

Going Solo, Unexpectedly

Report #10

By Lance Toland

The signals were there in abundance, and I missed each and every one.

UNTIL TWO YEARS AGO, I crewed with a friend on his Hawker 125-700 mostly to stay current in jets, and because it was fun. Although we were not full-time professional pilots, we worked to meet that standard. We were both type rated and trained annually at SimuFLite.

Then age 53, my friend had logged more than 5,000 hours as PIC, 300 hours in type, and was without question one of the most conscientious pilots with whom I had ever flown. Both of us had been charter pilots before launching our separate and, thankfully, successful businesses. We had flown King Airs, Citations and Hawkers for many years. We flew the way we trained, following SOPs and adhering to the “sterile cockpit” once we lined up. We also alternated in the left seat on each leg to maintain PIC and SIC proficiency.

I started the day of this story in the left seat on an uneventful trip from Atlanta’s Peachtree City-Falcon Field (FFC) to Camden, S.C. Our early morning departure ended with a non-precision approach to minimums. Once we pulled up to the FBO, my friend and his passengers were off the airplane like a shot and dashed to their business meeting. I elected to hang around the airport and meet one of my clients for lunch. Several hours later, as planned, I got the call to prepare the aircraft for an immediate departure. When my friend and his entourage arrived, I had the APU running, the TOLD card completed and the interior spiffy.

Before climbing into the Hawker, my friend asked me if I would mind flying left seat home. He said the meeting had been grueling and he was a little tired. Even though he had never opted for the right seat out of turn on any trip for the past 15 years, I did not think anything about it. Alarms were sounding, but I didn’t hear them.

All pretakeoff checks went smoothly as we taxied out. At the end of the 5,000-foot runway I gave a standard PIC takeoff briefing — airspeed alive, 80-knot cross-check, abort items. He nodded, but said nothing. We rolled onto the runway looking at a 200-foot overcast and 1/2-mile visibility. Our destination weather was forecast to be about the same. Once power was set I released brakes and began to accelerate. Everything seemed normal, but then my friend missed the airspeed alive and 80-knot cross-check.

Something was wrong. I asked, “How about 80 knots?” By this time, I was at V1 *plus* and heading for VR. It was too late to abort, so I instinctively rotated the aircraft. I heard no positive rate callouts after takeoff. My right seater was silent. I was on the gauges, climbing into a 200-foot solid overcast. My call for gear up elicited no response and no action.

A glance to the right and I saw my SIC somewhat slumped over in his shoulder harness with a

thousand-yard stare in his eyes. He said softly, “Boy, am I tired today!”

I was thinking, *What is wrong with this guy?* Then, quickly back to reality. *Fly the plane, Lance.* I reached over and pulled the gear handle up and raised the flaps. We entered the cloud base at 220 knots, runway heading and climbing to our assigned intermediate level off of 5,000 feet.

At this point I was single pilot in a Hawker 700, at night, in the weather and with my good friend and SIC in a questionable state of mind.

The rest of the flight back to FFC was basically solo. I did not declare an emergency, but took over all ATC communications. Weather was going to be a factor on arrival at FFC with moderate rain showers. I elected to stay low at FL 170 to cut the workload of climbing and descending, and just ride it out, periodically asking my SIC if he was OK, to which he replied, “Just a little tired, I guess.”

I suggested he don the O₂ mask, hoping this would help him clear his head, but he would have no part of it. The back course approach to Runway 32 was uneventful. My SIC did manage to get the gear down for me, but he still had that long, lifeless stare.

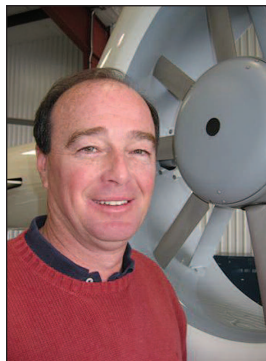
After landing and shutdown, my friend just sat motionless in the cockpit. I assisted the passengers onto an awaiting company bus, and then quickly returned to the cockpit. I asked my friend if he wanted me to drive him home, or maybe to the hospital. He replied that he was just real tired. As forcefully as I could I told him we could not have anything like that happen again. Speaking as his friend and insurance broker, I said I would not fly with him again until he was rested and visited his flight surgeon.

I was surprised when he agreed immediately and then drove off. It happened so quickly, we did not even have our traditional postflight beer — a ritual we’d practiced for more than 15 years!

As it turned out, my friend had actually suffered a mini-stroke that day. He discovered it a week later when, as promised, he went to see his doctor. The visit ended with him being rushed to Georgia Baptist Hospital for emergency heart surgery — he called me with that news as he awaited the ambulance. The verdict: four arteries with 80-percent blockage.

All of this was a real wake-up call for me. The signs had been there and obvious — the seat switch, the tiredness, the missed callouts — yet I missed them all. I was lucky the outcome wasn’t much worse.

Think about it. We don’t get “crewmember incapacitation” training on every trip back through recurrent training. But going solo can happen unexpectedly and at the worst possible moment. Be ready. **B&CA**



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