

Late One Summer Night

~by Wayne Doudney

There was lightning in the distance from the northeast through the southwest. Occasionally, we could see the lights of the city as we moved through the clouds—reassuring us that there was a place where the final landing would end this long, grueling day. Then we would go to the hotel where we could finally relax. Fatigue was subtly taking control of our will and our lives. Our day had begun more than 17 hours ago, and we were tired and edgy. We began our decent about ninety miles southwest of Little Rock.

It was difficult to determine if the lightning ahead was between the field and us, directly over the field or on the far side. Minutes earlier, we were advised by our dispatcher that the weather was northwest of Little Rock and moving toward the airport—if we hurried, we might get there before the weather arrived. Our challenge was to beat the weather to the airport—if successful, our reward would be the ability to get out of this cockpit and away from its demanding stresses. We flew as fast as we could, however, once in the lower altitudes the air became so unstable that we had to slow. We slowed enough to keep from bouncing our cabin crew around although they were seated and buckled in their seats.

It's funny how a lifetime of history can run through your mind in seconds. I was preoccupied with getting to the airport and on the ground, but my mind was filled with all kinds of thoughts, ripping around inside my head quicker than the speed of light. I happen to have an imposter who lives up there among all those thoughts. I'll tell you more about him later.

I was physically tired, but I felt reasonably alert. At this moment in time if we had been sitting on an assigned flight level in smooth air, my eyes might have become heavy, and I would have caught myself dozing off. This job is often an ongoing battle of fighting to stay awake. Not tonight. The thoughts of dealing with thunderstorms has the tendency of keeping me from getting the least bit sleepy even after being on duty for more than 12, almost 13 hours. Lightning and thunder have the ability to keep you awake even when you're safe at home in your own bed.

My first officer (F/O) must have been exhausted. He would never admit it, but he had commuted into Chicago from Southern California only hours before our first departure which was more than twelve hours earlier. Commuting is difficult even when conditions are perfect. It wouldn't be so bad if you could always sit in first class, wear a pair of BOSE noise canceling headphones and get comfortable. But, if you are stuck in a tiny coach seat between two fat people who smell and refuse to leave you alone because it is obvious that you are a pilot—well, it isn't pretty, and this scenario is more likely than not. He must be tired, almost to exhaustion. I don't care if he is only twenty-something-years-old.

Twelve hours on duty as a Captain and Check Airman is tiring enough. We departed mid-morning from Chicago O'Hare International Airport (ORD) to Salt Lake City International Airport (SLC) then, after a little over an hour on to Dallas Ft. Worth Regional Airport (DFW). Like ORD and Los Angeles International Airport (LAX), DFW is a jungle built of concrete with many varieties of motorized equipment zipping around from here to there at incredible speeds. There is an airplane parked at every gate waiting to be pushed back while another one is standing by waiting to take its place. It is a constant state of chaos, and I marvel at how it continues day after day without an employee being injured or killed more often than they are.

I mentioned the imposter. I haven't made friends with him as he is an imaginary being who lives in my mind and helps me to make it through the days when I'm on the job or in public. My imposter is constantly telling me that I am the best. The most educated, the most liked, the best check airman ever. He is always telling me that there is nothing that I can't handle. Whether it be a weary F/O or my own fatigue, late equipment, surly flight attendants or gate agents. "You can handle it," he says to me in a whisper, "because you are who you are. You have credentials, several type-ratings and never busted a check ride or a written

exam. You are so smart that when you were furloughed early in your career you found a job as an engineer at a nuclear propulsion facility. Man you are cool. You are more than the ace of the base—you are the ace of all airline pilots. You are right up there with Chuck Yeager and Lucky Lindy. You were just born too late to set any records because they were all taken when you arrived. You don't need to be an astronaut to be great—you have humility, after all, you are the most humble person to ever fly—as hard as it is for most pilots, you find that being humble is a piece of cake. Like I said——Man you are cool.” And, this imposter never quits. He is always there encouraging me when I think I need encouragement. I think a lot of his encouragement is false advertising, but I enjoy receiving it because he always made me feel like I was better than everyone else and supplied the false humility to go along with it. He is like a drug that makes you feel good. He made me know that I am cool. With this imposter constantly talking to me I have little time to think about important things like those flesh and blood people sitting a few yards behind me traveling along with me faster than a speeding bullet. I never gave a thought to the fact that these sweet people were family members, with sweethearts, mothers, fathers, children, grandchildren, and friends that were more than just acquaintances. I only concerned myself with what the imposter is constantly telling me, and that is always how great that I am.

To make a long story short—as we let down into the Little Rock area, the line of thunderstorms had moved critically close to the field. In my arrogance, along with the encouragement of my imposter, I was determined to make it in, to get on the ground and park at the gate. After everyone was deplaned I would gather up my things and stroll with my crew to the awaiting van that would drive us to the Hotel where I could get some well-deserved rest and of course, well-deserved respect from my crew for the fine job that I was doing. Then I would do it all over again tomorrow.

