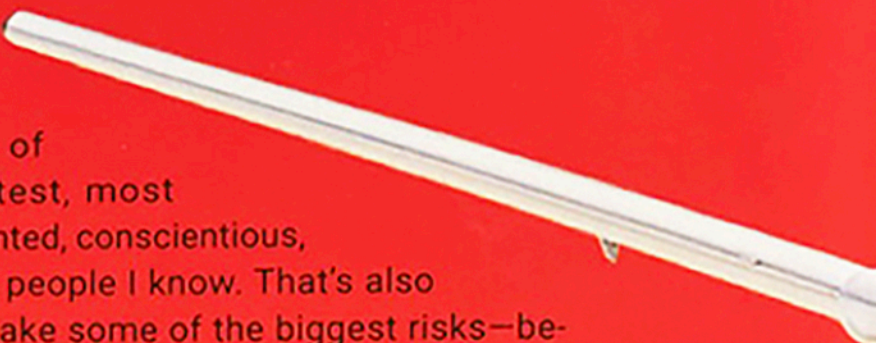




100 Smart Pilots
and the Dumb
Things They Did
Yet Lived to Tell
About 'Em



JEFFREY JAMES MADISON



Pilots
are some of
the smartest, most
detail-oriented, conscientious,
deliberate people I know. That's also
why they take some of the biggest risks—be-
cause if you ask them, they'll tell you they're some of the
smartest, most detail-oriented, conscientious, deliberate
people they know.

Visit an airport and hang out with pilots. If you hang
around long enough, you'll hear somebody say—right after
swapping a particularly harrowing hangar tale—"Good
judgement is the result of experience and experience the
result of bad judgement." Pilots love to quote Mark Twain.

But despite our abnormally high self-confidence,
pilots also are coachable. We learn from our mistakes,
and the mistakes of others.

This book is dedicated to all those smart pilots
who've made dumb mistakes and lived to tell about
them, so that the rest of us can learn from them and
become better aviators.

Jeffrey Madison a pilot since 1995, is a well-regarded aviation
safety expert. He is writer of the "Human Factors" column in
General Aviation News. Jeffrey is currently an airline pilot for a
regional and is an ATP, CFI/MEI, and has over 1,000 hours dual
given. He has flown into more than 250 GA airports throughout
most of the Lower 48.

OPUS SELF-PUBLISHING

Politics and Prose Bookstore
5015 Connecticut Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20009



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INTRODUCTION

These 100 smart pilots who did dumb things, and whose stories I share, all had three things in common:

1. They all used the FAA's Aviation Safety Reporting System to confess their transgressions,
2. They all admitted to learning something valuable worth sharing as a result, and
3. They all therefore escaped any enforcement action against them by the FAA.

Since its inception, the Federal Aviation Administration has tried to maintain a dialogue with pilots. At its best, the FAA learns from pilot errors, disseminates that new knowledge and works to promote a culture of aviation safety.

Yet often pilots think of the FAA at its worst—an overreaching bureaucracy bent on causing freedom-loving pilots trouble. So there hasn't been a long history of trust despite the fact that both sides agree learning from the mistakes of other aviators is a valuable teaching tool. If you've ever spent any time at the airport hangar flying with your buddies or critiqued other pilots' landings from the FBO porch, you know what I'm talking about.

The FAA knows about hangar flying, and about the educational benefits of pilots sharing tales of derring-do and goof-ups. It wanted to formalize the process of encouraging pilots to self-report, so more than just a few of our flying buddies would benefit from hearing about our harrowing moments. So, in 1976, the FAA established the Aviation Safety Reporting System (ASRS) in partnership with NASA. Through it, pilots submit reports to NASA, which then strips all identifying information from them—giving pilots confidence to admit mistakes without fear of reprisal.

The main thing to remember is you can *only* submit a NASA after an incident if you did it unintentionally, weren't committing a crime in the process, and didn't suffer an accident or crash as a result. You must also indicate a lesson learned and an intention to never repeat what you did. Lastly you must file the report within 10 days of the event's occurrence.

ASRS is a great concept but difficult to pronounce, so most pilots just call the report they fill out a "NASA." You don't have to be a pilot to submit a NASA. Anybody using the National Airspace System can too: air traffic controllers, cabin crew, maintenance technicians, dispatchers, ground personnel and others involved in aviation operations.

NASAs educate through a public database, which serves the needs of the FAA and NASA, and other organizations worldwide that are engaged in research and the promotion of safe flight. People like me.

