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The Lure of Home

Tim Brady
U.S. Air Force, bradyt@erau.edu

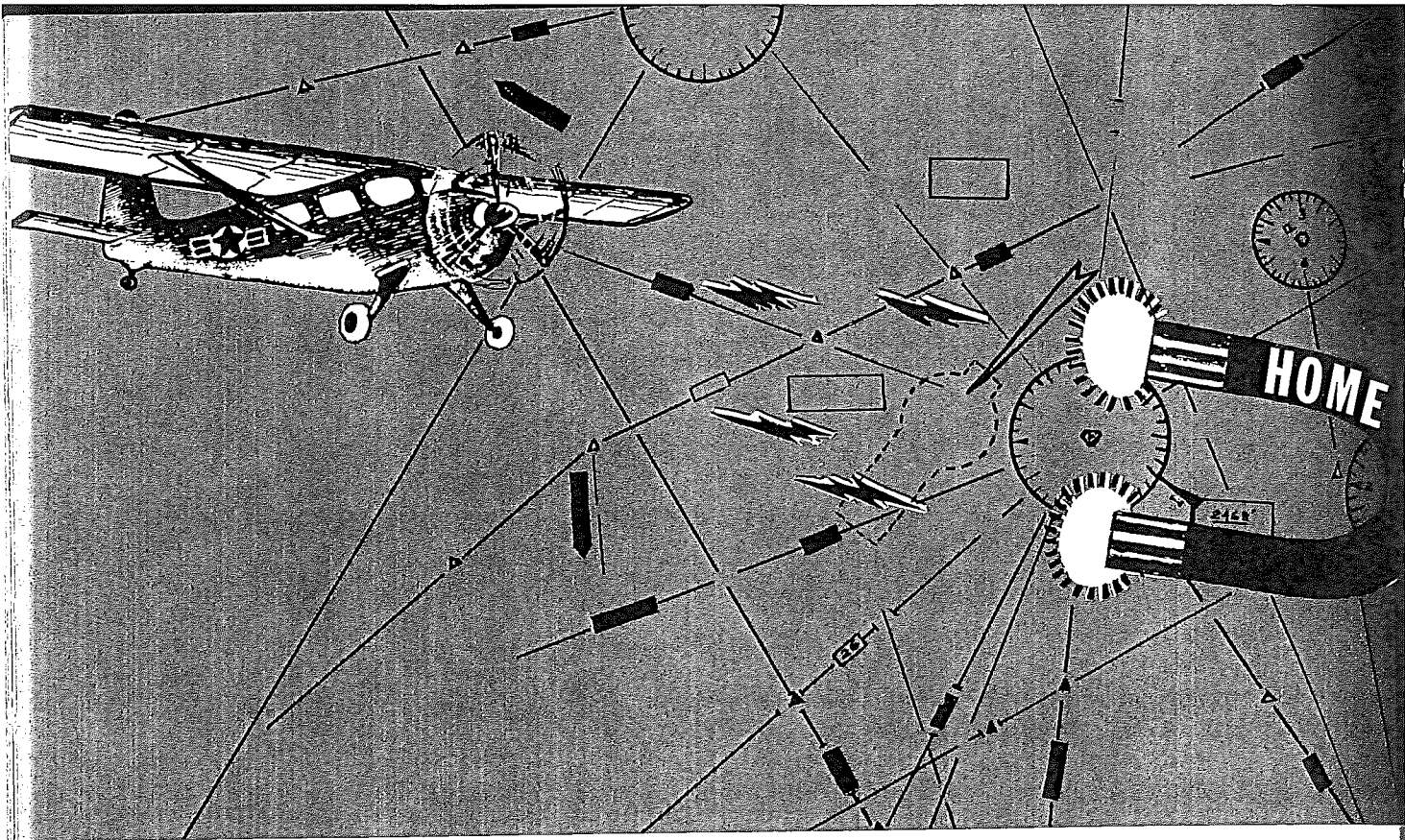
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THE LURE OF HOME

The accident report read, "Primary Cause: Operator factor; the pilot continued to fly in icing conditions which resulted in loss of power and aircraft control. Contributing Cause: Operator factor; the pilot disregarded the Flight Manual, filed and flew into forecast icing conditions."

Why?

What were the underlying drives that prompted

the pilot to defy common sense, the Flight Manual, and his aircraft's capabilities?

