

# Into the Dark

Get-home-itis and complacency left this pilot struggling in the dying light, and at risk of having to make a forced landing, or crashing.

I had originally intended to stay another day at the airshow, but an old mate camping next to me is leaving, so I decide suddenly to head home a day early.

Packing up the under-wing camp takes an hour or so, and we miss the takeoff slot before an aerobatic display.

While packing all the gear into my little one-seat amateur-built, I ask my mate for the time of last light. After a quick mental calculation I'm sure there's ample time for the long flight, provided the refuelling stop is pretty slippery.

We've both filled up from a mobile tanker the previous day, so with gear stowed and pre-flight done, we farewell the small gathering of well-wishers, start engines and taxi towards the duty runway.

The long taxi allows my engine to warm up properly and I'm impatient for the display to finish so we can take off.

There's nothing like the thrill of joining a queue of aircraft lining up to head into the wild blue yonder! It takes a lot of focus to be across radio traffic, pre takeoff checks, watching for other aircraft, and keeping a taildragger in line on a windy strip.

The bloke in front is off the ground and it's my turn. Check for anyone on final, fuel pump on. Make call entering runway and

departing to north. Gently ease throttle open, keep on the centre line as she gets to full power. A little back on the stick and off we go. A few seconds in ground effect to pick up speed then pull up into a 1000 ft per minute climb out. Boost pump off, steep left turn giving great view of the airshow, then off to the north.

After being tossed about on climb, what a relief to get above the turbulence and cruise in silky smooth air. I have some fun flying hands free. Little plane is trimmed so well I can make subtle course corrections by moving my head.

Flying north into the sun, I realise I should have cleaned the screen. Peering through a layer of bugs for a couple of hours is hard on the eyes. There's no traffic to see, except one aircraft thousands of feet below me on the same heading. He slowly pulls ahead and lands for fuel before me. We have a short yarn at the bowser. I don't get around to cleaning the screen, I don't think it should be an issue on this leg because the sun will be behind me.

After a quick check of the aircraft, I'm off. The sun is low in the sky, but home is only an hour away. After climbing to cruise level, I can see the sun setting behind me and suddenly notice how dark it is up ahead. I'm still a long way from

home and night is coming on faster than I expected. Whoops. This is not good.

I fly on for a few minutes while I take in my predicament.

What are my options? Turn back and camp the night at last airport? Not very safe. There's still lots of traffic around and I'd be flying into a red sunset with a dirty screen.

Divert to somewhere close by? Damn! The local chart is in the luggage bay, I forgot to swap maps when I landed. My ERSA\* has slipped out of reach ...

Keep calm and think. I remember that my phone's tracking app is transmitting breadcrumbs so my wife can see where I am. She must be worried.

OzRunways\*\* to the rescue. I look up a nearby airport I've never been to. Switch radio channels then make a dramatic 90-degree turn and head for the mountains that mark its location. Can't see the town in the gathering dusk. Bit worried. Little plane is nudging VNE as I trade height for speed – probably safe in this smooth air.

Open Google Maps™ to make sure I'm on the right heading. A slight correction, then after a few nervous minutes I see the street lights. The strip should be four miles south of town. There it is, lucky to see it in this light. What a relief. Make a downwind call and a fast, sweeping approach, then the smoothest landing, and nobody to see it.

Taxi up to a group of buildings, looking around with my landing lights. Shut down outside the deserted terminal, climb out – a bit shaky – and tie down, fumbling with the ropes.

I phone my darling wife to tell her that I'm safely on the ground. Instead of relief and gratitude, I cop an earful. She's been watching my progress on her computer. It's after dark and

she's been worried sick. Seeking a little compassion I tell her I'm starving. I missed lunch in the rush to get home to her. Here I am facing a hungry night at a lonely airfield. There's no sympathy. I've got myself into this mess, so I'm on my own. (I phone town to have a pizza delivered. Well worth the \$30.)

She's right. I'd stuffed up big time.

What a fool I'd been. I'd made several stupid errors – a hurried departure without careful planning, and not getting an accurate time for last light. I didn't organise a viable alternate airfield. I didn't ensure I had the correct chart before takeoff. I hadn't kept ERSA within reach. The screen was dirty.

I'd proven the statistics – the most dangerous time is after a pilot has become 'proficient'. Complacency had crept in and could have killed me.

I could have pranged my plane in some isolated clearing – or worse. But I'd been lucky, very lucky. I could have missed all the great things in my life since that day.

As often said, aviation safety lessons have been written in blood. Mine could have been added, needlessly.

Learn from the mistakes of others they say – you won't live long enough to make them all yourself. ■

\*ERSA – En Route Supplement Australia

\*\*OzRunways – electronic data provider

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