

I Learned About Flying from That: Judgment Lesson

Riding out the storm in an Aeronca Sedan

Flying Magazine

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“Good judgment comes with experience; unfortunately, experience is usually gained through bad judgment.”

That saying is probably as old as Wilbur and -Orville. We old pilots have developed our good habits through many years of flying and training. We have made mistakes along the way, and we have learned from them. We have had the good fortune, or, in many cases, the good luck to turn these bad experiences into good judgment. A great deal of air has passed over my wings and much water has passed under my keels since this near catastrophe played itself out in almost total darkness on Oklahoma’s Grand Lake o’ the Cherokees.

My brother Fred and I were operating an Aeronca Sedan on floats, making big money fast by selling sightseeing flights at two bucks a pop. The Aeronca is an airplane slightly larger than a Cessna 170 with the same Continental 145 hp engine. It is not a fast airplane, but it carries a good load. I was a young pilot at the time and eager for work. Flying was my game, and I

did anything and everything to gain experience and add time to my logbook so I could move up the aviation ladder. I had worked the previous summer in Alaska flying a Super Cub on floats out of Lake Hood. The Cub was a red-hot performer compared to the Aeronca. But despite its weaknesses, we could carry three or four paying passengers plus the pilot.

I was a low-time pilot when I applied for the Grand Lake job, but I had experience in Alaska, which was very valuable. And besides, seaplane pilots were not plentiful in the Midwest. There was one other applicant for the job; however, he weighed 225 pounds, and I tipped the scales at 135. It often meant I could carry an extra passenger. Weight is critical in any airplane, but even more so in a seaplane. The heavier the seaplane is, the longer it takes to get on the step as it accelerates on the water for takeoff.

We were working out of a busy resort tucked away in a cove. The lake was filled with boats on weekends, and the sooner I could get off the water and into the safety of the air, the better. My sightseeing flights out across the lake were short, only about 15 minutes, and then a turn for a downwind landing would bring me back to my home dock. Fred was still in high school and was a student pilot. His job was selling tickets, loading and unloading passengers, and shoving the airplane away from the dock.

Business had been good on that Fourth of July weekend. The passengers kept coming, and the money was rolling in. I had flown well into the warm summer evening. Dusk was falling, and we had emptied the last of our fuel into the airplane. The day had been hot and muggy, as the Midwest often can be, with temperatures in the high 90s. The airplane struggled on every takeoff; the density altitude was over 5,000 feet, although the lake was only 600 feet msl. The sun was setting in the west, sending shafts of orange plunging through the towering cumulus clouds just over the horizon. I unloaded my last passengers of the long day, and we hoisted aboard our empty gas cans for the fuel run to the airstrip at Monkey Island Resort. Fred flew the leg over because gaining experience was his reward for working long hours with little pay. A light wind was picking up out of the south, and to the distant west I could see lightning flashing. We could usually make the fuel run in 30 minutes round trip. Seaplanes and darkness do not mix well, and if you throw in a thunderstorm, you have a flight plan for disaster. It would have gone more quickly if I had flown, but it was Fred's leg. With a bit of coaching from me, he made a perfect water landing and taxied to the dock. The wind was increasing, but I wasn't worried. The airplane would lift off the water sooner with an increase in wind, and I would fly the leg back.

The waves were now building, rocking the airplane at the dock. It took the dockhand what seemed like forever to fill our gas cans. I was in a hurry to get going because the sky was getting blacker. Darkness was now becoming a serious factor. The wind shifted and thunder rumbled overhead. We loaded our fuel cans, and lightning flashed, lighting up the evening sky as we shoved away from the dock.

The super-heated air near the lake's surface was rising to meet the cooler air coming in with the approaching cold front. The two masses meeting the moisture from the lake was the

catalyst that formed those violent thunderstorms. They had the potential to turn vicious in a matter of a few minutes. The storms often brought with them heavy rain, lightning, severe turbulence, wind shear and possibly heavy hail.

I ignored all these signs because I was in a hurry to tie up to our dock and get the airplane secured. I failed to use good judgment because I lacked experience.

As I fired up the engine, it occurred to me that we were sitting in an airplane filled with cans of gasoline as lightning was striking the hills around us. I thought we could get home and tied up before the worst of the storms hit. As I taxied away from the dock, large drops of rain pelted the airplane. I still had not gotten the message.

I opened the throttle and charged into the building waves. Bouncing into the air with spray flying, I was happy to get off the water and into the air. As I accelerated to climb speed and turned for home, rain began pelting the windshield like machine-gun bullets. I climbed to get out of the rough air but soon began to hit scud at 400 feet. I was heading right into a squall line and flying into a dangerous corner with no safe options. The rain was so heavy on the windshield now that I had very little forward visibility in the darkening sky.

Flying the 20 miles up the lake at this altitude was too risky. I knew right then we were in trouble. Big trouble. Those danger signs were now staring me in the face. I had finally gotten the message, but it arrived about 15 minutes too late.

I decided to set down on the water and step-taxi home. The landing was one big splash, followed by a jarring jolt, then another and another as the Aeronca skipped over the waves and settled down to taxi speed. This was not going to work. The waves were over 2 feet high and breaking with whitecaps. The water was too rough to fast-taxi; the waves were smashing over the floats and hitting the propeller. Each breaking wave sent buckets of angry foaming water crashing over the nose and into the windshield. I backed the power off to a slow taxi and the heavily loaded Aeronca settled deeply into the water. All I could do was taxi directly into the wind. It made no difference what heading I tried to steer, the nose turned right back into the wind. The rudder and the sea rudder could not turn us.

By now it was pitch-black, with pouring rain, thunder, and lightning all around. The wind was 35 mph, gusting to 45 mph. We were standing still and, at times, moving backward. I added enough power to keep the airplane stationary, and the wings rocked violently as waves hit the floats. The danger now was that the wind would pick up a wing and force the opposite wing into the water.

If you think an airplane is hard to handle in turbulent air, just wait till you find yourself in heavy seas, unable to control even your heading. Airplanes make miserable boats; they are meant to be in the air where wings can support them and controls are effective. On the water those very wings catch air and can capsize the floating airplane, and the controls can become useless.

We were in white-capped swells with waves crashing over the bows of the floats. Capsizing and sinking was a definite possibility. I told Fred to break out the Mae West life preservers; we put them on, took off our shoes and unlatched the doors, ready to abandon ship at any time.

As the storm continued to blow itself out, my survival instincts began to strengthen. I could now see lights on the shore, and I was beginning to make out cabins and docks. The shoreline was circled with trees, hills and rocks — definitely not a safe place to beach an airplane at night. I headed for open water.

I could see a blinking light in the distance. In one brilliant lightning flash I could make out tents and a campfire. I flashed my landing light, and the light on the shore flashed back. I flashed three dots, three dashes, and three dots, the international signal for distress. To my complete amazement, I received the same Morse code back.

I continued to work my way toward the light. I was on the lee side of an island where the wind was milder and the water smoother. Getting closer to the signaler, I saw that he held two flashlights, one in each hand. When we got within 10 feet, I could see that he was standing in about knee-deep water, and he signaled me to cut the -engine. Fred and I jumped out of the airplane into the water, and the three of us pulled the Aeronca safely up on the only sandy beach around.

"Hello, I'm Greg and this is my wife, Nancy. Welcome to our island. We are camping here for the weekend," said my rescuer. "I'm a B-52 pilot from McConnell. When I told Nancy that was an airplane out there on the water, she didn't believe me. She said, 'Who would be dumb enough to be out on this lake on a night like this?'"

"Hi, I'm Jim," I said weakly. "Thanks for the help."