It's needless to say things didn't go so well. The turbulence was moderate to severe, and the visibility was poor because of the scud and rain. My F/O was uncertain about what he was seeing. He thought he had the field a couple times when he really didn't. I made the mistake of trusting his judgment too much at one time, and later when he asked me the question, “Do we really want to do this?” I didn't listen close enough to what he was asking, and what he was saying was good stuff, but I couldn't hear him over the whispers of my imposter. The nearer we came to the field the worse the weather over the field became. Another airliner had missed the approach as we were being warned about wind sheer, but we were so focused on getting on the ground that we ignored those warnings. The lightning was blinding and it had begun to rain harder. Several checklists were over-looked or done in a rushed and haphazard way. The “Mad Dog” (McDonald Douglas MD-80) is not the easiest airplane to land safely when the conditions are perfect. Flap settings and approach speeds are critical. These conditions were far from perfect. We were in moderate rain, and it was raining on the field. The winds were strong and varied in direction at various locations on the field. The pounding rain obscured visibility out of the forward windscreens. The turbulence had become more than just irritating—it was getting a little scary. When conditions like these happen it often produces so much stress inside the cockpit that careful thought is difficult if not impossible. The situational awareness tends to drifts away into oblivion. What should be a broad observation—rapidly becomes looking through a tunnel—so focused on one thing that you can't see the obvious. It's possible to see things that aren't there, and not see things that are.

This flight had degenerated into a chaotic list of errors. Suddenly the runway was ahead, and we were on final approach. As we let down, the crosswind became more apparent. In my past experience and great wisdom, I knew that the crosswind limits were close but not quite exceeded. I was carrying an extra 20 knots for safety and maybe a few more for good measure. The runway was a little over seven thousand feet long, and we were cooking along with extra speed, but we needed it to compensate for the turbulence. Besides, the headwind component would counteract the extra speed or so the imposter led me to believe.

We touched down fast and maybe a little long. Now it was time to start getting rid of the speed and start decelerating. Something was wrong, the airplane didn't slow like it should——the anti-skid was working overtime, and the end of the runway was approaching rapidly. Directional control was difficult. The thrust reversers were being applied, and the engines were howling. We did manage to slow to ninety knots before going off the end of the runway, and to eighty knots before sliding down the embankment and into the approach light stanchions used for the opposite direction approach lighting system.

The airplane slid sideways into those stanchions and broke into pieces. When the movement stopped—silence was the strangest sound I've ever heard. I didn't know it immediately, but I was dead, however, I could still hear and see. Suddenly, there were voices and commotion. Most of the passengers and crew escaped through openings in the fuselage. Enough fuel remained in the tanks for a spectacular fire—we were not short on fuel. Eleven people lost their lives including me. My F/O suffered a broken leg and most of the passengers and crew were injured. A week later, two other passengers died in the hospital.

The fault for this accident was entirely mine. I am responsible for it all. I was the Captain, it was my airplane and I was in charge. Now let me tell you what went wrong.

First, no one should have to fly that tired, and we were very tired. I should have excused myself and my F/O at DFW. That is one of many reasons that there are reserve pilots standing by.

Second, no one should test the limits of their skills and the limits of the aircraft they are flying in or near a thunderstorm. We could have avoided this accident if I had insisted that we make our way upwind of the storm and hold for a few minutes. The storm would have passed over and away from the airport in a short time, thirty minutes at the most, but so what if it had taken an hour. Then the only problem left for us to deal with would have been a damp runway, and we would have avoided the crash. We had plenty of fuel—lack of fuel was not a problem.

Third, checklists should be done methodically. If, for some reason a checklist is over looked—when realized—arrangements to complete it before entering a critical phase of flight should be made immediately. When things started to turn into chaos, I should have requested a vector away from the weather where I could have gained complete control of the situation. I should have insisted on both of us settling down before trying to shoot an approach with things left unsure and undone. On this night, we landed without arming the ground spoilers, and thus went off the end of the runway because there was not enough weight on the wheels for the braking to be effective.

Now, there are losses of lives including my own. I am sorry that I failed to do my duty and it cost so many so much. I am dead and I am thankful that someone is telling my story. Be careful out there, and tell your imposter to get lost—true humility only works before you die.
Thank you for listening.

This could be a true story, I'm not saying that it is, and I'm not saying that it isn't. But, I will say most weather related accidents are similar—there are always more than several opportunities to prevent them from happening. Many times blame can be placed on those imposters that have a great tendency to lie. When fatigue has a grip on a person the voice of the imposter is always louder than all other voices.

Keep Your Speed Up! ~ awd