

# The Danger of Accumulated Stress

Here's a tale of apparently small things leading to a big mistake that could have killed someone.

Like many pilots, I wanted to attend the Warbirds Over Wanaka show at Easter.

I had made plans to fly my helicopter to the event to take part in the Sports Aviation display, so I was going to be letting people down if I didn't get there. 🙄

The preceding week at work, things had not gone well, with some jobs going over time, and a particularly difficult software problem. 🙄

Throughout that week, the weather reports had been variations on a theme of cloud and/or rain, with unstable fronts racing up and over the South Island. 🙄

It was raining steadily in Christchurch on Thursday morning, so I finished up some last-minute things at work, and headed out to Rangiora Airfield to start the journey. On the drive out, the weather improved. At the airfield, the day was fine and clear – hooray!

I'd checked the (now free) MetFlight weather along the route, which was marginal, though the auto report from Timaru, my first stop, was okay.

I phoned a friend living at Timaru and the weather was reported as overcast but clearing. So I pushed the helicopter out, locked the car in the hangar and set off.

A fine day deteriorated into low overcast as I approached Timaru, which took some 20 minutes longer than planned because of a head wind. 🙄

During fuelling at Timaru, a small electrical problem emerged, which took a while to fix safely, so the day was getting on. 🙄

I took off and headed for the McKenzie Pass, only to find low cloud blocking it.

I went along to Burkes Pass, and eventually the cloud lifted for a clear run through to the Mackenzie Basin.

## Poor decision making

Took off from Rangiora, despite the stress.

Continued into poor weather.

Carried on, despite poor weather.

Took off from Tekapo, cold and hungry.

Carried on through Lindis Pass, constantly checking for cloud, and ignoring how cold I was.

Racing to Wanaka, getting there on time my only priority.

Had only one final destination in mind.

## Points at which an accident could have been avoided

1 Delayed taking off from Rangiora, recognising I was too stressed to fly well, and 'letting people down' was not important in comparison.

2 Delayed taking off from Timaru because of deterioration in weather, and recognition of time-induced stress brought on by repair to electronics.

3 Delayed at McKenzie Pass.

4 Borrowed warm clothes and had a meal before taking off.

5 Stopped at Omarama until cloud lifted.

6 Waited at Tarras, until I was in a better shape to fly.

7 Had a Plan 'B' and 'C'.

In Professor James Reason's Swiss cheese model of accident causation, an organisation's defences against failure are represented as slices of cheese. The holes in the cheese represent weaknesses in the system. When those weaknesses line up, a hazard passes through the holes, leading to an accident.



By now I was too low on fuel to get to my next fuel stop of Omarama, so stopped instead at Tekapo – more delays, more expense, and closer to letting my fellow exhibitors down. 🙄

Once at Tekapo, a southerly squall blew up the Basin, and phone calls to a friend who was driving to Wanaka confirmed that the weather was poor.

Reluctantly, I decided to stop for the night at Tekapo, despite letting folk at Wanaka down. I was very well looked after by the people at the airfield, who rang round and found me the last bed in town, and gave me a lift in. Great service, and I could feel the worries of the last days receding, despite not making it to Wanaka on the appointed day.

A good night's sleep and a brisk walk back to the airfield to find a good flying day, but with cloud to the south.

Despite the warming walk, I'd arrived at Tekapo with only the clothes I was wearing (the rest were in a Wanaka-bound car) and I was not dressed for the cold morning. 🙄

Just after 0830 I was in the air, with the trip scheduled to take 55 minutes, well within my safe range of 1 hour 20. I might yet make it before Wanaka Airport closed for the show, but crikey, that draught coming in was cold! 🙄

Approaching Omarama, there was lots of low cloud, and a higher layer of overcast, but I could see the hills of Lindis in front, so a safe way through to the foot of the Pass, and sunshine on the hills.

