

Lost in the Sky

By

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To my wife Yolanda, thanks for all your caring and support.

To my son Brennan, thanks for always being there for me.

Part I

Experience is that marvelous thing that enables you to recognize a mistake when you make it again.

— Franklin P. Jones

Chapter 1

October, a few years from now

Larry tossed the tattered People magazine into the rear of the DC-3 cockpit. It was the third time he'd read it and it wasn't interesting the first time. The problem was he didn't have anything else to do. Outside twin engines spun the massive aluminum propellers and created a thrumming vibration that would put even the most wired up toddler to sleep in minutes. Alone in the cockpit, even Larry felt himself lagging.

He nonchalantly performed a scan of the double row of round instruments, their stark white needles highlighted against black backgrounds, and did a double take. The altimeter, artificial horizon, airspeed, and rate of climb indicator all looked normal, but the left fuel gauge was pegged almost to empty. He tapped the gauge with a finger, the needle wiggled, but returned to its original state. He nervously checked the right gauge and was shocked to find it was nearly empty as well.

What the hell? he thought, suddenly wide awake *where did all my fuel go?* He did a quick scan of the VORs, and hoped they would tell him he was tracking a station that might lead to an airport, but the navigation needles wandered aimlessly. Panic burst into his consciousness, but his years of training forced it back down. He could hear the voice of his crotchety old instructor *Fly the airplane, then work the problem.* Right now, he had a big problem.

He could not understand why all his fuel was gone. He could not understand why he didn't know his current position. He could not understand how he could have let these

facts escape him. In all his years of flying, knowing precisely how much fuel he had and his exact position were his primary concerns. How could he have screwed up so badly?

He scanned the night sky for lights. Maybe if he was really lucky he would see the outline of a runway, but the sky was dark as the inside of a coal mine. There wasn't a flicker of light visible in any direction. That seemed very strange until he noticed that his altitude was 15000 feet. *Maybe I'm between cloud layers.* he thought, but something didn't feel right. It was too dark. He expected to see a light somewhere in the distance, but he didn't. That, was really strange. In all his years of flying, even on the darkest nights, there was always at least one light somewhere in the distance. He couldn't escape the feeling that it was just him and his cargo flying into a gigantic dark void. Only the vibration he felt on his backside let him know that he was still at the controls of an airplane, and he'd better come up with a plan soon. He needed to figure something out soon, or his fate would be decided for him, when the engines ran out of fuel.

He snapped out of his musing to check his position again. He punched the locate button on his flight computer and a small airplane appeared in the center of the twelve inch LCD display, its bright screen outlined by a one inch black plastic rim. The plane was shown in bright red, with a wingspan of maybe half an inch. The background was a field of dark black representing the terrain around his current position. A light gray grid of squares, ten high, and ten wide overlaid the screen, and provided distance information. He could use the squares as a reference to calculate his distance from a particular landmark. A legend in the lower left corner of the screen showed the current scale at ten miles per grid square.

He expected to see the screen filled with roads, railroad tracks, streams, rivers and other landmarks displayed around the location designator, but there was nothing.

Everything around the plane was shown as a sea of black.

His first inclination was that the screen was zoomed in too close. However, when he punched the zoom out button, the screen looked exactly the same. The only difference was the small legend in the lower left corner updated to show a scale of twenty miles per square instead of ten. Puzzled, he punched the zoom button again. At forty miles per square the display was still a field of dark. The small red airplane in the center of a dark screen mocked his stupidity.

The panic that he had successfully shoved down reared its ugly head and Larry felt his pulse rising. Perspiration started to form on his brow. He forced himself to remain calm and work the problem, even though he felt like standing up and walking out the cockpit door. He took a few deep cleansing breaths and turned his focus back to the navigation screen. He punched the zoom button once again and saw something that jerked the breath out of him with a sudden gasp.

On the far right of the screen he now saw the jagged scrawl of an ocean coastline. In fact the wrong side of a coastline that was far away. Too far away. Much too far given his current fuel.

Larry shifted his attention down to the legend and saw the scale was set to 100 miles per square. He performed a quick visual calculation and determined that he was approximately 500 miles west of that coastline. The navigation display highlighted a number of airports on the far side of the coast, but none within reach. He was 500 miles out to sea without enough fuel to get back to land.

The realization hit like a punch to the gut and the panic now came back full force.

Larry knew now that he had no choice, he was going to crash at sea.

Chapter 2

Larry slumped down in his chair and contemplated his next move. He had no chance to make it back to land. The amount of fuel left in his tanks wouldn't let him. He was going to have to ditch. Ditching was the aviation term for a water landing, but in a plane this size landing was an optimistic term. More likely you hoped to survive a crash in the water. Even if he didn't die in the crash, he didn't know how he was going to be rescued this far from land. He could be floating at sea in a survival raft for days.

The fuselage of his airplane was not made to ditch in the water. It was made to slip effortlessly through the air, not smash into the water at over 100mph when it came time to ditch. His plane wasn't built strong enough to handle the impact of hitting the water at that speed applies to the structure. His fuselage was designed to be as light as possible to provide the highest efficiency possible. Boat hulls, on the other hand, are constructed out of strong materials so that they can handle the stresses of traveling through the water. Boat hulls don't worry about the weight, but airplane fuselages do.

