

■ ■ The landing had been a grease-on—just a feather-brush of the wheels as we touched down.

Seconds later the airplane lay with its nose buried in the snow; its nose-wheel was crumpled and broken beneath the engine; its prop was wrapped around the cowl; and its tail pointed toward the sky.

It was unreal and impossible. But the proof stood in front of me—a beautiful little gleaming white Yankee, now crippled and useless.

Two hours before, I had left DuPage County Airport in northern Illinois. A good friend, Fred Creedle, was my passenger. The wind was light and the cumulus clouds were scattered widely beneath an open sky. Visibility extended far beyond 15 miles. It seemed a truly

perfect day for flying, I thought.

It was late in March and the temperature hovered in the low 30's. A light, late-winter snow had fallen the night before, crusting the countryside below to all horizons.

This was my seventh hour in the cockpit of a Yankee, an airplane I truly love to fly. It is fast, responsive, and just plain gorgeous. We had rented our bird from Planemasters Aviation, an American Aviation Corporation dealer and flight school operating out of DuPage County Airport.

Our first destination—just a coffee stop—was Lewis-Lockport Airport at Lockport, Ill., some 25 miles southeast of DuPage. During a pass over the field to check wind direction, I noted that the snow had melted from the blacktop

strip, leaving a scattering of small puddles along its length. We landed, had our coffee, and took off on our second leg, headed for Ottawa, Ill. Half an hour later we were there. The field has two turf strips and a 2,300-foot blacktop running northeast-southwest.

The windsock was puffing slightly, indicating the same mild northerly wind that had accompanied us all morning. I elected to land crosswind on the hard-surfaced strip, and entered the pattern.

But I was hurrying and I shouldn't have been. Suddenly we were on final and coming in hot, much too hot. I hit the throttle and put the Yankee into a go-around, mumbling something unprintable to Fred, and determined to show him a good landing.

The second pattern gave me all the

by DENNIS BRENNAN / AOPA 388710

## What Happens When You

# 'Bend' An Airplane?



One minute a nice soft touchdown—the next second, an airplane digging its nose into the ground. The FAA had a lot to say to the pilot about this mishap. Photos by F. W. Creedle

time and airspace I needed. We touched down with a barely noticeable bump. I relaxed and looked down the runway. The airplane had begun to veer to the left. I pushed right rudder to correct the roll.

Nothing happened.

The seat of my pants—and everything else—began to tingle and I hit the right rudder hard. Still nothing happened. I could do nothing but sit helplessly and watch a two-foot-high snowbank beside the runway rush at us.

Then we hit. There was a throaty crunch and a loud crack as the nose-wheel snapped. Suddenly Fred and I were sitting half-suspended from our seatbelts, staring face down into the snow that covered the Yankee's nose. We scrambled out of the cockpit and ran 30 feet away. We stopped and stared back at the crippled bird. There was no sign of fire.

"Hey!" Fred exclaimed. He raced back to the cockpit, retrieved a camera he had brought along, and began to shoot photos of the accident. I looked down the runway. Two cars were racing toward us from buildings at the other end of the field.

For a moment I could do nothing as I tried to sort through the confusion of thoughts whirling through my head. What had gone wrong? What will Planemasters say? Should I report to the FAA? What happens then? Will

## Pilot bangs up plane on landing and learns, firsthand, what to expect from FAA when it investigates such accidents

they suspend my private license?

The two cars reached us. Several men piled out. They had the big question: "Anyone hurt?"

"No. We're okay."

"What happened?"

"Hell, that's what I'm trying to figure out."

"You got to be careful in weather like this. A wheel can freeze up on you. You got to set it down a little hard to make sure you break any ice that's formed."

"Yeah," I said, remembering those puddles at Lewis-Lockport.

The men helped me push the airplane further off the runway, where it stood with its nose resting on the ground, looking abandoned and lonely.

"Look at this," called one of the men. He pointed to a long black tire mark on the runway. The mark ran from our point of touchdown to the snowbank where the Yankee had stopped. It convinced me that a brake had locked. I breathed a little easier, sure that my flawless landing procedure had not been at fault.

The men drove us to the airport office where I called Planemasters and reported the accident. I spoke to Rudy Centofante (AOPA 210677), president of Planemasters, a dark-haired, energetic man who is positive the Yankee is what Orville and Wilbur had in mind when they began it all.

Rudy's only concern was over the possibility of injury, either to me or anyone else. I assured him we were all right. I also kept trying to apologize for creaming his airplane.

