



# ERRORS OF OUR WAYS

*Learning from the mistakes of others*

BY BARRY SCHIFF

**AS** this article was taking shape a few months ago, I began to realize that it represented a significant personal milestone. Not only was this to be my five-hundredth magazine article, but it is appearing on the twenty-fifth anniversary of my first contribution to AOPA Pilot (June 1963).

A numerologist might attach even more significance to such an event because this month I also will celebrate my fiftieth year on earth and my twenty-thousandth hour above it. Although I view all of this as strictly coincidental, such milestones do have philosophical implications. For example, spending the equivalent of 2.3 continuous years in a cockpit entitles one to a certain right of reflection.

Although hours alone do not a pilot make, they at least provide an ex-



perienced perspective of matters aeronautical. Consequently, I would like to take this opportunity to review some of the poor judgment and near-tragedies I have observed during 36 years of flying. These vignettes provide some interesting and entertaining object lessons.

- Some years ago, a teen-age pilot devised a novel way to fulfill a desire to be in the spotlight. He used his rented Aeronca Champ to fly into one of those large advertising spotlights that used to spike the night sky over Los Angeles to herald a motion picture premiere or a supermarket opening. It was an interesting challenge, but one that almost ended his brief career.

After several attempts, he did manage to remain in the spotlight for almost a full circle, but only while turning steeply at low altitude. The aircraft was seen by thousands, a few of whom also observed it enter an inadvertent spin and ultimately recover at less than 200 feet above the ground. For the pilot, it must have been an illuminating experience.

- After months of preparation, the pilot of a new Aerostar 601 was about to assault the world speed record for light airplanes over a 500-kilometer closed-circuit course, a record then held by the

Soviet Union. On hand for the departure was Ted Smith, the Aerostar's designer.

Smith was photographing the airplane and asked the pilot to center the rudder, which would make the airplane look a bit sleeker. The pilot neutralized the pedals, but Smith indicated that the rudder still was askew. This eventually led to the discovery that the rudder was not connected to the control cables (possibly since it had left the factory). An engine failure shortly after takeoff undoubtedly would have resulted in a catastrophic wingover.

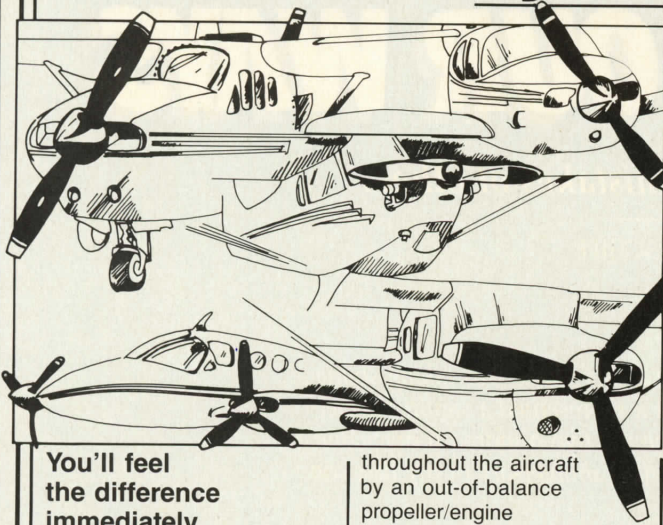
Although this pilot normally was diligent about preflight inspections, the rudder check had been overlooked on this and previous flights because rudder movement cannot be observed other than by someone outside the aircraft. It is noteworthy that most pilots trust rudder (and elevator) function to luck.

- Intense competition can push some people beyond the limits of reason and propriety. Such was the case when a Super Cub instructor was competing with a peer during a short-field landing contest. Instead of using an imaginary line on the runway, these pilots used the actual runway threshold from which to measure landing distance.

**T**he pilot remained in the spotlight while turning steeply at low altitude. The aircraft was seen by thousands, a few of whom also observed it enter an inadvertent spin and recover at less than 200 feet above the ground.

The third approach by the rear-seat pilot was low, and the Cub was hanging on the prop, perilously close to a stall. As the main tires passed only inches above the edge of the runway, the pilot chopped the power and pulled the control stick aft. Since there was no reserve of airspeed, the airplane did not balloon. Instead, the tailwheel came down and caught the lip of the concrete runway.

