining Rabbit lights to go.

"Damn," he muttered harshly, "did I switch tanks?" He pressed the Boost Pump Switch to on and with one hand straining on the yoke he turned the knob to switch to the opposite tank with the other hand. The cylinders ignited just as the angle of attack breeched past the stall limit.

The next morning the sun reluctantly lit the unhappy site of a lost life and bent metal. An aggrieved family shed tears about what could have been and officials shook their heads in sorrow over what should have been avoidable. The right wing tank was half full of fuel while the left one was bone dry. The fuel starvation was the result of an unpracticed habit of planning for emergencies – the rites of passage to being an unsafe pilot.

The subtleness of intuition arises from the confines of the soul, garnished with experiential references and it forces the hand of the body's spontaneity through instinct. Both these richly imbued elements of daily life are governed by the knowledge of the mind. Any amount of experience can, in a flash of a moment, if allowed, be subjugated to the whims of the former two, leading to disaster.

Intuition drives the instincts. The mind, with its seat of knowledge, governs and moderates the final decision, never the other way around. Practicing Emergency Procedures periodically would have saved the day and another uneventful landing would have been accomplished. Going through a mental checklist of decisions in the order of their rightful sequence would have prevented this



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

calamity. Even in moments of panic the oft-practiced sequence would have accomplished the desired outcome.

The devil that makes us match the angle of bank to the slope of the cloud against the attitude Indicator's display of the Real Reality is the same devil that conspires for bad outcomes when constant practice and proficiency are lacking. Thus acquisition and constant practice of knowledge is the only solution to a safe outcome in aviation and life.

Learn! – Gain knowledge.

Practice! – Gain Instinct.

Live! – Gain Intuition.

Let Intuition and Instincts be guided by Knowledge.

What To Do

Be thoroughly familiar with your airplane and be current in it, or get a check ride.

Pre-plan all aspects of your flight — including weather. Fly your plan.

Use services available — FSS, Weather Bureau, etc.

Pre-flight your airplane thoroughly.

Use your checklists.

Have more than enough fuel for takeoff, the planned trip and adequate reserve.

Be sure your weight loading and C.G. are within limits.

Be sure articles and baggage are secured.

Check freedom of all controls.

Maintain appropriate airspeed in takeoff, climb, descent and landing.

Avoid other aircraft's wake turbulence.

Switch fuel tanks before engine starvation occurs.

Practice engine out, emergency landing gear extension and other emergency procedures at safe altitude — preferably with a check pilot.

Use caution in mountainous terrain.

Keep your airplane in good mechanical condition.

Stay informed and alert, fly in a sensible manner.

Contact Information:

Parvez Dara, MD FACP, ATP, MCFI, MEI, AGI

FAASTeam Member – Phil FSDO

Director MAPA Safety Foundation

SAFE member.

Dara@dnamail.com

<http://jedismedicine.blogspot.com>