FEAR

Respect goes hand-in-hand with survival

BY MAX KARANT

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Any pilot who says he's *not* fundamentally afraid of airplanes is either a liar or a fool. If he's honest about his innermost feelings, he'll be a lot less likely to end up a statistic. Unfortunately, far too many pilots stick their macho chests out and tell the world they know all about that particular set of circumstances—so what the hell!

There are many kinds of fear—but they are gradations of the same thing. Many psychiatrists say that fear is a healthy self-preservation emotion.

I've experienced many gradations of fear and am not ashamed to admit it. That is why I've been flying for over 30 years and nearly 10,000 hours and am still going. Many people confuse fear with panic. They are different and not many pilots who panic survive. I fear panic.

Panic is the extreme. It's uncontrollable terror. The only things that might possibly save you in that state are the design of the airplane you're in, its flight characteristics—if you let go of it—or luck.

Having been in on the birth of AOPA's Air Safety Foundation and many of its programs, I've had the rewarding opportunity to see pilots coping with everything from nervousness to panic.

In the few times I've come close to it, I couldn't even tell you what two and two equalled. A lot of guys who have admitted experiencing panic say the same thing. Not many pilots live to confess a bout with panic. Fortunately for me, I have. Once I got so much ice while flying on instruments over the Alleghenies that my plane was pushed below the minimum en route altitude. It was winter, but I was sweating. Then I remembered what a wise old instructor had warned me of years before: when you feel *that* coming on, slap yourself, yell, jump up and down—anything to get your thoughts back on a logical track. I did, and immediately told the center my predicament and asked where the nearest radar approach control facility was. Center said Charleston, W. Va. I envisioned that wild terrain.

Soon center handed me over to Charleston approach, and it was clear Charleston had been warned that I sounded shaken. When approach acknowledged radar contact, I told him I was 2,000 feet below the MEA at full throttle and asked where the nearest dangerous obstructions were. He calmly told me there was a ridge 20 miles south and that it should be no problem to me.

I managed to reduce the panic to apprehension and nervousness and was thinking fairly clearly. I blessed that Canadian bush pilot friend of mine who told me how to burnish the leading edges of my props and spray them with silicone to keep the ice off (it worked like a charm). I told the controller to give me *very* gentle turns onto the ILS for fear of stalling (he'd already figured that out), and I broke out of the freezing rain just above 1,000 feet agl—at full throttle. Slowing down, I chose what seemed to be the safest combination of gear and flaps, then landed going like a bat out of hell. I still sweat over it.

Panic approached at Santiago, Chile, too. It was solid IFR, and I found I'd filed for an airport that wasn't there! It was the new terminal; the approach plate was published, complete with frequencies. But in the air a Chilean pilot told me the airport wasn't there yet. I was low on fuel and in the Andes—the kind of country that's not conducive to bluffing. I'd been told the radio aids at the old airport were out of service. Frantically I began tuning around the VOR receiver. Suddenly, I received a station that was the VOR on the old airport. I told the tower I had it, and he casually said—"Okay, go ahead and use it." They're very casual and informal down there in South America—another worry.

I set up a VOR approach, and frantically kept tuning the ADF to nearby beacons on either side of the approach. My inbound track matched what I had on the approach chart for the old airport. A hole opened in the heavy rain clouds, and in the hole was the end of runway 03—a sight I'll never forget. I'm not an aerobatic pilot, but I was that day. I went into that hole like a performer at the National Air Races, leveled off over the runway number, and touched down—only to see a line squall obliterating the other end of the runway, moving toward me. I didn't give a damn at that point; my wheels were solid on the ground.

This is the kind of experience that can kill people. In normal, everyday flying I experience nervousness, some apprehension and worry. Will I hit a bird? Will an engine quit and where would I land? (Any grass strip—or a SAC base would suit me then.) Is some other plane like an airliner coming up my rear where I can't see him? I stay on radar for protection. Is that little trouble with the gear likely to keep it from extending? I've got a theory with my plane: my major concern is to keep fuel flowing to the engines and get the wheels down. Everything else may be difficult, but not a crisis.

I'm *always* apprehensive about the National Weather Service, either VFR or IFR. No matter what they tell you, you must be prepared for the opposite and the worst. That icing in the mountains was a morning flight, and those experts didn't know a thing about that weather or its hazards. When a DC-3 corporation pilot (who landed after me) and I told them in some rather nonregulation language after we got on the ground, these were their first PIREP's. Meteorologists have told me it was CAVU from Washington to Philadelphia—and I've run into a squall line 20 miles northeast of Washington. No explanation, just a shrug. My instrument rating is my life insurance.

Playing the role of the sage, I'd tell *any* pilot to prepare himself for some level of fear whenever he flies. That preparation will help alleviate some of the problem. Once you're in the air, stand by with the controllers in the centers and towers, no matter whether you're VFR or IFR. In case of trouble, they can be wonderful helpers.

Have a healthy respect for fear, and don't be ashamed of it. Used properly, it can keep you alive. □