

178 SECONDS TO LIVE

Pilot Proficiency has been taught in aviation ground schools, written about, and discussed since Orville and Wilber ushered in their Wright Flyer airplane in 1903, and pilots continue to fly from visual flight into meteorological weather conditions restricting flight with tragic results.

In March 2016 the Aircraft Owners and Pilot Association (AOPA) magazine reported on a proficiency item with an article by William E. Dubois titled "The Lost Lessons of 178 Seconds to Live". The article states, "Some things never change, it seems. Take unintended flights from visual flight rules into instrument meteorological conditions: VFR into IMC. While these accidents represent a small number of the total crashes every year, they consistently represent a disproportionate percentage of the fatalities."

This has been a problem written about many times in accident reporting especially by the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB). I wrote about one specific accident I was an eye witness to at Van Nuys Airport in California on November 15, 1974 at 7:10 in the morning that matches precisely the 178 seconds to live description.

Eye Witness to a Fatal Crash

Pilot Witness: Van Nuys Airport, California, Nov 15, 1974, 7:10 a.m.

It was already a bad day at Van Nuys Airport, visibility was restricted with 300 foot overcast. It was Friday, November 15, 1974 at 7:10 in the morning when I got out of my car in the parking lot of Pioneer Aviation at Van Nuys Airport and started walking to the office. I heard an aircraft very low to the ground and remember thinking that I was sure glad I was not up flying. The bottom of the overcast was only 300 feet and no one in their right mind would be up in the soup that close to the ground unless they were on final approach and in line with the runway. And they weren't.

I stopped dead in my tracks only a couple of steps from my car and looked up towards the sound of the aircraft very near but buried in the clouds. It was loud, very low and circling. I knew someone was in trouble and wondered if they were in contact with the tower. I followed the sound as the aircraft that made two tight circuits above me and not visible. Then the aircraft emerged left wing down out of the bottom of the overcast. I couldn't believe it. I could almost reach up and touch it! It was a twin engine red and white Piper Aztec. This guy was definitely in trouble. I was standing only a few hundred feet east of runway 16L at Van Nuys.

It was apparent the pilot made visual contact with the ground because he pulled up sharply. I know he was surprised and unfortunately it was the last surprise of his life. Apparently, the pilot hauled back on the yoke and disappeared back into the overcast in a climbing left turn. The airplane went into the low overcast at an extremely nose high attitude appearing to stand the plane on its tail. It was clearly obvious the pilot was totally disorientated and making the wrong corrections to his flight.

Within two or three seconds after the beginning of the climb back into the overcast, the throttles were closed to idle and an engine backfire was heard or possibly two backfires at almost the same time.

It went quiet with no engine noise to be heard. Several seconds later the aircraft broke out of the overcast in an extreme nose down attitude in a spiral to the left. The aircraft appeared to be in a spiral rather than a spin. But no matter at this point, it was too late. It was over. The pilot and his two passengers were heading out for a fishing trip in Mexico and had the very last surprise of their lives. The aircraft made about one-quarter to one-half turn after becoming visible below the overcast prior to impact.

The impact was more of a thud and a whooruuump rather than a loud crash. I was about 50 yards away when the Piper Aztec crashed into the fuel pits in front of San Val Aviation on the east side of the two parallel runways at Van Nuys. The aircraft parts went flying and were clanging into the tarmac and I was straining to see if any were headed directly for me. The sound seemed to be absorbed into the initial flame and thick black smoke that rushed upward and into the overcast. The whole flying sequence and nightmare of a flight was over in an instant. Not more than 45 seconds had elapsed since I had gotten out of my car and taken those first two or three steps. The fuel pits did not ignite. The visibility was so bad that the tower was not visible from the crash site.

I heard later that the pilot had his twin engine rating but not an instrument rating. The pilot in the right seat had his instrument rating but not his twin engine rating. The synergy just didn't work for them that day. It was a classic disorientation case from the moment of liftoff and the flight itself could not have lasted more than two and one half to three minutes—probably 178 seconds. I witnessed only the last few seconds of the ill-fated flight and the fishing trip to Mexico that never was. The fortunate person that day was a dentist that was supposed to be onboard but decided, for some reason, not to take off with them but to meet them at a nearby airport in the mountains, Agua Dulce, where the weather was clear. He was there waiting but they never arrived and not until he made some phone calls as to where his friends were, did he learn the news. The dentist made the wise decision that day.

The details of this flight account were taken from the accident report that I filed that day with the FAA's Flight Standards District Office (FSDO) in Van Nuys, California.

Jim Davis, FAA 1779352 CFI

Witness Report Written to the General Aviation District Office of the FAA, November 1974.

When reading accident reports and pilot accounts of near misses or tragedies of one sort or another, one often wonders how the pilots could have made such a mistake and "...what were they thinking ... how could they have made such a ... mistake?" That's what you ask yourself while you are sitting very comfortably in your study where you can see and think clearly and have plenty of time to analyze what you would have done had you been in that poor chap's place—like wait for the marine layer of air to dissipate and VFR weather returned. The fishing trip could wait.

When reading these reports it always seems you would have done what was necessary and the accident would have never occurred had you been flying.