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This tore the tailwheel structure from the aft fuselage, which—in combination with aggressive braking that almost caused a noseover—resulted in the shortest landing of them all. Pride indeed goeth before the fall.

- The student in the front seat of the Aeronca Champ always forgot to apply carburetor heat prior to a power reduction. So it was during this particular entry to a power-off stall. The instructor, who was seated in the rear seat, however, was about to teach his student—and himself—a valuable lesson.

As the student brought the aircraft into a nose-high attitude with the engine throttled, the instructor reached for the ignition switches (which are located to the rear of the student's left elbow and thus cannot be seen from the front seat) and stealthily turned off the magnetos. When the aircraft began to quiver during the stall entry, the student lowered the nose and pushed the throttle forward. Instead of the engine roaring to life, of course, the propeller came to a standstill. The instructor screamed at the student for having gotten them into such a precarious situation. He simultaneously turned the ignition back on, took control of the airplane, and entered a high-

speed dive to get the propeller spinning once again. (No, the airplane did not have an electric starter.)

Trouble is, the prop was hung up on a compression stroke and would not budge, not even at the red-line airspeed of 112 knots. With altitude and ideas in short supply, the instructor had no option other than to make an emergency landing on the beach. Fortunately, the sands were void of sun worshippers on that winter weekday. (The FAA inspector who arrived on the scene believed the instructor's story about having been victimized by carburetor ice and allowed him to take off after being assured that the carb ice had "melted." The local constable was less sympathetic and ticketed the pilot for illegal parking.)

- A veteran American pilot in South Africa was about to depart Hluhluwe (pronounced: shloo-shloo'-ee) in a popular twin on a flight to Skukuzi on the eastern edge of Kruger National Park (where some of the bugs are so large that a pilot needs a type rating and a saddle to fly one). Since the pilot had departed Johannesburg with full tanks, he knew that he had enough fuel for this second leg and did not bother to make a visual inspection of the tanks. No problem,

though. The fuel gauges confirmed a more than adequate supply.

Enroute to Skukuzi and over the desolate bushveld, the fuel-quantity indicators began to move rapidly and inexplicably toward the big E. Was there really enough fuel on board? The pilot began to wonder. Perhaps someone had drained fuel from the tanks while the airplane had been left unattended for two days. The pilot had two choices: continue over the wilderness with an unknown fuel quantity or land at nearby Mbabane, the capital of Swaziland, where the occupants of a South African-registered airplane might be greeted by a less-than-hospitable welcoming committee. But even this, he reasoned, seemed preferable to a potential forced landing amid a pride of lions.

At Mbabane, the airplane was met by a Jeep bristling with machine-gun-toting soldiers. The prospects for having to spend time in a Swazi jail seemed to be increasing. After being confronted and questioned by a general who had more medals and decorations than Idi Amin, the pilot was advised that his trespass (he had neither a visa nor an overflight permit for Swaziland) might be overlooked in exchange for an adequate sup-

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ply of Yankee dollars or South African gold. After emptying his wallet and arranging to purchase fuel with his American Express card, the pilot fired up the twin and hightailed it into the air before the general had a change of heart.

How much fuel did the twin require? Not much, considering that the tanks were indeed more than half full. An inadequate preflight inspection, however, could have avoided having to pay what amounted to more than \$20 per gallon to top the tanks.

- The young pilot and his friend had been planning this flight to Las Vegas for months, but when the big day finally arrived, the departure airport was shrouded with a blanket of zero-zero fog. Just enough visibility remained to taxi the Luscombe onto the runway and line up with the centerline. Big deal, the pilot thought. I've got 20 hours of instrument dual and an airplane equipped with a turn-and-bank indicator. I'll fly needle, ball, and airspeed until we're on top, and it'll be severe clear the rest of the way.

The initial climb was routine, considering that neither the pilot nor the airplane were properly equipped for IFR flight, until the turn indicator began to stick. This is when the pilot learned what the big boys meant when they talked about "sweating bullets." The turn indicator could be made to function (albeit briefly) by stabbing at the rudder pedals and inducing a yaw strong enough to dislodge the needle.

