

Seat of the Pants

I'm a pilot and experience has taught me that flying an airplane is hours of boredom punctuated by moments of stark terror.

I'm always looking for ways to improve my piloting skills and a few years back I took an aerobatics lesson in Daytona Beach. Aerobatics is acrobatics for airplanes, spins, rolls, loops and flying inverted, upside down.

Improving your piloting skills is a good thing but, the key to being a superior pilot is using your superior judgment to avoid the situations where you might have to use your superior skills.

This is a story of how a series of minor judgment failures can have major consequences.

Judgment failure one, my instructor, he called himself Maverick, I kid you not. A short, stocky bulldog with NAVY emblazoned across his sweatshirt.

When he introduced himself, I was so focused on his glass eye that I failed notice that the hand I was shaking was also a prosthetic. Judgment failure two, three and four.

Maverick arrived an hour late, so he skipped checking out the plane assuring me he had flown it earlier in the week with no problems and, if we had any problems as he explained, "that's why we got on parachutes."

Judgment failure five and six and just so I don't leave the stage completely humiliated, I'm going to stop keeping track at this point.

We departed Daytona International and as we leveled off over the beach at 3000 feet, Maverick cranked the yolk and we were instantly upside down.

I can tell you, there's nothing like it, both exhilarating and frightening as hell.

At that moment, my favorite flying quote from Leonard da Vinci popped into my head: "When once you have tasted flight, you will forever walk the earth with your eyes turned skyward, for there you have been, and there you will always long to return."

My thoughts were interrupted by an unsettling silence and the acrid smell of aviation fuel filling the cockpit.

With our only engine out, I should have immediately focused on our situation, but now the whole da Vinci thing was bugging me. Da Vinci lived in the 1500's. Man didn't fly until 400 years after he was dead. Leonardo never tasted flight and I'd be willing to bet if that son of a bitch was sitting next to me in the plane, it'd be the last goddamn time he waxed poetic about flying.

Maverick snapped us upright, desperately pumping the throttle back and forth. "Get on the radio and declare an emergency."

I frantically keyed open the mike: "Good Afternoon, Daytona approach, N4349X we're over Daytona Beach, 3000 feet, seems like we got an engine out and we're declaring an emergency."

That's right, the pilot voice, the one you hear on the news after some big aviation disaster, you know that voice, the one that screams. "I'm-still-in-control-even-though-we're-totally-fucked."

Daytona sensed my anxiety, "Roger, 49X, are you in control of the airplane?" Before I can answer, Maverick clicks in: "no more than usual."

Instead of circling and landing on the beach, like I thought we were going to do, Maverick glided us away from the beach. In the distance, across three miles of swampy creeks, I spotted an small county airport.

I changed frequencies and begin declaring an emergency.

A mile out, we're lined up on for runway only to discover another plane taking off in our direction.

We snapped our plane on its side, barely avoiding a head on collision at less than a thousand feet.

Then in a brilliant aerobatic move Maverick rolled the plane back towards the airport and glided us smoothly to the runway.

I jumped out and kissed the ground. Maverick began slamming his gear on the runway and screamed, "Goddamnit! That's the third time that's happened to me in this plane."

We hitched a ride with a fellow instructor for the short flight back.

My superior judgment told me we were safe at last.

As we taxied out, Maverick recounted every moment of the flight to his instructor friend who completely ignored his German student pilot.

At the end of the runway, in broken English, the German radioed our departure. At the same time, another plane announced they were taking off on the same runway.

We looked around, there was no other plane. That's because the student had taxied to the wrong runway.

Now, it takes less than superior judgment to know that the best thing to do would be to taxi to the correct runway and take off from there, right? Without hesitation, the instructor shoved the throttle forward and shouted to the German, "Just Go."

Thankfully, we never saw the other plane.

As we lifted off, our tiny Cessna, designed for two people, struggled for altitude with the weight of four. Maverick and the instructor were so caught up in the discussion of our near disaster that they failed to notice the new one rapidly developing as the student pulled the nose of the plane higher and higher.

So high, that the wings stopped flying and the nose plummeted towards the ground. The instructor yanked us up, yelled at the German to keep it level, then turned the plane back over to him and returned to his conversation.

I still don't know which of the two flights I feared more for my life.

Flying was my second greatest thrill that day, getting in my car and driving away, the first and since then I've adopted a new flying quote: It's better to be down here wishing you were up there, than up there wishing you were down here.