

Precautionary Landings

If the one thing you could do to save your life and that of your passengers was to make a precautionary landing, why wouldn't you do it? You might be able to save the aircraft too.

Situations that call for a precautionary landing can arise due to many reasons: the pilot is lost; the aircraft is running out of fuel; there's not enough daylight left; the weather is deteriorating rapidly, the aircraft develops mechanical issues.

Grant Twaddle, CAA Team Leader Flight Operations Helicopter, and a 10,000-hour pilot, says such situations can happen to anyone, any time.

"Essentially, you should always be prepared and on the lookout. You must also be conscious of the wind. If you have those two sussed, 90 per cent of your planning is done. If you haven't done that planning, then time is your enemy."

Marc Brogan, A-Cat Instructor and CAA Aviation Examiner Flight Training and Flight Operations, says to expect the unexpected.

"Exercise due caution on every flight. Distractions and complacency can happen. Make sure you always think of an escape route, your options, and 'what-if' scenarios."

The Biggest Challenge

Despite best intentions, things may not always go to plan.

Carlton Campbell, CAA Aviation Safety Adviser and experienced

instructor, says there could be many reasons for making a precautionary landing.

"But overall, it is likely to be the result of poor decision-making and inefficient flight management sometime earlier in the process. As the pilot, you have to face the fact that you've been pushed into that corner due to an earlier set of less-than-ideal decisions."

Marc says, "Deciding to make a precautionary landing is, to a degree, about giving up your pride. But often, there are other factors influencing it, such as passengers who may not be best pleased by a delay, peer pressure, or time constraints on the aircraft's return. People tend to change their personal limits, and stretch minima, when faced with such situations."

Carlton advises to just accept the mistake and don't make another one by pushing on.

"Making a precautionary landing is less stressful and easier than having to make an emergency landing (or worse).

"A controlled flight to landing gives you so many more options. Therefore, the longer you leave it, the more options you lose. And as soon as it becomes an uncontrolled flight, there's the increased potential for the landing to end up being a fatal – that is what statistics consistently tell us."

Always be aware of nearby aerodromes or landing strips, as well as keeping a lookout for potential places to land, should you need them.

Grant too recommends that, "If there is any doubt, then you should perform a precautionary landing – no one takes a dim view of it. The accident files are full of cases that could have been avoided had the pilots opted for a precautionary landing."

Valuable Lesson

Experienced Massey School of Aviation flight instructor, Alistair Edwards, vividly recalls a precautionary landing he made more than 25 years ago.

"I was flying a PA28-140 from Christchurch to Wellington via Arthur's Pass. The general forecast wasn't too bad and indicated the flight was possible. However, north of Karamea, the weather started worsening. I made the decision to divert to Motueka as conditions would normally be more favourable east of the ranges.

"The weather was rapidly closing in and I felt I had no choice but to land as soon as possible. I couldn't get back to Karamea or Westport, and couldn't continue to Motueka. I wasn't able to get anyone on the radio either, as I was flying at about 500 ft to get below the cloud base.

"So I ended up making a successful precautionary landing in the Collingwood area. It was a on a flattish paddock. Shortly after landing, it began raining heavily and I'm thankful for the precautionary landing training I'd had.

"In hindsight, I should have turned back earlier. But as they say, the least experienced continue on into conditions the more experienced turn back from, to join the most experienced who never left the ground in the first place.

"It taught me a valuable lesson, and the secret to making a successful precautionary landing: once the decision has been made, stay calm, apply your training, and have faith in your ability to get onto the ground safely."

'Staying Alive'

Grant says helicopter pilots would not hesitate to make a precautionary landing. "These machines can land almost anywhere. The only hesitation would be about ditching in water."

Phil Janssen, a 10,000-hour helicopter pilot, was faced with such a situation recently.

"I was making a ferry flight to deliver an R44 to Rangiora. When I left Levin, it was calm and the weather forecast was good. While passing Paekakariki, I encountered turbulence. The airspeed was reducing and there was a severe downdraught, so I figured that turning around might mean that I would end up in the water – it is really important to know your aircraft limitations," says Phil, who has had more than 2000 hours on type.

"I thought then, 'maybe there's another way to do this, but I don't know what that is'. And so I made a precautionary landing on a deserted beach. At the end of the day, nothing's more important than staying alive."

Just Do It

Mitch Jones, CAA Flight Operations Inspector, Helicopter, who holds ATPL H and ATPL A, and is also an A-Cat instructor, recalls some of the many precautionary landings he has made.

"To go by a very old aviation mantra, it's better to be down here wishing you were up there, rather than to be up there, and wishing you were down here. So, just do it."

More Information

Flight Instructor Guide, available on the CAA web site, www.caa.govt.nz/FIG. ■

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