

A BAD WEATHER DAY

... and nowhere to go and nowhere to land ...

In 1963 I was flying as Captain for Frontier Airlines in a Douglas DC-3 out of Bismarck, North Dakota. It was a miserable day to go flying for me and my co-pilot, and our two passengers. Our cargo consisted mostly of mail. That's where the company made money, or at least some of the time. We had six stops scheduled with Minot the first and the weather was at minimums. Our agent, or company as it was, estimated the ceiling and visibility at several of the fields meaning we would have to shoot the approach in hopes the "estimates" were correct and we would be able to see the runway when we were down to the minimum descent altitude. If so, we could land legally otherwise it would be a missed approach and on to the next destination airport. The FAA rules did not allow you to even attempt an approach if the weather was reported below minimums. So sometimes we had to fly down the approach to take a look. Otherwise the company may have questions about your ability to fly their airplanes in bad weather.

Our minimum descent altitude at Minot was 400 feet above the ground and wouldn't you know it, there was no runway in sight. We were still in the overcast. It was a missed approach, and on to Williston, then to Sidney and they were both below minimums. They were FAA controlled airports so no approach was necessary, or allowed because their weather reported was below minimums. We flew on by and headed to Glendive.

Glendive, Montana was originally established by the Northern Pacific Railway when they built the transcontinental railroad across the western United States, but I didn't know that at the time. Anyway, I didn't care. That meant nothing to me since we were flying, but taking the train on a day like this seemed to be a good idea if we weren't already in the air. Did I mention it was a miserable day to be flying? We waved goodbye to Glendive and kept on chuggin. They wouldn't get their mail today.

We set our course to Miles City, Montana. My fuel gauges were already making me nervous in light of this crummy weather everywhere we went. We started our route that day with full tanks, 600 gallons, and normally burned 90 gallons an hour in the DC-3. As I stared at the fuel gauges I caught myself wondering why I made a decision to make flying a career. I snapped out of it trying to remember where the two passengers were to deplane. Don't know why I thought of something like that at a time like that because, I couldn't care less about the passengers. So why was I thinking about it?

Miles City was a missed approach, and it was on to Billings, Montana, my last shot with an ILS because even our alternate, Riverton, Wyoming was reporting weather conditions at zero-zero. Zero visibility, zero ceiling. You couldn't see a thing if you were on the ground, and we were in the air. My bad feelings were getting worse.

Naturally, the weather report at Billings was not good, but they had an Instrument Landing System (ILS) so I took her down to the minimums of 200 feet above the ground. There was no runway to see. We were still in the overcast. Our hope now was our alternate, Worland,

Wyoming, and all they had was a radio beacon. This meant our missed approach was 400 feet above the ground. Our company owned the radio beacon and the FAA approved our approach procedure. The FAA had no facilities at Worland. Things had to get better, or at least that was the hope.

As we approached Worland, the station told me another Frontier pilot had made a landing a few minutes before and he reported my landing was going to be a little tight. I knew what he meant when he used the words 'a little tight'—weather was below minimums. Hope was dwindling along with our fuel. I was unable to refuel since a missed approach was necessary for all the airports we'd been to today. This airport was it. Our last chance. We didn't have enough fuel to go anywhere else.

I knew the "reported observation" most likely meant it was below minimums. But, I had to shoot the landing. My alternate at Riverton was zero/zero. Did I mention my fuel status? The weather was socked in everywhere. I had not yet seen a runway to land on since takeoff. Everything had been "a little tight" all day long and that's what we were facing again. I had to land this time or I was going to run out of fuel and crash. I was out of options. I might as well crash at Worland or somewhere nearby so the fire equipment and an ambulance could get to us sooner than somewhere out in the boonies away from the airport.

I made the approach at Worland on the radio beacon which was near the north end of the runway. At 400 feet, minimums for a non-precision approach, and still in the overcast, I passed over the beacon, marked my time and estimated when we would pass the south end of the runway. Still in the overcast where I estimated the south end of the field was, I initiated a turn to a course 80 degrees to the right of the runway heading. As I rolled out on the new course I immediately rolled into a 260 degree turn to the left hoping to come out on the reciprocal runway heading for the landing. As I went wings level out of the final turn with a heading for the north runway, and still at 400 feet in the overcast, I chopped the power and with full flaps and minimum airspeed, I started a descent below the approach minimums. It was already 'tight' and it was gonna' get 'tighter'.

I broke out of the overcast at 100 feet above the ground, or maybe lower. Didn't have time to check and take my eyes off the only runway I'd seen all day. The runway was dead ahead, and we weren't dead! It was the best landing I ever made, and any since. I did have some words later with the Frontier pilot on the ground that said my landing was going to be little tight.

When Mac told this story, I said, "The Lord was really looking after you that day." Mac laughed and replied that was exactly what his wife told him when she heard the story years before. Mac said, "She told me that quite a few times on some of the other stories I told her."

This story was told in October 2021 by Weston McEwan, also known as "Mac." Mac is retired from both United and American Airlines (Continental Airlines bought Frontier out and United bought Continental). As a result of many mergers of various airlines, Mac retired from two airlines—American and United. Go figure, and Mac is 92 years old.