The absolute truth may never be known. The men who could tell us, the pilot, co-pilot, and passenger died in the crash. But we can look back through the mission history and find some answers.

The mission was briefed as a cross country proficiency flight for the pilot and co-pilot.

During the briefing the ops officer went over the proposed routing and checked the long range weather forecast. At the time of the briefing it appeared that the trip out would be in advance of a weather front and the trip back, four days later, would be behind the front. The ops officer briefed the two pilots not to fly in actual instrument conditions.

The trip out went pretty much as planned.

Four days later, on the trip back, it was a different story. The weather didn't live up to the long range forecast, as is its inconsistent fashion, and as a result the pilot had to change the routing.

While enroute to the first stop, the weather forced the crew into an unplanned enroute stop where they refueled and refilled. The second leg of the trip was completed routinely. After reaching the second stopover point the pilots checked the weather for the final leg; again the weather had turned sour so they decided to RON.

The next day the pilots checked the weather for the return trip home and again it was lousy. Another RON was necessary. The co-pilot called the squadron ops officer on the horn and informed him of the decision. He concurred and advised the co-pilot to check the weather the next day and give him a call before leaping off.

That night the pilot made a long distance call to his wife. The following day was to be their tenth month wedding anniversary and they were anxious to be together. The wife offered to drive the distance separating the two bases so they could be together but he told her that the weather was improving and that he would be home the next day.

The pilots flight planned for 6000 feet for the trip home. During the weather briefing the weather man forecast light rime icing between 3000 and 10,000 feet. Minimum freezing level was 3000 feet. The pilot filed his flight plan ignoring the flight manual warning which states, "Do NOT fly the aircraft into known or forecast icing conditions." He did not telephone the squadron ops officer as he had been instructed.

At the aircraft the co-pilot was completing the preflight and the pilot was putting the bags in the aircraft when a transient alert sergeant came out to assist. He asked the pilot if he didn't want to stay instead of flying in this weather. The pilot responded that he preferred not to fly but he had to get back home.

Shortly after takeoff, while climbing to 6000 feet the aircraft started to ice up. Rather than return to the departure point the pilot requested 3000 feet and pressed on. Nine minutes later the pilot requested the lowest altitude available and was advised by center that he was "at it."

Ground witnesses reported hearing the airplane passing overhead (still in the clouds) with the engine acting up,

probably indicating that the carburetor had iced up.

The combination of a severely distorted airfoil, increased weight, and an impaired engine, all due to icing, probably forced a descent. Ground witnesses observed the aircraft banking and yawing erratically with the engine running rough.

The aircraft had exited the clouds at about 500 feet AGL but the pilot had extremely limited forward visibility due to windscreen ice. The erratic maneuvering was probably an attempt, on the pilots part, to gain side visibility in an effort to find a forced landing site.

The ground witnesses then observed the aircraft to nose up abruptly then pitch down sharply, diving into the ground . . . it stalled.

The Dash One for this airplane states that with the control wheel held full aft there is no stall or loss of control such as is normally associated with an aircraft in a stalled condition. Following that statement is a warning: "With slats inoperative the aircraft may stall abruptly followed by a strong nose down pitching moment."

In all probability the slats were rendered inoperative because of structural ice.

If the pilot had turned around when he reported picking up ice he probably would have been able to make a safe landing at the departure base.

If he had not disregarded the flight manual and taken off into forecast icing conditions he would not have encountered the difficulties.

The pilot let the lure of the home fires enter his judgment to a commanding degree. He wanted to get home.

The situation is not without parallel. Dropping back a couple of thousand years into the imagination of Homer we find a well known figure, Ulysses, pursuing a similar goal. After the battle of Troy, Ulysses, in following the urge to return home, had to endure a hurricane, overcome the lethargic well-being offered by the Lotus-eaters, battle Polyphemus (the one-eyed Cyclops giant), flee a cannibal race of island dwellers, escape the embrace of Circe (belatedly), ignore the mind boggling song of the Sirens, battle the monsters Charybdis and Scylla, endure the eight-year affections of the nymph Calypso, and upon return to Ithaca he had to wipe out a score or so of his wife's suitors. Old Ulysses had the urge.

Ulysses' adventure is mythology but the urge to return home is not. It is a very real thing, something we all have. That's fine as long as we let it take its proper position. When we don't; when it reaches the forefront of those things that influence judgment, we place our lives and those of others in jeopardy.

Get-home-itis has no function in the decision making process when the decision involves the airplane and the mission.