

Maintenance and line personnel who support our aircraft usually do a good job. Whether the aircraft is serviced for us, or we perform "self-service" we never seem to find anything amiss. Why do we have to bother with preflight checklists and developing a routine for our preflights? Read what happened when two highly experienced pilots got distracted out of their routine. Note: The item these pilots "missed" is something that line personnel often do for us. Do we really believe that line support is so infallible that we don't have to check their work?

Never Again Online: Lost Dances

By Loren A. Bauman

Our adventure began flying low over the watery plains of northern Minnesota. My brother and I were vacationing in his 1958 Cessna 180 on Edo 2700 amphibious floats, with western Washington as our ultimate destination. After extensive preflight preparations, we were ecstatic to finally begin our 1,400-nm journey.

We had planned a "splash and dash" trip. Like dancing with every girl at the prom, we would gently engage every eligible body of water close to our flight path. We planned to fish, but only as an excuse to linger at each pond for a while, wanting to savor each dance. It was to be a grand eight-day voyage, with ample time for admiring the capabilities of my brother's aircraft and improving our own.

Our preflight preparations had involved two full days of lubricating, inspecting, pumping, priming, bleeding, weighing, and flight checking. In truth, there was a whole lot of fussin' over what seemed like a thousand variables. The airplane's paint was recent, but the metal beneath showed evidence of a harsh life. But, this airplane oozed character; it was a fine, hard-working machine. Engine inspection revealed everything was healthy under the hood, and polishing the metal frame provided the finishing touch.

The 180 had earned the name "Loon," after the spirited Minnesota state bird because the aircraft has a long graceful body and rides low in the water.

Our takeoff from land was a snap. The engine had a hungry, energetic growl. We reached rudder control speed quickly, and the takeoff roll was almost too short to savor. Rate of climb was respectable, and I quickly settled in.

"Nice plane, big brother," I said.

"Yeah, it's not too bad," he replied. "It's so graceful when it just begins to caress the water's surface," he added with youthful excitement, "Just you wait." I wouldn't wait long.

"General aviation needs a better checklist system—it's too easy for items to be missed, particularly in complex airplanes like this one." These words had barely crossed my brother's lips when silence overwhelmed the engine hum.

We reflexively initiated engine-out procedures and another 10 seconds lapsed while we listened to the wind whistle before our disbelief relented.

"Is this for real?" I asked.

"Yeah, I think so!" my brother's voice squealed with an uncharacteristic pitch. We pitched the airplane for best-glide speed, and searched for a place to land.

The deafening quiet had a death-grip on the cabin. A power-off glide in an amphibious Cessna 180 is akin to a pheasant shot in midair. From an altitude of scarcely 1,000 feet, we had less than 30 seconds before the flight would be over, ready or not. We headed for water, turning back and sharply to our left. No time to bring the landing gear down for a road landing. My mind still in denial, I was certain the engine would restart. The shoreline trees were dead ahead.

While my brother tried to restart, I pushed the yoke forward, lowering the nose, to avoid stalling the airplane. We were now heading toward the treetops, crossing them with the width of three leaves to spare. The lake, now fully visible, was minuscule! It nestled within towering 100-foot rock walls on all sides, and the opposite shore approached with surreal speed.

I lowered full flaps, confirmed the gear was up for a water landing, and we touched down. The landing was graceful, although hurried and downwind. We splashed to a stop. It happened so fast my heart had no time to race. I finally took my first breath.

"What just happened?" I asked. "Did we just make an emergency landing onto a lake that is too small for a takeoff?"

"Yeah! And the wind will blow us into those rocks if we don't start to paddle," my brother said, squirming manically to get out with a paddle.

Even then, my disbelief was still in charge. I climbed up to inspect the fuel tanks, hoping for a restart. **Then I saw the left fuel cap was gone and a telltale blue streak trailing aft!** We had departed without the fuel cap and, with the fuel selector on "both," fuel had siphoned overboard from both tanks. The second tank's rubber bladder had been sucked upward, causing the gauge to indicate it was two-third's full.

Two days of meticulous preflight inspections had ended with a last-minute fight with a problem on the credit card reader on the fuel pump dispenser. My brother had already mounted the airplane's wing for fueling, but when I couldn't make the pump run, he came to help. We argued with the pump to exasperation, and then decided to go to a nearby airport for gas. The rest is history—history unfortunately captured by the local media.

It turned out that we had landed on a lake that was property of a large mining company. The treetop approach took us directly over its security office. For "a plane crash," they had called in the cavalry: security supervisors, company engineers, ambulance, fire trucks, and, yes, the FAA.

Before the sun went down, the newspapers and TV reported a "small airplane crashed in the mining pit after running out of gas." Even this partial truth was painful. We didn't enjoy our celebrity status. Community folks addressed us, "Oh, you're those guys." Family members began calling us "the Looney brothers," and suggested we no longer fly as a team. Forty years of being enveloped by aviation safety, excitement, and opportunity fell victim to one brief break in our pilot routines.

We were grounded until we could meet the company's representatives and receive their consent to extract our "Loon" from their waters. Fortunately, despite initial sternness, everyone came together to help us get out. Unfortunately, this involved the Department of Transportation, temporary removal of power lines, stripping the airplane of any unnecessary weight, and obtaining insurance waivers and a rescue pilot. To complete the aeronautical equivalent of "going to the woodshed," the FAA met with us to review the "incident."

The hapless, cap-less, trip ended with the extraction flight: The Washington trip would have to wait for another day. Despite everything that had happened, no property or people were hurt.

We deconstructed our fundamental error to sift through its parts.

We did not lack for thoroughness or discipline during our years of flying together. **My brother and I have 87 years and 8,500 hours of combined flying experience**, nearly all as single pilot in command, and all gratefully without incident...until that day. But this time **we did let a distraction interrupt the normal order and completion of the checklist, causing an upset in our usually complete personal preflight check.**

For future flights, we will cruise with considerably more altitude, sacrificing some intimacy with the landscape. We will use "both" fuel setting for takeoffs and landings only.

Most important, we will not allow a distraction to interfere with the checklist items and disrupt our personal preflight check.

The simplest break in the careful execution of a pilot's routine can compromise safety and tarnish years of personal aviation history. And so it was for my brother and me.

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