"Relax," he said. "These things happen. Just be glad no one got hurt." He explained what I should do to make sure the Yankee was looked after until he could fly to Ottawa and check the damage. I did as he instructed, then Fred and I hired a car to drive the 60 miles back to DuPage County Airport. We filled Rudy in on the details of the accident and then went to Fred's house where we reexamined the day's events over a couple of warming potables that helped to relieve the nagging feeling that, in spite of the tire mark, I'd still done something wrong.

The following Monday, I telephoned the General Aviation District Office (GADO) No. 3 at DuPage. Thus I was

first introduced to FAA Principal Operations Inspector Ned Powers. Ned has since transferred from DuPage and is currently working in the Minneapolis GADO.

Was Ned qualified to make a judgment of me as a pilot and of the circumstances of my accident?

Slightly. He has been flying for 33 years. He is a one-time aerobatics champion. He was a longtime operator of a Minnesota FBO and cropdusting operation. He worked in aviation in the Republic of Sudan for a couple of years. He is an ex-FAA flight examiner, a helicopter instructor, and the holder of more ratings than I even knew existed.

During the first telephone conversation, I gave him the initial report of the accident. The next day he mailed me an official aircraft accident report which I filled out and returned. That, I hoped, would be the end of it. Ah, innocence!

Several days later Ned called me. "You'll be getting a letter from me soon," he said. "Don't get all shook up when you read it and call me when you get a chance."

I hung up and looked at the phone. Why should a letter bother me? Two days later I found out why. The letter arrived; I opened it and stared at it in disbelief.

"Investigation of the incident," it began, "which occurred at Ottawa, Ill., . . . gives reason to believe that your competence as a private pilot may have been involved and that a reexamination of your airman competence is necessary . . . The reexamination will consist of private pilot flight test maneuvers with emphasis on crosswind and short-field takeoffs and landings and slow flight."

The letter further informed me that if I failed to take the reexamination, it "would be necessary for us to start proceedings to suspend your private pilot certificate until such time as you demonstrate your competence to exercise its privileges, unless other arrangements are made . . ."

I thanked Heaven that Ned Powers had warned me the letter was coming. If I'd received it unexpectedly, I would have hit the ceiling. As it was, it scared hell out of me.

I couldn't really understand their reasoning. Wasn't that black tire mark clear evidence that a brake had locked on me?

"Not necessarily," Ned Powers told me when I telephoned him again. "You might have dropped the wing when you touched down and landed with the right wheel in the air. That would have left a



This tire mark on the runway surface led the pilot to believe, at first, that his left brake locked on touchdown. Investigation showed nothing wrong with the brakes and pilot learned more than one thing could have caused tire mark.

# 'Bend' An Airplane

tire mark. It could be other things, too. That's what we have to find out."

After telling Ned I would call him back for an appointment for the re-examination, I decided to take a couple of hours of dual in the Yankee.

Three weeks passed between the time of the accident and the time I took the dual. It was too long. I bombed completely. I could handle the airplane well enough in the air, but something switched off the instant it touched down. I nearly sent a couple of Plane-masters' instructors out the canopy as they hit the pedals to control my landing rolls. It was obvious that it would take more than a couple of hours of dual before I felt confident in the Yankee again. And I found myself asking that best-known of pilots' questions: "What the hell am I doing up here?" It wasn't the airplane's fault. It was mine.

I'd had it. I decided to quit flying. I called Ned and told him I wanted to turn in my license voluntarily.

"No sir," replied Ned Powers, stern enforcer of air regulations and guardian of America's airways, "I'm not going to let you do that. You're upset. You take a few days to think it over. Then call me back. But think about it good first."

I did think it over. Two weeks later I called him and thanked him and asked if he wanted to set a date for the test. I also asked if I could take the test in a Cessna 150 in which I'd logged more than 70 hours, compared to the seven in the Yankee. He said it was no problem and was obviously pleased I'd calmed down enough to decide against turning in my ticket.

A few days later we were sitting in Ned's office at GADO-3 headquarters at DuPage County Airport. Ned explained why and how the FAA is involved in aircraft accidents.

Under Section 609 of the Federal Aviation Act, the FAA is delegated by the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) the authority to investigate all nonfatal civil aircraft accidents involving aircraft that have a certificated maximum gross takeoff weight of 12,500 pounds or less. This authority includes accidents involving rotorcraft, aerial application, amateur-built aircraft, and restricted category aircraft. It excludes air taxi aircraft operators and commercial operators of small aircraft.