I flew towards the Pass, keeping a wary eye out behind to make sure the cloud wasn't closing in. 🙄

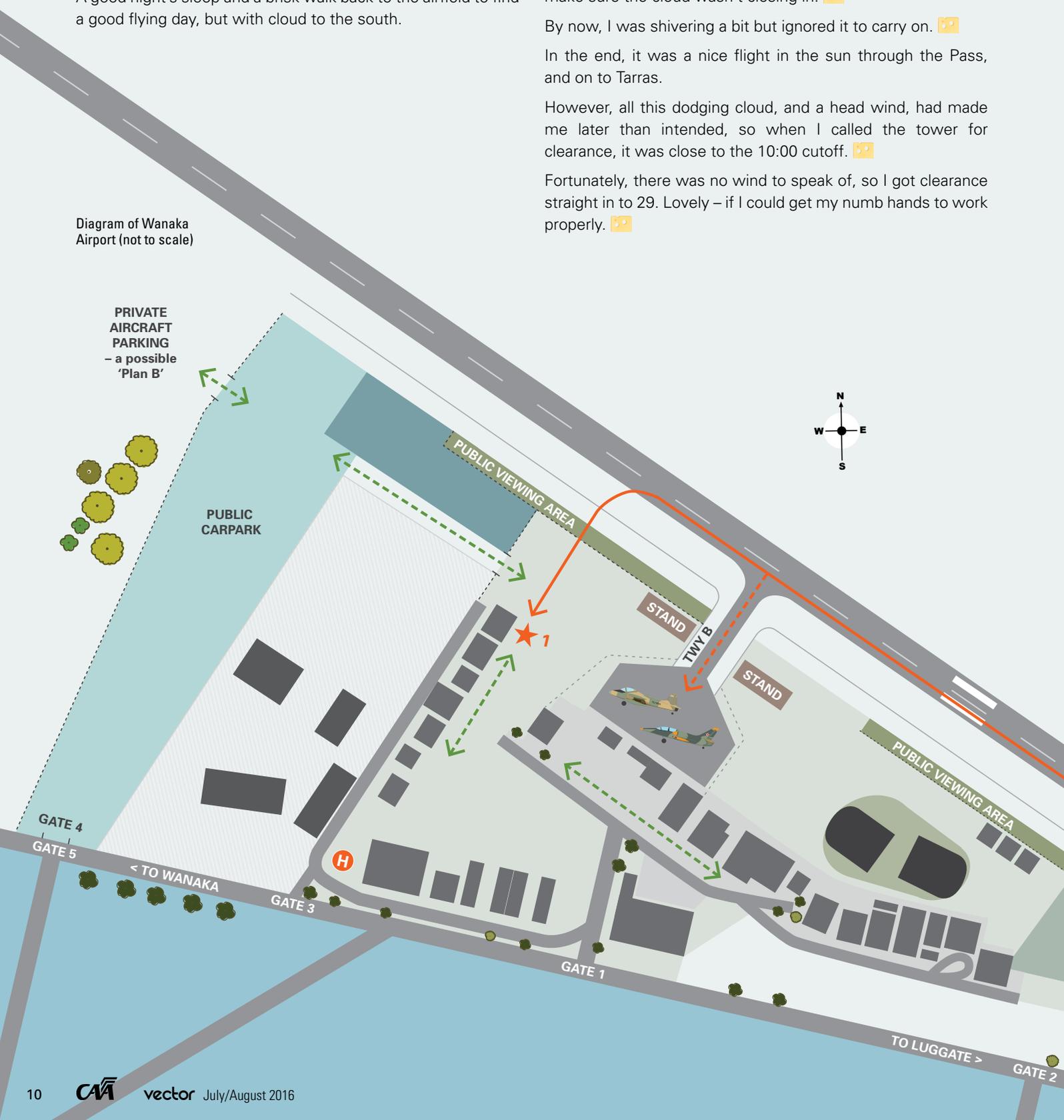
By now, I was shivering a bit but ignored it to carry on. 🙄

In the end, it was a nice flight in the sun through the Pass, and on to Tarras.

