

Lost in the Sky

By

Douglas L. Perry

Chapter 1

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Larry tossed the magazine into the rear of the cockpit. It was the third time he'd read it and it wasn't interesting the first time. But there wasn't 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. Even Larry felt himself lagging.

He nonchalantly scanned the cockpit gauges again and did a double take. 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 the heck did all my fuel go?” He did a quick scan of his instruments, and hoped they would tell him he was close to an airport, but the navigation needles wandered aimlessly. Panic crept into his consciousness, but his years of training forced it back down. He could hear his old instructors' voice in his head. “Fly the airplane, then work the problem”. It bothered him that he had no idea where all his fuel had gone. It bothered him that he didn't know his current position. In all his years of flying, knowing how much fuel he had and his current position were his primary concerns.

He scanned the horizon for lights. Maybe if he was really lucky he would see the outline of a runway, but the sky was inky black and nothing was visible in any direction.

That fact seemed very strange until he noticed that his altitude was 15000 feet. “*Could be above a cloud bank*” the thought to himself, but he couldn’t help feeling that he was all alone 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 had a problem. He realized that he needed to do something about it soon, or his fate would automatically be decided 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 12 inch LCD display. It was shown in bright red, a wingspan of maybe half an inch, on a field of dark black representing the terrain around his current position. He expected to see landmarks displayed around the location designator but there was nothing. No roads, railroad tracks, airports, streams, not even a single river, everything around the plane was shown as a sea of black.

His first inclination was that the screen was zoomed in too close. Maybe he could only see a few hundred yards. Maybe he was over the desert and there weren’t any landmarks. However, when he punched the zoom out button, the screen looked the same. The difference was the small legend in the lower left corner updated to show a scale of 20 miles per square instead of 10. Puzzled, he punched the zoom button again. At 40 miles per square the display was still a field of dark except for the small red airplane in the center.

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 focused on the navigation screen. He punched the zoom button once again and saw something that took the breath out of him.

On the far right of the screen he now saw the jagged scrawl of an ocean coastline. Beyond the coast, he saw the yellow splotches representing the inhabited areas of a city, at this point, a city that was a long distance from where he was. Larry shifted his attention down to the legend and saw that the scale was set to 100 miles per square. He performed a quick mental calculation and determined that he was approximately 500 miles west of the coast. The lack of any landmarks between the coast and his plane meant that he was probably over a large body of water. Glancing over at his fuel gauges he realized that he didn't have enough fuel to get back. The realization hit like a kick 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

October 15, 2012

Larry slumped down in his chair and contemplated his next move. He had no chance to make it back to land. There wasn't enough fuel left in his tanks. 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 out. He could be floating at sea for days.

The fuselage of an airplane was not made to ditch in the water. They were made to slip effortlessly through the air, not smash into the water at over 100mph. Airplanes aren't strong enough to handle the impact that hitting the water at that speed applies to the structure. Aircraft fuselages are designed to be as light as possible to provide high efficiency. Boat hulls, on the other hand, are constructed out of strong materials so that they can handle the stresses of traveling through the water, without worrying about the weight.

Knowing that there wasn't much else he could do, Larry decided to 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 that could provide some help. It was a long shot, but worth a try.

"Mayday, mayday, November four three eight two three, flight level 15, 500 west LAX, low fuel, declaring an emergency, can anybody hear me?"

Larry waited for a response, but the radio only hissed with static. He repeated the call again, but with the same result. Frustrated, he repeated the call four more times, but each time no one answered.

He ripped the headset off his head and slammed it against the cockpit console. No answer. He was alone.

His next thought was 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, or he would be dead in a few hours of floating in the water. The gear was in a large orange duffel bag, near the back of the airplane the last time he had seen it. Depending on how the plane 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 cargo hold, 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 switched off the left magneto, pulled back the throttle, feathered the prop, 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 it struggled to maintain altitude with only one engine.

Those tasks completed, Larry exited the pilot seat, yanked open the cargo door, and clambered through. He clicked on the cargo light switch and whistled out a long breath when he saw the large pile of boxes in the cargo hold. Most of the recent loads had boxes

stacked on either side, leaving an aisle down the middle, however this load was floor to ceiling all the way across, with only a small gap at the top separating boxes from the fuselage.

If he had any chance of reaching the emergency gear, he would have to crawl across the top of the boxes, hope there was enough room to get over the stack, and find the survival gear on the floor in the very rear of the plane.

He stuck his foot in between two sets of boxes and used it as a step to climb up the mound. He banged his head on the fuselage, retreated slightly, then put his head into the space between the boxes and the aluminum skin of the plane. Pushing off with his leg, he slid on top of the boxes and crawled toward the rear of the plane, digging his elbows into the tops of the boxes, and dragging his torso behind.

Turbulence banged his head into the side, he grabbed it in pain, swore to himself, 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 him against the sharp edge of a steel beam and he yelled out in pain. 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 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 mighty yank on the box below him. It moved back slightly. He tried again and the box moved again, 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. Just as he was about to pull back on the boxes once more, the right engine sputtered, then went completely silent. He tried to pull his head back but his chin hit the box below. He struggled to free his head, but he was stuck, and the noise inside the plane became eerily quiet.

Chapter 3

October 15, 2012

Larry kicked and struggled to get his head free, but he couldn't move it. His chin was wedged into a hole in the box below, his head against the fuselage above. He frantically twisted and turned, and the bottom of his jaw burned from the box edge below. He kicked himself forward and his chin popped out of the hole. He was free.