"Once an incident is reported," Ned said, "we are required to investigate. And we are further required to resolve its cause. We must determine whether it was caused by a malfunction of the aircraft, by incompetency on the part of the pilot, by a violation (buzzing, for example), or a combination of these.

"In case of a malfunction, we try to

find out what happened. If the competence of the pilot is in question, we are required to reexamine his piloting abilities. If it was a violation, then we must decide what action should be recommended against the pilot."

What is a pilot required to do when he has an accident?

Under NTSB Part 430, the operator of an aircraft is required to report an aircraft accident that occurs when anyone is killed or seriously injured in the operation of an aircraft. The operator is also required to report an accident in which the aircraft receives substantial damage.

"Substantial damage" is defined as "damage or structural failure which adversely affects the structural strength, performance, or flight characteristics of the aircraft, and which normally would require major repair or replacement of the affected components."

However, Part 430.2 also explains that "substantial damage" is *not* "engine failure; damage limited to an engine, bent fairings or cowling, skin or fabric; ground damage to rotor or propeller blades; damage to landing gear, wheels, tires, flaps, engine accessories, brakes or wingtips."

In other words, the damage that is not "substantial" does not need to be reported. I admit, I groaned aloud when I realized that I need not have reported my Ottawa accident. But since I did report it, the FAA had to investigate it. And even if I hadn't reported, someone else might have and it looked better for me to do it.

Because no "substantial damage" was involved, Ned described, for official purposes, my own case as an "incident."

After explaining the regulations to me, Ned then began to ask about my accident. We came up with a lot of possibilities: perhaps I had misjudged the crosswind; perhaps I had "let go" when the airplane touched down and not kept it under proper control; perhaps the wheel had indeed been weather-frozen. And maybe it had been mechanically locked. (The latter possibility is somewhat excluded because a check of the brakes after the accident showed that they were in perfect working order.)

There was no real way to resolve what had gone wrong. But Ned seemed more interested in finding out if I was willing to admit that maybe it had been me—not the airplane. Frankly, by this time, I was convinced that it was my fault.

"Well," said Ned, "shall we go up?"

I wasn't exactly enthusiastic about the idea, but nodded and we left the office. On our way to the Cessna 150 I'd rented, I noted that the wind was coming out of the north at about 15

knots and gusting up to 20. It was going to be a bumpy ride.

Fifteen minutes later I put the 150 into the air and we left the pattern. I was nervous. Ned either sensed or saw it. He began to talk and to demonstrate cockpit procedures, airspeed control, "handling" the airplane, and making it behave the way I wanted to.

We tried a little slow flight, a stall, a 360° steep turn, and three crosswind landings. And then it was over. We headed for the parking strip. A short while later, Ned signed my logbook, "Post-incident proficiency check—Ned Powers, FAA-GADO-3."

"Is that it?" I asked. "What happens now?"

He grinned and held out his hand. "Nothing. It's over. You're okay. Good-bye and good luck." He left for the GADO office and I stared after him. Lord, I thought, I'm still a pilot! That may sound like a prayer of thanks. It was.

Later I saw Ned again and asked what would have happened if I'd walked into his office ready to tear the FAA to pieces. "Oh, we get them like that," he said. "But it makes no difference. Even if a pilot does raise the roof with us, we still have to resolve the case because the law requires us to. It's just that simple."

What Ned didn't add, but which is just as obvious, is that the pilot who cooperates and who is sincerely interested in resolving the case is going to make it easier on himself.

Ned told me, "Our interest is primarily in making *safe* pilots, not in revoking or suspending licenses. We want to help the pilot if we can and our purpose in reexamining him is to see if he's doing anything wrong and, if he is, then to suggest how he can correct it."

I believe him. Ned's treatment of my case was *not* impartial; it was *better* than that. It was courteous, personal, and sympathetic.

Am I a better pilot because of the accident? Lord, I hope so. Considering that I could just as easily have killed myself and a very good friend, I sure do hope so. □

---

## THE AUTHOR

Dennis Brennan is senior editor of *The Lion*, the official publication of *The International Association of Lions Clubs*. He first appeared in the pages of *The PILOT* in June 1970 with his article, "A Hot Day In August." A private pilot, he is the author of a history of aviation for juveniles, "The Skymasters," published in 1968.

---