That was many years ago. Today, that Luscombe pilot never departs on an IFR flight in any airplane without first S-turning on a taxiway to verify the integrity of all gyroscopic instruments.

- The charter pilot was about to depart on a return flight from Mexico to Los Angeles in a Twin Beech. When his passengers arrived at the terminal building, he was preoccupied by the purchase of a souvenir. Consequently, he was not paying much attention when one of them asked where in the airplane they could stow the tequila.

"Stick it in the rear of the cabin," the pilot advised. "The baggage compartment is already full." He directed his passengers to the airplane, attended to the filing of a flight plan, and finally arrived at the large taildragger, where he found his passengers seated and ready to go.

Everything appeared normal during the takeoff roll until the pilot pushed forward on the yoke in an attempt to

raise the tail. There was no reaction; the airplane remained in a three-point, nose-high attitude.

Well, the airplane is a bit heavy, the pilot thought. We just need a bit more airspeed. But acceleration was agonizingly poor in such a tail-low attitude, and the Model D-18 was running out of runway. There soon was insufficient room to abort, and the tail remained stubbornly low even though the control wheel was shoved to its forward limit. Finally—and with only scant feet of runway remaining—the airplane slowly levitated into the air in a dangerously nose-high attitude.

Without taking time to explain, the pilot screamed for the passengers in the

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**R**ather than risk landing with such an extremely aft CG, the pilot insisted that his passengers dispose of the tequila though an emergency exit and into the Pacific Ocean.

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rear of the cabin—who coincidentally were the heaviest—to get up and move as far forward along the aisle as they could. This shift in the center of gravity did make the airplane more manageable, and the passengers were allowed to return to their seats after the gear and flaps had been raised and cruise-climb established.

The pilot discovered to his chagrin that the tequila earlier mentioned by his passengers had consisted of several cases weighing hundreds of pounds. Rather than risk landing with such an extremely aft CG, the pilot insisted that his passengers dispose of the tequila—one bottle at a time—though an emergency exit and into the Pacific Ocean. Needless to say, the pilot never again left the loading of an airplane up to his passengers. (Nor did those passengers ever again charter his airplane.)

- The ferry pilot was flying a brand-new Cessna 172 from the factory in Wichita to its proud owner in Southern California. Accompanying him on this flight was a friend who had come along

for the experience. As the aircraft approached the Colorado River, the pilots agreed that buzzing the water skiers would break the monotony of a long, slow flight. So down they went, exhilarated by the increased sense of speed at low altitude.

Suddenly there was the sound of a loud "twang" and the pilots were shocked by the sight of a 50-foot length of wire coiled around the left wing. Fortunately the 172 was still flyable even though the left horizontal stabilizer and elevator had been damaged.

After landing at Parker, Arizona, the pilots were disturbed to learn that the telephone lines through which they had flown were 50 feet below several heavy-duty high-tension cables that also spanned the river at that point. Now *that* could have resulted in a most electrifying experience.

The elements common to the events described are carelessness and poor judgment, factors contributing to the majority of aviation accidents. That each pilot managed to survive his own stupidity, however, is no credit to his skill or cunning. Were it not but for the finger of fate, we might just as well have read about these misadventures amid the sobering reports issued frequently by the National Transportation Safety Board.

Each pilot received a valuable object lesson, but the methodology was intolerable. Safe flight demands also that pilots recognize their fallibility and vulnerability to error. Pilots must be willing to learn from the mistakes of others and accept the advice of their mentors. Good pilots are not the product of repeated exposure to unnecessary risk. The best pilots are those who never tempt fate or confront a hazard of their own making. It is only during the struggle for perfection that we can at least attain some level of excellence.

The transgressions catalogued above are serious breaches of trust and represent carelessness in the extreme. Each pilot, therefore, deserves the harshest criticism for exposing himself and others to such unnecessary dangers.

But what makes these misdeeds even more fascinating is that they were not committed by several pilots. They were the reprehensible acts of one. And that pilot—I hesitate to confess—is me. □

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