He slid his head back on top of the boxes and pushed himself backwards with his elbows. He felt his feet slip over the edge and increased his pace. His hands finally reached the edge. 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.

He jumped into the pilot seat, switched off the autopilot, and leveled the wings. 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, hoping to maximize his time in the air. He had lost about a thousand feet of altitude from the stall, but still had a little time to think before the water would reach up to greet him. 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. If he was lucky enough the impact would kill him and he wouldn't have to drown, or die of hypothermia.

This thought faded when he saw the smiling face of his wife and son in the picture he had taped near the altimeter. Seeing her smile, he inwardly melted and 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.

Returning to his options, he tried to decide what to do. There weren’t many choices left. Soon the altimeter would read zero. He tried the radio a few more times, but all he got was static.

He heard snippets of conversations break through the static from time to time and became immediately excited, but quickly found out they were simply radio waves that had bounced off the ionosphere from some plane most likely thousands of miles away, and unable to help him even if he could have sent a message.

If only there was some way that he could find out if there was a ship in the local area, he would turn toward it and try to ditch next to them. He played with the radar, but since it was really only useful when it pointed at clouds, it wasn’t much help. When he pointed it toward the ocean, all he got was ground clutter, probably from waves on the sea.

Larry watched nervously as the altimeter continued to spiral slowly downwards. The big hand looked like a clock spinning backwards in time, though moving much too fast. It was almost as if he were watching the time indicator in a time machine as he flashed backward. If only that were the case. How he wished he was back in time, 2 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 and 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 threw the plane rapidly up, then down, left, then right, rattling the contents with every hit. At 4000 feet he gave 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, but it was a losing battle as simply keeping the wings level was an all consuming task. 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. While it may seem strange to leave the landing gear up while landing in water, the smoother the bottom of the plane the better. Landing gear tend to stick down too far, and are likely to catch in the water and flip the plane on its nose. It also might seem silly to turn off the fuel pumps when the tanks were empty, but 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, then things would be worse.

He checked the position of the flaps and realized that he hadn't lowered them yet. That 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 into place. When they ground to a halt he went through the checklist one more time, to make sure he didn't miss anything.

With the flaps down he attempted to readjust his speed, but the turbulence had 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 back and forth 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 get a glimpse of the moon. If he could get a reflection off the surface of the water, he might have a chance to get the direction of the wind. Landing into the wind would cut down his speed entering the water, making for a safer landing. However, the moon wasn't in sight.

It was likely he was still above an overcast, but if so, the clouds were very low. His current altitude was approaching 3000 feet. There were two options, the moon was behind the tail of the plane and he couldn't see it, or it was below the horizon. He started a shallow turn to the right while he scanned out the windows. After he did a complete 360 degree turn, the moon was still not in sight so he assumed it had not yet risen.

He wanted to see the surface of the water so he switched on his landing light. The beam shone through 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 but realized that there was something on the surface that made it look fuzzy. After a few moments his brain recognized it as fast moving spray, but then he saw something else below the spray and his heart sank.

Chapter 4

October 15, 2012

Larry was nearly overcome with horror as the landing light illuminated towering waves on the ocean surface. The waves streamed across the field of view as if they were runaway freight trains, massive pyramids of frothy water capped with white crowns of spray that looked like the veil of some monstrous wedding gown. The sheer magnitude of the waves were not evident until a dark speck traversed the beam and Larry recognized it as a pelican. Larry literally gasped when he used the pelican's wingspan to estimate that the waves were three stories tall. Landing into the face of one of those would be as brutal as hitting a concrete wall, he would never survive it.

Larry concentrated on keeping the wings level but he was transfixed by the sheer size of them. He concentrated on looking out the windshield for a reference to keep the wings level, but his eyes were drawn to the giant waves reaching up at him from below.

Larry's original plan of landing into the wind, was no longer an option. It would be suicide to crash into the face of one of those. Landing with the wind would be extremely dangerous, but it was a chance he would have to take. From his point of view Larry had to choose between two bad choices. One choice was almost immediate death, and the other had a very small chance that he might make it, for a little while anyway.

The choice made, Larry turned the plane downwind. Judging the relative speed between the wave tops and his landing speed, he determined that the best plan would be to try and skim along the tops until he slowed enough to set down on one and surf down

the other side. It was extremely risky with a small chance of success, but what other choice did he have?

He lined up a wave top with the front edge of the right wing so that he could determine his relative speed. The wave top moved swiftly backwards as the plane sped overhead. This was not going to be easy. Landing on top of a wave with the turbulence rocking the plane as it was, would be like shooting a basketball into a hoop from a fast moving jeep while driving by on a bumpy road. Possible with practice, but getting it right the first time was nearly impossible.

Larry shook the beads of sweat that had formed on his forehead again, and tightened his grip on the controls. His forearms burned like fire, but he held on tight, still reacting to the turbulence that tried to flip him upside down and throw him in the water.

The wave tops looked close enough for him to reach out and touch them, but he knew if he did the ride would be over. Larry's heart pounded in his chest as he mentally got ready for the final assault on the landing. He aimed the nose on a string of wave tops that formed a loosely straight line. Spray blasted the windshield momentarily blotting out his view. He punched the button for the wipers and waited as the screen cleared.

He finally focused on one particular wave top and moved the control yoke forward a millimeter to aim for it. The wave dropped briskly behind him and Larry had to refocus on another one. He made one final check of his instruments and yanked his seat belt tight one last time. This was it. He braced for impact.