Position Report

Alaskan Aviation Safety Foundation Summer 2011

Article written by Jim La Belle

National Transportation Safety Board

There have been many times in my career as an NTSB investigator that I wished I could reach out and literally grab one of my fellow airmen by the lapels and shake them, shake them back from the dead, give them another chance at life. Of course that's impossible, but the frustration is palpable when you see life wasted time and time again, often over lapses of basic airmanship and judgment. Winding up in a zippered bag is not the way to close your flight plan.

So, after 26 years of accident investigation and thousands of accidents, what stands out as shakable offenses? You probably know them, but I'll tell you again. I warn you, you may not like the implications or some of the direct language, but if only one of you reads and heeds, and it saves a life, then it's worth whatever offense someone may take. Forewarned, read on, if you will…

Fellow AASF members,

I have attached a very thoughtful article by someone many of you know: Jim La Belle, Chief, Alaska NTSB (National Transportation Safety Board). Jim has investigated thousands of aviation mishaps. He knows what he is talking about and the lessons are written in blood. The unfortunate thing is there is nothing new here but maybe, just maybe, some of us will take heed after reading Jim's article.

Harry Kieling, Chairman of the Board, AASF

In no particular order of consequence, as they'll all kill you:

Returning to the airport after a loss of engine power. Below 600 feet or so, don't even think about it. Go straight ahead, or select an area roughly between 10 and 2 o'clock. Given enough altitude, you MAY be able to make a turn to 3 or 9 o'clock using something less than a slam-it-to-the- stops steep turn—maybe. Every takeoff should be accompanied by actively thinking where you'll abort, and where you'll go in case of a power loss. Turning around is NOT usually an option. You'll lose time, altitude and airspeed deciding what to do, and a steep, low altitude turn without power is probably going to end in a stall/spin and a lawn dart into something a lot harder than air, with you taking up space in a yellow bag. Go online, and search for "The impossible Turn." It is good reading, has pictures, and may save your butt.

Pushing weather. Bad weather causes accidents, right? Nope, it's the decision to fly in such weather, or the decisions made when in the weather, that results in accidents. The NTSB rarely finds weather as the principal cause of accidents; rather it's usually a contributor to the chain of events leading to the accident. The good thing about weather is that it changes; don't get antsy and think you have to be somewhere at a certain time. I can recall so many serious accidents where waiting a few minutes or a couple of hours and the flight would have ended with a cold beer instead of a cold shiny metal slab. As an investigator going to the site in a helicopter, it's often blue and beautiful—you can see all the obstacles, look down and see that burned smudge that was an airplane, and wonder how it got where it was. I'll share with you a sight I saw years ago but won't forget--as we approached the landing zone close to a wreck that was in a blind canyon off the pass, I saw an arm sticking out of the wreckage, seeming to point to the west, towards the correct drainage and safety. If the pilot would have waited an hour or so, or elected to turn around when he saw the lowering clouds, he wouldn't have needed posthumous directions from a passenger.

Overloading. Want to be a test pilot—overload your aircraft. Aft center of gravity loadings are particularly challenging, with handling thrills assured, particularly during takeoff and approach. Flying safely requires discipline and a belief in the aircraft handbook. Years ago in Alaska, 18 people, 16 of them passengers, didn't make it home for Thanksgiving because of a significant overload coupled with an aft CG. And I assure you, the tally increases every year. Read the book, plot the points, and stay inside the lines.

406 ELTs. Come on, what are you thinking? That it won't happen to you? My job exists because it DOES happen to people like you. We've already had several missing aircraft since the plug was pulled on the 121.5 analog satellite receivers. Yes, occasionally someone, a high flyer or a FSS facility, or a tower may be within range of the 121.5 signal, but usually not. 406's are digital, send a signal immediately on impact or manual activation, and tell rescuers where you are within a few yards. A pilot got his Cub stuck on a glacier earlier this year, turned his 406 on and had a rescue helicopter

over him in 25 minutes. Ditto on a couple of other accidents this year. By contrast, there are at least two missing airplanes out there this year that have 121.5's that may never be found. And here's one argument I hear: "I don't care about rescue; if I crash it's my problem." Hardly. A crash or missing aircraft generates massive searches and cost, not to mention putting many others at risk during the search. By not having a 406 ELT, you are being very selfish and uncaring of others. Think about it like this: If you or one of your passengers is lying in a wreck in the wild with some non-disposable body part broken, wouldn't that $1,500-3,000 that a 406 cost look like chump change for an almost assured rescue?

Moose Turn Stalls. You know these. You're fixated on a moose, bear, what have you, and roll into a steep, tight turn over the object. As you continue the turn, it steepens ever so slightly, and you unconsciously add top rudder to keep it from getting too steep. Your airspeed decays, there may be a slight buffet, and in a heartbeat, probably one of your last, you've flipped over the top and are now pointed straight down with the stick sucked into your lap (a natural reaction that close to the ground) with an unwelcome embrace from Mother Earth a second or two away. That kind of stuff makes my phone ring a couple of times every year; I'd love for it to stop.

Okay, I could go on, but I've run out of space.

Thanks for listening, and may I be privileged to shake your hand someday, and not your lapels!

Jim La Belle

Chief, Alaska NTSB