However, all this dodging cloud, and a head wind, had made me later than intended, so when I called the tower for clearance, it was close to the 10:00 cutoff. 🙄

Fortunately, there was no wind to speak of, so I got clearance straight in to 29. Lovely – if I could get my numb hands to work properly. 🙄

Diagram of Wanaka Airport (not to scale)



On final, the tower cautioned me about aircraft waiting on Taxiway B. As I approached the taxiway, I could see planes both sides waiting, and thought that they would not be pleased to have a helicopter blowing them around as I taxied past.

I obtained clearance to continue down the runway and 'round the back', meaning going around the end of the stand and over to my destination.

Here, now, was my first serious mistake – not making myself clear to the controller, who had another destination in mind.

I had also made a second major blunder, in that I had requested a non-standard landing zone. This means I had passed out of the controller's responsibility, and made myself responsible for making sure the landing zone was clear and safe for all concerned.

I continued down to the end of the stands, and while there were several people in orange vests about, there didn't seem to be any obvious crowd control. But there was a clear path to my display destination, and a good area clear to land in.

By now, I thought I was in danger of holding up the start of the show, so I high-hovered over to the display area outside the hangar, and, making sure no-one looked like they were going to cross the empty space, set down. Not my best set-down – my hands didn't seem to be working quite as they should. But why weren't the orange jackets making sure no-one was crossing, as I was expected?

Except I wasn't expected.

My cold, overstressed brain had reverted to a previous arrangement: initially landing in the helicopter drop-off area, then once the marshals ensured the display area was clear of public, flying over and landing in it, which would avoid having to manhandle the machine on its minuscule ground wheels.

When I did land, I was quickly – and rightly – condemned for an incredibly stupid piece of flying.

I had ignored some basic safety precautions, including that it was entirely my responsibility to make sure the area was clear and safe – not the crowd control people. (It's in the rules, 91.127.)

Then there were the clear instructions in both the show literature and the NOTAM about NO PROP TURNING areas. I had just landed in one, in direct contravention of the NOTAM I had read the day before.

My two stupid and dangerous decisions could have cost lives – why had I made them?

On reflection I realised I'd accumulated a considerable number of small stresses, each one insignificant, but adding up to a serious load on the brain.

They led to some very poor decision-making:

**Get-there-itis:** there were several points when I should have stopped the trip.

- » Before it began, I knew I had a lot on my mind even before I went to Rangiora to open the hangar (the 'S' in 'I'm Safe').
- » At Timaru, with marginal weather ahead.
- » At Mackenzie Pass, when the weather made my planned journey impossible.
- » In the morning at Tekapo, cold and with no breakfast (the 'F').
- » At the Lindis Pass, when the cloud meant I was constantly looking over my shoulder.
- » At Tarras, the reporting point for Wanaka. (I'm in a helicopter, I could have landed in a paddock and waited.)

**Ignoring the cold:** It wasn't until I'd been on the ground for a few minutes, and was drinking a coffee and standing in the sun, that I started to shiver. I'd actually passed through the shivering stage and into, I believe, the beginnings of hypothermia while flying, but told myself to ignore it and carry on.

**Not inconveniencing anyone:** Relative to possible injury or death, annoying a few pilots for a moment while I taxied to my cleared destination is way down the list.

**No Plan B:** I had only the final destination, the display area at the hangar, in mind. Always have plan B (and C) in mind.

I could have...

- » set down at the end of the taxiway and wheeled past;
- » high-hovered over the aircraft to the apron;
- » continued to the visiting aircraft park;

...but none of those options occurred to me at the time because I hadn't planned ahead.

Had the flying gods not been smiling on this day, the result of my stupid decisions – brought on by stress and cold – could have been fatal.

It's not an experience I wish to repeat. ■



#### Key

- Hangars and other buildings
- Ⓜ Where pilot should have landed
- 1 Display area
- ★ Landing spot
- Route of helicopter on arrival at Wanaka
- - - Walkway