

Under Pressure

The car manufacturer, Henry Ford, said that under pressure, the mouth speaks when the brain is disengaged. This aviator would agree.

As is often the case, the incident started happening long before it actually occurred.

I was under the hammer that morning with a lot of jobs, and the clients – a group going into the bush for a week of possum hunting – turned up late.

I knew the destination airstrip had challenges. It's quite steep, sloping upwards for landing, and a downhill takeoff. It's also really narrow.

There's not much leeway for go-rounds or other contingencies, and once you're committed, not a lot of room for mistakes, or the ability to change plans at the last minute.

It's half-way up a valley, above the bush line, and very susceptible to wind. In the morning, wind tends to come down the valley, which works in your favour, but by 10 or 11, the wind starts to move up the valley, which works against you in landing.

I knew the sun also affected that airstrip, and I knew the approximate time on this mid-winter day that it would do that. The sun moves across at about 15 degrees an hour so it doesn't take many minutes for the sun to come up over that hill. I knew that too.

For that reason, I flew over the airstrip for a look, and it was in shadow.

I made my approach from about two miles back, because you had to come up the gully, round the corner, and on to the airstrip.

As I got in sight of the airstrip, everything was still all right, it was still in shadow.

But about half-way along the landing roll, the sun suddenly rose above the hill and straight in my eyes.

I couldn't really see anything. I kept trying to look out the side of the aeroplane, out the window. My focus moved and I didn't keep the plane completely straight.

It ran two feet to the left, hit a rock and burst a tyre.

So that was the final result of being under work pressure and not saying to the client, earlier, "Sorry mate, you came late, it's too difficult, we'll do it tomorrow."

Well, we got the aeroplane turned round and unloaded, startled clients and all. We jury-rigged a ski to go under the flat tyre and took off for home base.

Once there, we inspected for more damage, but fortunately there was none.

A couple of guys I respect had a word with me. They wanted to know where – given that I knew the sun would be an issue – was my head during the approach and landing?

Good question. I had felt like I was committed, I hadn't wanted to let the clients down, it was a really short-haul trip when I was more focussed on the much longer ones later in the day, I didn't want to come back during a very busy work period, and I thought I really could beat the sun to land without incident.

I stood back later and thought, "Well, all of that was really stupid of me".

What did I learn? Well, the pressure put on you by clients can influence you to do things you really know you shouldn't.

But, in truth, the main pressure came from me. Not really the clients, and certainly not from my employer.

But it's the sort of pressure that's been around forever and ever, right up until today – the pressure to fly.

Anyone wanting to learn from my experience needs to recognise when they're under pressure, and examine the decisions they make during that time.

There's also the importance of planning well ahead, not just a wee bit ahead, but well ahead.

Because when you leave a place, it might be nice. And at the time of your departure, where you're going might also be nice. But even during a 15-minute flight, things can change.

The conditions changed for me in just a few minutes.

Know your flying areas well, so well that your destination is going to be as safe as what you anticipate.

I should have been thinking ahead during the approach, especially since I couldn't actually see the strip the whole time.

I sure learned, and from then on, there was many a time when I would go to a place and say, "nah, we're not going in there" and we'd either return home or go to an alternate.

While I put pressure on myself that day, and accepted the clients' pressure, I've always been careful not to do that to my own staff.

If, for example, somebody didn't feel confident to do a job, rather than go and do it myself and say, 'oh you're bloody useless and I'll have to do it for you,' I would take them and show them how it could be done so that it built their confidence up.

I never, ever, did a job another pilot said they couldn't handle.

So I was pretty aware of not putting pressure on my staff – it's just a shame I had to break one of my aircraft to learn the lesson for myself. ■

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