

## MISPLACED TRUST

*“Big-time” pilots aren’t always infallible*

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It was a sunny Sunday morning with virtually no wind, a perfect time to practice landings at our non-towered field. I’d been making good progress through my student program, and had been thoroughly drilled in ways to handle stalls, engine failures, electrical failures, and a host of other maladies that can beset an aviator.

I’d also learned good operating practices from the highly capable pilots I sought to emulate. Along the way, I formed a generalization in my mind: The more complex the airplane a pilot flies, the better-versed in good operating procedures he’s going to be. Therefore, it’s less likely he’d require my close attention as I practice.

During my training I’ve had a variety of pilots flying small singles cut into the traffic pattern ahead of me at untimely moments. So I’ve learned to be wary. But my wariness is relaxed when I see a twin or larger craft, since here is a pilot of considerable experience who’s probably extremely suspicious of novices like me. So when I’m in their company, I concentrate on *my* technique. This generalization caused me considerable consternation this sunny Sunday.

The wind gradually picked up and shifted during my flight. It was never much above five knots, and I changed from Runway 21 to 14, and then to 19. Other pilots took off, landed, or passed overhead during my session, and we all observed every uncontrolled airport operation courtesy.

As I turned final for Runway 19 and another touch-and-go, I heard a muffled voice on Unicom announce, “Lawrence traffic, Cessna 12345, taxi to 14.” I

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I’m there*

didn’t think much about it, except that while the other Unicom transmissions had been clear, this one sounded like either a bad radio or the pilot was somewhat under the weather. (There had been a big game the previous afternoon at the University — lots of fans from all over.)

The airport attendant gave local winds and advised the Cessna that I was working on Runway 19. During my next touch-and-go, I saw a fair-sized twin, so my apprehension departed; after all, what little wind there was wouldn’t bother me, let alone him. The Cessna pilot finished his run-up as I called my downwind. He delayed a moment, and then, as I turned base, I heard a sleepy, “Lawrence traffic, Cessna 12345 departing on 14, southbound.”

“No problem, sir,” I thought. “I see you taxiing out, and after I clear the intersection of 19 and 14, you’ll be on your way and so will I.” But I called my turn to base leg anyway, because he never acknowledged my presence. I even pointedly said, “One-Niner.” And then I turned final for Runway 19 — he was still sitting on the threshold of Runway 14. About halfway down my final approach, I saw a tail beacon move out of the corner of my eye.

A quick mental projection of vectors conjured images of a fireball at the intersection. Obviously there was no time to debate propriety on the radio. Better (I felt) that he should be predictable from there on out so that I could avoid him. But there’s a fair stretch of Runway 14 before the intersection. If I aborted over the intersection at my altitude, I wondered, would he rotate before the intersection and come up into me?

I heard no one else in the pattern, and hoped to God that if someone had snuck in behind me that they could see something atypical transpiring and would stay clear. I added power and leveled off into a tight 360-degree left turn. When I came around, the Cessna had cleared the intersection.

I resumed final, touched, went, and climbed out for another. Back at the terminal a bit later, I compared notes with the attendant, who said he heard the radio transmission and reached the window and mike about the time I turned.

I’m not writing this with thoughts of, “Alert student smugly saves his bacon and that of a high-time pilot (with passengers?) driving a high-dollar plane.” I don’t know why the Cessna pilot acted as he did. What’s important is that I should have insisted that my presence be acknowledged on my base leg. And I should not have been lulled into a false sense of security because of my generalization.

No matter what we fly, pilots are humans first and pilots second, and each of us should watch all of the others very closely.