For six and a half years, I plumbed the depths of tens of thousands of NASAs and wrote about them in my Human Factors column at *General Aviation News*. I reported on hundreds of unintentional pilot mishaps and analyzed the human factors surrounding their misdeeds. I included both the pilots' lessons learned along with additional

takeaways I gleaned from comparing their reports to other similar NASAs. Sprinkled in are some of my own gaffes, too.

I shared some real NASA doozies in my column. Now I'm sharing the most incredible ones with you. My hope is the same as all the smart pilots who confessed to that dumb thing they did: Share these stories and perhaps another pilot will learn something valuable about flying and become a better aviator to boot.

At the end of each brief chapter, I pose three questions. Those questions are designed to increase your overall situational awareness and boost your aviation decision-making skills. Thank you for reading my book. Enjoy.

ASLEEP AT THE YOKE

Falling asleep while flying is something I've never done. I remember reading about a flight crew who did, overflying their Hawaiian island destination. I wondered what those two pilots felt in that moment when they both suddenly awoke with land and the airport well behind them. I can only imagine the gut-wrenching feeling they must have experienced.

A Piper Seneca pilot alluded to that feeling in his report to NASA's Aviation Safety Reporting System. He overflowed his destination by more than 500 miles. He woke up aloft, low on gas, over the Gulf of Mexico.

The pilot wrote in his NASA report that he decided to drive all night from an unspecified location to his job as a flight instructor at an unnamed airport. He arrived just after 6 a.m. He took care of some paperwork, then departed from that airport to Crossville Memorial Airport-Whitson Field (KCSV) in Crossville, Tenn. According to the pilot, the flight from his home airport to KCSV is supposed to take about 40 minutes.

As he neared KCSV, he fell asleep. He woke up two and a half hours and more than 500 miles later. He wrote of being disoriented and unable to recognize any landmarks. That's because there weren't

any landmarks. His plane had proceeded southwest, over Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama and Florida. He woke up more than 200 miles out over the Gulf of Mexico. Fortunately, the Seneca's fuel tanks had been filled, which gave him about a 600 nm range. Otherwise, he might have run out of fuel sooner, over mountains or forests.

Once he regained some situational awareness, he turned back north and aimed for the Lynne NDB (non-directional beacon) near Panama City, Fla. He also transmitted a distress signal on the aviation emergency frequency, 121.5. The Coast Guard responded and gave him vectors east toward St. Pete-Clearwater International Airport (KPIE) in St. Petersburg-Clearwater, Fla.

The book cruise speed of a Seneca is about 162 knots. Unfortunately, this pilot was so far out over the Gulf of Mexico that after 30 minutes his airplane ran out of fuel, still out of sight of land. He declared an emergency, feathered his props and ditched into the ocean.

A Coast Guard Falcon dropped a life raft near the downed plane, but the pilot could not get to it. That's because he didn't know how to swim. Instead, he clung to two seat cushions for 20 minutes until a Coast Guard helicopter arrived and hoisted him to safety.

According to his report, the only lesson this pilot learned from the incident was that he needed to learn how to swim.

Pulling an all-nighter is only one way to find oneself asleep behind the yoke. Coming down off an intense, prolonged adrenaline rush is another, and it's more insidious. The pilot of a light twin filed a NASA report, citing that as the reason for his sudden onset exhaustion and subsequent airborne snooze.

On the first leg of his two-leg cargo run, he experienced a hydraulic problem. As a result, he became overly worried that the gear

would not extend. He prepped himself by reading and re-reading the emergency gear extension checklists and memorizing gear up procedures should the manual extension not work.

Reading his account of events in his NASA, I came to understand the phrase “he worked himself into a lather.” This guy had psyched himself up like he was in the last moments of a World War II suicide bombing mission.

“Strangely, I began to feel the effects of what can be described as an increased level of anxiety,” he wrote. “I kept telling myself this is a non-issue, but the adrenaline clearly had begun to flow. My heart rate was noticeably increased, and my palms were damp with sweat.”

All his worry and preparation were for naught. The gear came down normally, and he landed uneventfully. He swapped company planes, but it took more than an hour of bureaucracy to clear him for departure. Just after he climbed to cruise altitude, his body dumped out of his system all the adrenaline it had pumped into it a few hours earlier. As a result, he experienced a physiological “crash” at 9,000 feet while in cruise.

