

LAST FLIGHT

Sometimes you know when your last flight will be because you are retiring; sometimes you know when the money runs out, but there's still hope; sometimes you bust a medical, and suddenly your flying days are over. It's finished. Occasionally a last flight is noted on the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) investigation report and the hope is, this will never happen to you. You normally don't get to read it anyway. The NTSB usually doesn't get to talk to you because you're unavailable. Definitely not a way any pilot wants to conclude a flying career. A career ended and it's just done. Time's up. No more flying. It's over, and sometimes so is your life.

I don't know if Jerry had an inkling, but I know at the very end he was too busy to make this his main focus. It may have flashed through his mind with the adrenaline pumping, and I'm sure it was pumping hard, but he had little time to reflect. There wasn't enough time. Jerry knew he was low on fuel.

Jerry was an excellent pilot. I know because I flew with him many times, and learned a great deal. He instructed me for my multi-engine flight instructor rating, and took me through the ten hour checkout required by the insurance company when I bought my twin engine Piper Apache. He was very good teacher, and let me fly the company's twin-engine Cessna 310 delivering tax documents up and down the San Joaquin Valley to Bakersfield, Fresno, Santa Barbara and home to Zamperini Field, also known as Torrance Airport in the Los Angeles basin.

Even Louis Zamperini didn't know it was his last flight when, as a bombardier on a B-24 Liberator bomber, crashed into the Pacific Ocean during World War II while searching for survivors of another downed aircraft. Louie survived only to spend 47 days in a raft and two years in a Japanese prison camp before the war ended and liberation. He never flew again in battle. Sometimes you just never know when your flying career is finished.

Another pilot and old friend not knowing he would not return to his base in England at the end of World War II, was Walt Blair. His flying days were over when the tail of his Lockheed P-38 Lightning fighter was blown off at 28,000 feet by German 88 anti-aircraft cannons. He knew it was time to try out his parachute when he suddenly found himself going 300 mph straight down! The chute worked as advertised, and Walt became a prisoner of war for 45 days till the war ended. After the war he went to college on the GI Bill, hired on to a pump company, sold pumps, became President of Peerless Pump, but never flew another day by his own hand. Walt said, "That last flight did it for me."

Ernie didn't know it was his last flight when he took a multi-engine student pilot, learning at the expense of the Iranian government, up for a lesson in the practice area east of Miramar NAS. Another Iranian student, and friend of Ernie's student in a similar twin-engine

Piper Aztec, began swooping down evidently horsing around simulating an attack on his friend and flight instructor. On the second pass he collided with Ernie and his student. One-third of Ernie's Aztec wing was sheared off. The solo Iranian pilot spun his Aztec into the ground dying on impact. Ernie took the flight controls of his aircraft, and slipped the aircraft from altitude heading to the closest runway at Miramar Naval Air Station, San Diego. Ernie declared an emergency with the intention to land.

The approach and runway was cleared for Ernie's aircraft. But less than 50 feet above the ground, Ernie's Aztec clipped the tail of a Navy fighter jet waiting takeoff in the run-up area, and his Aztec cart-wheeled into the ground. The effort to crash land the disabled aircraft was tragic. Ernie and his student were killed.

Not the way to end a career in aviation. Ernie Nathan began flying in 1925, instructed student pilots for the military prior to World War II, test flew the B-24 Liberator Bomber for Consolidated Aircraft Company, and other aircraft. Ernie had many accomplishments in aviation as well as being the Chief Aerobatic Instructor for the Navy Flying Club in San Diego where I took aerobatic instruction from him. Ernie Nathan was an outstanding pilot. May Ernie Nathan rest in peace.

Jerry knew he was low on fuel. According to a newspaper account Jerry reported a low fuel state to Torrance tower as he turned final over the Vincent Thomas Bridge while ferrying a Cessna Model 210 on a dark night for the owner after electrical work was completed at the John Wayne Airport. Torrance tower immediately cleared him to land on runway 29R. He was on final approach to Torrance with clearance to land. The Cessna's engine quit while sliding down final approach. Jerry could not clear the last house before the runway, slammed into the roof somersaulting upside down into the back yard of a house, and bursting into flames. NTSB reported he "... was about 2,500 feet short of runway 29 Right."

Brave souls at the Pizza Parlor nearby, hearing the commotion rushed to the scene and pulled Jerry from the cockpit which was on fire. Jerry was on fire. At first, they yelled for him to release his seatbelt, but he said, "I can't." Moments later the fire burned through the safety harness, and Jerry crumpled to the roof of the cockpit now upside down with the plane lying on its back. The rescuers successfully pulled him out of the passenger side door due to the intense fire on the pilots' side of the airplane. Jerry was pulled onto the wing, and safely into the yard away from the fire. The rescuer's comforted Jerry while waiting for the medics to arrive. He told them his arms were cold, and that's when they saw in the dim light his arms and hands were severely burned. Jerry survived a week in the hospital until his burns took their final toll.

The NTSB described the accident as "A loss of engine power due to fuel starvation as a result of the pilot's mismanagement and inadequate preflight inspection." Jerry was well familiar with the Cessna 210 and had flown it many times, but never to the fuel exhaustion stage.

The planes owner who was not onboard stated to the NTSB officials, "...I checked the fuel gauges and noted each fuel gauge read about one quarter tank." It was a short flight, maybe ten minutes, across the bay from John Wayne Airport to Torrance.

Sometimes it only takes one mistake to alter the course of your life. One mistake the NTSB knew of that fateful night bringing down the Cessna, and closing out the last chapter of a pilot's life. There was probably more than one mistake. Usually more than just one mistake is needed to bring down an airplane, but maybe not that night. Only one mistake ...

Some years before, Jerry told of another incident involving low fuel in a two place Champion Citabria. The new owner asked Jerry to fly with him from the Compton Airfield to Torrance which is literally a three minute flight. Just exit the traffic pattern after takeoff from Compton, and enter downwind at Torrance reporting for landing on 29R. All went well until the Champ's engine quit on final, and the new owner turned completely around in his seat even though he was buckled in the front seat and said to Jerry in a panic, "What do we do now?" Jerry said, "I got it..." as he banked the airplane in a steep slip draining all the fuel available from the high wing tank causing the engine to cough back to life. Some moments before making the runway, he reversed the slip and began taking the last of the fuel from the other wing tank and kept the engine running throughout the landing. Jerry planned the landing to have enough speed to make the 45 degree angled taxiway with little slowdown, and a hurried request to Ground Control for taxi to parking. It worked. The engine didn't quit until they ran out of fuel in the tie-down area. No one the wiser, but them. Of course the fuel truck driver may have figured it out when he topped off the Champ with fuel.

So Jerry's fuel exhaustion on his final flight was not his first experience with a low fuel situation. Did he try the same tactic with the Cessna 210? I'm told a C-210 cannot be slipped to drain all the fuel from the wing tanks. We'll never know. It was dark, and no reports concerning the approach other than one person seeing the plane go over his house making no noise. The engine died and the NTSB report stated, "...the intact right fuel tank contained about 8 ounces of fuel...the left tank was breached, but approximately one gallon was drained...the fuel selector was positioned to the right fuel tank..."

No doubt it was fuel exhaustion and a terrible fire that fateful night for Jerry. Jerry a good friend who went west and unfortunately left a paper trail right through the desk of the National Transportation Safety Board. A tragic end to a professional career with more than 15,000 flying hours, some of which are logged in my pilot log book.

A sad night indeed for my good friend Jerry Hoke, an outstanding pilot, and my old flight instructor. May Jerry rest in peace.

Summary by Jim Davis, West Valley Flying Club