

HOW SAFE A PILOT ARE YOU?

BY: DAVE FITZPATRICK

Have you ever found yourself trying to turn a bad landing into a good one—like after several bounces down the runway?

Have you continued a flight into deteriorating weather conditions despite the potential risks and hazards?

If you said yes, you have been guilty of a pilot decision-making error. These are the leading cause of the majority of aviation accidents and the resulting insurance claims.

THE INVULNERABLE PILOT

There are, of course, hundreds of different pilot errors. But perhaps the worst problem is what we refer to as “the invulnerable pilot”.

The invulnerable pilot believes that they have the skills and expertise to overcome any situation that comes their way. They’ve usually been flying for years and nothing bad has ever happened to them. As a result, an undue sense of security and downright overconfidence can develop. This often leads to bad decisions—and big trouble.

Here’s an example I’ve recently come across. Peter, a very experienced pilot, was captaining a Learjet owned by a large corporation. He was ready for take-off as soon as his passengers arrived. They were two company executives who had rushed in from a business meeting and were behind schedule for a meeting at their next stop—which was a two-hour flight away.

The weather conditions at their airport of departure consisted of a 2000 foot ceiling with scattered layers at 500 and 800 feet. The airport was surrounded by mountainous terrain. An IFR clearance would take at least 30 minutes. Since his passengers were in such a rush, Peter decided to depart VFR and try to obtain an IFR clearance en route, flying at about 1500 feet AGL.

The one possibility Peter didn’t consider happened: he was unable to obtain his IFR clear-

ance because of heavy IFR traffic. Peter was unable to maintain visual references to the ground. Just a few minutes after take-off the jet crashed into a mountain.

THE MORAL OF THE STORY

This story clearly shows that even a veteran pilot can make a fatal error when their decisions are based on something other than smart piloting. In this case time pressure was the culprit, but it can be any number of things.

Another problem was that Peter didn’t think the situation through very carefully. He just assumed he would get his IFR clearance. It never occurred to him that he might not. Had he thought about all the possibilities he would have realized the danger. The low visibility and dangerous terrain didn’t seem all that significant to Peter.

As the prototypical invulnerable pilot, he was confident that nothing could really go wrong for him. The trouble is that very often the first thing which goes wrong is also the last.

In the luckiest cases such pilots get a big scare which straightens them and their attitude out. But the best way to avoid the risk is to keep educating yourself about proper piloting decisions.

You have to realize that accidents can and do happen. Only by maintaining a healthy respect for safety and your own limitations can you minimize your risks.

Keep learning.

And keep on making good decisions.



DAVE FITZPATRICK IS AN AIRCRAFT OWNER, PILOT AND THE PRESIDENT OF AIR 1 INSURANCE. HE OFFERS FREE AVIATION INSURANCE REVIEWS TO THOSE THAT CALL HIM AT 1-888-917-1177.