“A glance at the GPS and I recall my descent will start in about 17 minutes. I close my eyes for a few seconds.” Approximately 35 minutes later, he woke up suddenly, flailing his limbs in the process. “I can see the glow of the clouds below and ahead of what I think is the city of the destination airport approaching. I continue on my course.”

Only when he scanned the GPS did he become confused. It indicated he was 17 minutes past the destination airport. It had also drawn him a course 180° behind his current position back to the airport. He wrote of being further confused by the body of water

below him, a body of water similar in appearance to one he knew was on the approach to his destination airport.

His attempts to contact ATC went unheeded. At that point, he was still unsure if he was lost, but he definitely thought his radios had failed. Just before squawking 7600 — the code for lost communications — he decided to check his headset cables. That's when he discovered they were unplugged. When he had startled himself awake, it turns out he'd kicked the headset plugs out of their sockets. Once he reestablished contact with ATC and explained his situation, he got vectors to the field. He landed without further incident, followed by a lengthy phone call to an ATC supervisor.

I watch a lot of action movies. I read a lot of action novels, too. But I don't recall any of them describing the crash the hero's body would suffer after narrowly surviving a 40-villain ambush, or after escaping a million-bullet gunfight with only a graze. So I didn't know surviving a life-threatening, adrenaline-pumping experience would cause somebody to physically collapse soon after. The information probably doesn't make for good reading, but it is vital to know.

Scientists, doctors and the International Close Quarters Protection Operators Association (ICQPOA) — the association of professional bodyguards — find this information important enough to provide plenty of documentation. Their jobs are comprised mostly of monotonous moments of hyper-vigilance punctuated by infrequent moments of life-threatening terror. Sound familiar?

The ICQPOA reminds its membership “after a life-threatening situation has passed, most if not all people experience a kind of burnout. After only a few minutes of extreme mental and physical intensity, the human body can collapse in exhaustion.”

Adrenaline is one of a cocktail of chemicals the body blasts into your system during a fight-or-flight event. Adrenaline increases your heart rate, gives you an immediate surge of energy and focuses your attention. Simultaneously, your brain and your adrenal glands release norepinephrine, which does the same things as adrenaline. It's a backup in case your adrenal glands fail or are weak. Norepinephrine also improves your response time while diverting blood flow from non-essential body areas, like your skin, to essential areas, like your muscles.

Minutes later, the adrenal glands push out cortisol. Its mission is to maintain body fluid balance and optimum blood pressure. During a crisis, it suppresses other primal physiological urges like sex drive, immune response, digestive processes, and even growth.

Running out of fuel far from shore and preparing to ditch into the Gulf of Mexico is about as life-threatening as it gets. The possibility of a landing gear failure while inbound to an airport with emergency personnel and an adequate runway may not seem an equivalent threat to many pilots.

However, our brains cannot differentiate between real and imagined life-threatening events. So when the twin aircraft cargo pilot ginned himself up into a state of high anxiety by worrying about what catastrophe might occur with inoperative landing gear, his body went into fight-or-flight mode. It loaded him up with the Big Three.

Depending on a person's health and how he or she handles stress, it might take half an hour or a day and a half to recover from the excess adrenaline, norepinephrine and cortisol released into the bloodstream. The chemicals themselves force the body into attack mode. Afterward, the body must process them through the kidneys, liver and small intestines before excreting them.

The body recovers and repairs itself most efficiently when asleep. That's why our physical reaction after an extreme threat event is to collapse, fall asleep, and let the repair and recovery processes occur.

"I think something we can take away from this is to really look and question the decision to continue a flight after having to perform certain emergency procedures," concluded the twin aircraft cargo pilot.

The ICQPOA takes it one step further. It warns its members to guard against a counterattack by fresher adversaries who will take advantage of the post-threat "crash."

Good advice for us pilots, too. The post-adrenaline collapse leaves us vulnerable to our own host of adversaries: Get-thereitis, weather, and even our own aircraft.

QUESTIONS

- 1) LIST THE LINKS IN THE CHAIN THAT CAUSED THE PIPER SENECA PILOT TO FALL ASLEEP DURING HIS FLIGHT.**
- 2) WHAT ARE THE FOUR CHEMICALS THE HUMAN BODY SECRETES DURING A "FIGHT OR FLIGHT" EVENT?**
- 3) UNLIKE IN ACTION MOVIES, WHAT REALLY HAPPENS TO THE HUMAN BODY AFTER A "FIGHT OR FLIGHT" EVENT? THEREFORE WHAT'S THE BEST COURSE OF ACTION TO TAKE WHEN THAT OCCURS?**

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