Knowing that there wasn't much else he could do, Larry decided to get on his radio and call for help. It was hopeless to reach someone on land, he was much too far away. But, he might reach a passing airliner. Maybe they could relay a message to a ship in the area that could provide some help. It was a long shot, but worth a try.

He pressed the black plastic talk switch on the control yoke. He spoke into the sponge covered microphone mounted on the end of a flexible black wire leading from his headset.

“Mayday, mayday, November four three eight two three, flight level 15, 500 west LAX, low fuel, declaring an emergency, can anybody hear me?” Larry said in his best unhurried captain’s voice.

He sat transfixed and waited for a response, but the radio hissed with static. It was almost as if every piece of gear in this plane was making fun of his mistake. Every piece laughed in his face and refused to work. He repeated the call again, but with the same result. His frustration mounting, he repeated the call four more times, but each time no one answered. The frustration finally won over his calm. He ripped the headset off his head and slammed it against the cockpit console. No answer. He was alone.

After a few minutes of anguish he calmed enough to look for his survival gear. If he was going to have to go into the water, he needed to find the life raft and other survival gear. Judging by how far north the navigation display showed his position he would probably be dead in a few hours from hypothermia if he didn’t.

In a large orange duffel bag, near the back of the airplane he had a small one person raft and a survival pack that should keep him alive for a few days. The last time he had seen it, it was near the tailcone. Depending on how the cargo was loaded he wasn’t sure if he could find it or not.

Larry unbuckled his seat belt and slid off the pilot’s seat. He crouched over to prevent his head from hitting the ceiling and grabbed the handle of the cockpit door. He spun the handle, and yanked open the door to the cargo hold. As he was about to enter, the left engine coughed, sputtered, and shook violently. It caught and sputtered a few more times, then went silent.

Larry spun back around and slid into the pilot seat. He grabbed the emergency checklist and read off the items for an engine loss. He clicked the silver switch handle for the left magneto, pulled back the red throttle handle, feathered the prop with the gray handle, set the mixture to full lean, and turned off as much electrical load as possible. He let the autopilot compensate for the lack of thrust on the left side and listened as the right engine struggled to maintain altitude.

Those tasks completed, Larry continued his search. He exited the pilot seat, yanked open the cargo door, and clambered through. He clicked on the silver ball handled cargo light switch and whistled out a long breath. The eight foot high oblong shaped cargo hold was jammed with layers of large and small boxes forming a wall that reached nearly all the way to the top. Most of his recent loads had boxes stacked on either side, leaving an aisle down the middle. This load was floor to ceiling all the way across, leaving only a small gap at the top barely big enough for a human.

If he had any chance of reaching the emergency gear, he would have to crawl across the top of the boxes, and hope there was enough room to get over the stack. There had better be enough room to find the survival gear on the floor in the tailcone or he would be in real trouble.

He stuck his foot in between two sets of boxes and used the lower box as a step to climb the wall. He banged his head on the fuselage as he pushed off. He retreated slightly and put his head into the space more carefully. Once on top he pushed with his leg, and slid on top of the boxes. He crawled toward the rear of the plane, digging his elbows into the pile, and dragging his torso behind.

A turbulence bump banged his head into the fuselage. He grabbed it in pain, momentarily rubbed it, and continued to crawl. As he got near the tailcone, the space between the boxes and the fuselage became so small that his body barely fit. He could no longer dig his knees and elbows into the boxes. Instead he dug his fingers into the spaces between them and pulled himself forward. A heavy turbulence bump threw his shoulder against the sharp edge of a steel runner used to form the shape of the fuselage.

“Dammit” He yelled and rubbed his shoulder.

He finally reached the edge of the boxes, and wedged his head through the space between the fuselage and the last box.

He tried to turn his head to look down, but another box just below prevented his movement. He tried looking down with one eye, but it was too dark. He needed to get his head further in so that he could see down below. He braced himself against the fuselage and gave a hard yank on the box below him. It moved back slightly. He tried again and the box moved, but not as far. He gave one more yank, but the box didn't move.

He lay flat on the boxes, and slid his head through the space. It was larger, but only slightly. He tried to peer over the edge, but his vision was still blocked by a black duffle bag. Just as he was about to reach for it, the right engine sputtered, and after a few seconds spun to a stop. The airplane became deathly silent. The air rushing by the fuselage was the only sound.

A thought shot through his brain. Trim. He needed to get the airplane retrimmed as soon as possible or he could lose altitude fast. Right now altitude was precious. Altitude was life. Altitude was time to figure out what to do next.

He tried to pull his head back but his chin was wedged into place by the box below him. He struggled to free his head, but it was stuck. His heartbeat started racing as he lay there with his head stuck between the boxes and the airplane skin. Only then did he feel the airplane sinking toward the sea.

