

I learned about flying from that //

WHEN A SUNSET ISN'T PRETTY

Even experienced pilots make errors in assessing available daylight, let alone a pilot with just 125 hours. This one got a real wake-up call to double-check everything when planning a flight.

Photo: istockphoto.com/luchschen

I was flying from Tauranga to Gisborne to visit friends. Before departure I checked the AIP GEN 2.7 daylight tables so I would be back home in the light. I noted end of daylight was to be 0545 UTC (1845 NZDT).

After spending a pleasant day in Gisborne, knowing my flight time would be less than an hour, I departed GS around 0440 UTC (1740 NZDT).

Enroute, I thought sunset was occurring more quickly than I was expecting. I rechecked the GEN 2.7 and found, to my alarm, that I had misread the table. I'd used the Zone 1 end-of-daylight at 0545 UTC, instead of Zone 2, which was 0527 UTC: a rather significant mistake of 18 minutes when I'd only allowed about a 10-minute daylight safety margin!

Immediately I contacted Bay Approach, explained my situation and asked for their advice and assistance.

The air traffic controller asked me a number of pertinent questions like the cloud (nil) and visibility (fine) at my position, and fuel status (two hours).

This air traffic controller was excellent: he asked me to 'stay with' him and over the next 15 minutes was in regular contact.

He asked if I preferred to continue on to TG or land at Whakatane, which was only minutes away at the time. I said Tauranga, given that it was on the edge of Zone 1, and light conditions would still be in my favour.

He came back five minutes later, saying that TG Tower were okay with me landing there. He said he'd monitor my progress and to contact him if I needed anything further. At this point I contacted TG Tower, while still monitoring Bay Approach. »

// I found, to my alarm, that I had misread the table. //

» Tauranga Tower asked if I'd like some vehicle lighting at the threshold as I had only nav and strobe lights. I accepted the offer, since I'd never landed in semi-dark conditions, and I didn't know how well I'd be able to judge my precise elevation just before touchdown, if going only by runway side lighting.

(As it turned out my strobe lights lit up the runway when I was still about 20 ft AGL so it was easy to judge the touchdown, and there was still just enough twilight for me to taxi to the hangar.)

I orbited twice waiting for the vehicle lighting to be put in place and made a safe and smooth landing without any control or visibility issues.

What did I learn?

- Check and then *re-check* all the information I'm using to make flight planning decisions.
- Allow a greater time safety margin when planning flights that will be anywhere near end-of-daylight.
- We've got an excellent resource in ATC. Both Bay Approach and TG Tower were calm, reassuring and extremely helpful.
- Self-reporting is a positive thing to do so, hopefully, pilots can learn from other pilots' mistakes.

The CAA:

What did this pilot do right?

- Contacted ATC straight away to explain situation and ask for advice.
- Didn't allow pride to prevent him accepting all help to land safely.
- Reported the occurrence.

And finally...

CAA flight examiner John Parker says there's a reason most aero clubs require their aircraft to be back on the ground at least 30 minutes before evening civil twilight.

"It allows for unexpected delays. It's the same reason aircraft have reserve fuel. You don't plan to use it, but it's there if you need it." ✈️

THE NEED FOR WATER IS REAL



A health and safety expert and trained medic, who's worked in some extreme environments, has seen first-hand the effects of dehydration. He says pilots in a hot New Zealand summer are a high-risk group as some have poor awareness of how it can impact them.

Tom O'Donnell has worked on pipeline projects in Saudi Arabia and offshore oil rigs in Northern Australia.

He's also an aircraft owner, who flies his Cessna 180 to some of the more remote parts of the South Island.

Tom says safety issues often have a commonality across industries, and dehydration is one that has the potential to lead to accidents and injuries in the aviation sector.

He's seen many incidents of severe dehydration as a medic in Western Australia where the temperatures regularly get to 40 plus degrees Celsius.