

PROFICIENT PILOT

Recklessness or skill?

BY BARRY SCHIFF

I am occasionally asked if I have ever been truly frightened while flying a general aviation airplane. If asked by a nonpilot, I usually try to sidestep the truth because of a natural desire to defend general aviation, to promote it, and to encourage others to join our brotherhood.

But when asked by a fellow pilot, a compatriot with whom I share the sky, I confess that, yes, I have been scared, very scared. What experienced pilot hasn't been deeply concerned for his or her safety at one time or another?

My most frightening moment occurred many years ago while ferrying a relatively new Cessna 185 from Switzerland to Indiana. I was over the Denmark Strait, an icy finger of the North Atlantic Ocean that pokes its way between Iceland and southern Greenland. A low oil-pressure indication grabbed my attention and almost gave me cardiac arrest. The needle was nudging the lower limit of the gauge. The windswept ocean was pockmarked with churning whitecaps that offered little hope of a survivable ditching. The nearest airport, my destination, was hundreds of miles beyond the western horizon.

After shaking my head to rid myself of disbelief, I communicated my plight to the crew of a nearby airliner on 121.5 MHz. The captain of the Douglas DC-7 offered words of encouragement and comfort, but these did little to alleviate the wracking fear and rivulets of perspiration crawling down my neck.

I also reduced power. Although this would increase the time during which the engine would continue to operate with low or no oil pressure, it also would increase the time required to make landfall and prolong the agony (if I were to make it that far).

I then organized my raft and other survival equipment, but I had little faith in its ability to keep me alive.

Every passing minute seemed like 15, but eventually the ice-covered island with the most inappropriate name came into view. At least now my fate would be determined more by the outcome of a forced landing on ice than by a ditching in the ocean.

My destination, Narsarsuaq, miraculously came into view at the near end of a long fjord, and I was blessed with the opportunity to make an uneventful landing.

A mechanic for Scandinavian Airlines decreed that the engine was fine. The abnormal oil-pressure indication, he said, was the result of a contaminant holding open the pressure-relief valve.

I continued the flight to South Bend, but this was to be my last transoceanic flight in a single-engine airplane. I was no longer willing to bet my life on the continuous operation of a piston engine in such a hostile environment.

Any form of motion involves an element of risk. Climbing out of a bathtub, riding a horse, or walking across the street is not without some hazard. The idea, I eventually concluded, is to acknowledge and understand the risk associated with each flight and determine in advance whether the reward is worth the risk. For me, a flight across the North Atlantic during the winter in a single-engine, piston-powered airplane is not worth the risk. Others may disagree and that is their prerogative. But it is also their risk, not mine.

The process of assessing the hazards and determining which ones we are or are not willing to accept is known as *risk management*. The more experienced a pilot, the better is his ability to assess risk. Charles A. Lindbergh put it another way when he wrote, "I learned that danger is relative, and that inexperience is a magnifying glass."

Does this mean that I won't fly at

night in a single? No. Does it mean that I won't fly over the Rockies? No. Does it mean that I won't fly instruments in a single? Of course not. But it is unlikely that you'll find me flying over the Rocky Mountains or the Sierra Nevada at night in instrument meteorological conditions. Reduce the risks and I am more likely to consider filing a flight plan.

Some argue convincingly that failures and malfunctions are no more likely to occur during night IMC than on a clear day. After all, we are told, the airplane, the engine, and its systems don't know the difference between night and day (the perception of automatic rough notwithstanding). This is true. What such bold pilots often fail to mention, however, is that many such problems can be far more serious and consequential at night or during IMC than on a VFR day.

Complacency probably explains why we often fail to properly assess the risks associated with a given flight. Consider that IFR flight over the mountains at night. When a pilot undertakes such a challenge for the first time, he probably does so with anxiety and apprehension. The odds are, however, that he will complete the flight successfully. This encourages him to do it again and again until he does not give it much thought, even though the risks involved have not lessened one iota.

A U.S. Army publication, *Flight Facts*, puts it this way. "When first attained, each new plateau of risk seems to be the last." But as we grow accustomed to it, a new horizon beckons. What instills us from fear as we approach the danger is simply habit, the familiarity of a point we have reached and all of the points we have left behind. Until one steps too far, it is often difficult to tell the difference between recklessness and skill. □