Chapter 3

Larry kicked and struggled to get his head free, but he couldn't move it. He felt like a worm stuck on a fishhook, his legs flailing about, but his head held in place. He frantically twisted and turned but his head wouldn't move. The bottom of his jaw burned as it scraped on the box underneath him. He threw himself forward violently, the box underneath moved slightly forward, and he was finally free.

He slid back toward the cockpit on top of the boxes by pushing backwards with his elbows. He felt his feet slip over the edge and increased his pace. He let himself down, and climbed into the cockpit just as the aircraft shuddered and the left wing dropped. The autopilot had stalled the plane and it was pointed nearly straight down, twisting to the right.

He jumped into the pilot seat, switched off the autopilot, and leveled the wings with the plane dropping like a rock. After a few anxious moments the plane slowly stopped its downward spiral and straightened out. He feathered the right prop, turned off the magneto, and sat back in the chair. When he put his hand up to his chin, it came back red with blood.

That was the least of his concerns at the moment. He trimmed the plane for best glide speed, to maximize the time he had left. He had lost about a thousand feet of altitude from the stall, but was gliding straight and level for the moment. He still had a little time to think before the water would reach up and smash his plane into tiny pieces. He was about to buckle his seatbelt when a wry grin crossed his face. Without his emergency

gear he wasn't going to last long in the water, so what was the point. His wife and son were already dead, why not go join them. If he was lucky enough he would be killed by the impact and wouldn't have to drown, or die of hypothermia.

This thought faded when he saw the 3 by 5 digital picture he had taped near the altimeter. It was taken at the beach three years earlier on a trip to Miami. His wife and son posed next to a palm tree both smiling as if it were the happiest day of their lives. And it had been. Seeing her smile, thoughts of suicide vanished, and he caressed the picture with his left index finger.

"I'll meet you in heaven someday, but not today if I can help it." he said to her.

He focused back on his predicament. He didn't have many choices left. Soon the altimeter would read zero and that's exactly how many options he would have left. He tried the radio a few more times, but all he got was static.

Snippets of conversations broke through the static from time to time and he became immediately excited. But he quickly found out they were simply radio waves that had bounced off the ionosphere from some plane most likely thousands of miles away. They wouldn't be able to help him even if he could have sent a message.

Larry watched nervously as the altimeter continued to spiral slowly downwards. The big hand of the altimeter looked like the second hand of a clock spinning backwards, but it was moving much too fast. It was almost as if he were watching the indicator in a time machine as he moved backward through time. If only that were the case. How he wished he was back in time, 3 years ago to be exact. Things were different then.

The altimeter read 8000 feet, then 7000, then 6000. At 5000 the turbulence became markedly heavy.

Larry felt a knot forming in the back of his neck between his shoulder blades, so he shrugged his shoulders a few times. He flailed his arms like a big seagull trying to claw his way into the sky. Simply controlling the plane became an exercise in concentration. He fought the bumps as they tossed the plane rapidly up, then down, left, then right, as if it were a child's toy. Every hit rattled the contents with a massive jolt. At 4000 feet he gave the nylon end of his seatbelt an extra yank so that he would remain in his seat through the bumps.

He fought with the controls to maintain best glide speed. A bump would throw the plane left, he would counter right, but it was a losing battle as simply keeping the wings level was an all consuming task. But keeping the wings level was important. It prevented the deadly downward spiral.

At 1500 feet Larry re-checked each item on the checklist one more time. Landing gear up, check, fuel pumps off, check, electrical off, check. It may seem strange to leave the landing gear up while landing in water, but the smoother the bottom of the plane the better. He didn't want the landing gear to stick down too far, catch in the water and flip the plane on its nose. Novice pilots might also think it silly to turn off the fuel pumps when the tanks were empty. But he knew even with empty tanks, some fuel usually remains in a hidden corner and ditching might just cause it to get pumped into the engine bay. An electrical short from the salt water may spark the fuel into fire, and that would ruin his whole day for sure.

He checked the position of the flaps and realized that he hadn't lowered them yet. Landing without flaps would make his descent into the water much faster and more

dangerous. He slid the switch to the 30 degree position and listened for the motors to move the flaps. He heard the comforting hum as they moved into place.

With the flaps down he attempted to readjust his speed. The turbulence had now increased to the point that he was one minute pressed into the seat and the next hanging from the seat belt. He was almost continuously flipping the control yoke one way, then the other in an attempt to keep the wings level. Sweat dripped from his forehead. He snapped his head to the left to fling off the drops.

He scanned to the left, out the windshield, then to the right hoping to use the moon as a reference. If he could get a reflection off the surface of the water, he might have a chance to read the wind direction. Landing into the wind would cut down his speed while entering the water, making for a safer landing. But, the moon wasn't in sight.

He switched on his landing light to see the surface of the water. The beam illuminated the night like a giant cone reaching down to the surface. Far down below Larry could see a fuzzy bright white spot on the surface of the water. He blinked his eyes a few times trying to focus on the spot. He realized that it wasn't his eyes but there was something on the surface that made it look fuzzy. After a few moments his brain recognized it as fast moving spray. Then he saw something else below the spray that made his heart nearly stop.

