

Lessons Learned From Falling Out Of The Sky

A not-so-funny thing happened on the way to a recent speaking engagement. My airplane suffered a mechanical failure, and then things went from bad to worse. I ended up with two broken legs, a broken right shoulder, a broken sternum, and a few small fractures in the left side of my face. But I'm coming back from these injuries, and by the time you read this, I should be well on my way to a complete recovery.

Here's The Story

The first thing I should tell you as I recount the story is that I have no first-hand memories of the accident or the flight leading up to it. In addition to all the broken bones, I suffered a concussion in the accident, and it's not uncommon for an injury like that to erase a fair amount of memory. My passenger—my best and oldest friend, Neal Checkoway—never lost consciousness, though, and he remembers everything that happened. Between Neal's memories and what we've since learned from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), the investigators from my insurance company, and the Maryland State Police, I've been able to put together a pretty good idea of what happened.

The story actually starts with Neal, who had spent the previous 16 months in Jordan as a Peace Corps volunteer. Up until about two years ago, Neal was the CEO of a San Francisco-based Internet travel service, and his wife, Shellie, was on a partnership track with a Big 8 accounting firm. Both felt ready to take on new challenges—and to give something back in return for some of the success they'd enjoyed—so they quit their jobs and joined the Peace Corps. Their assignment in Jordan was to have lasted two years, but Shellie had some medical problems, and the Peace Corps brought them back to the US when it became apparent that she'd need surgery. So as a result, Neal was temporarily in Washington, DC, and I had a commitment to be in nearby Baltimore to put on a seminar for an Alphagraphics owners' group.

Neal and I made plans to get together. I flew my Piper Arrow (a single engine, four seat airplane with retractable landing gear and a 200 hp. engine) from Raleigh-Durham International Airport near my home to Ronald Reagan National Airport in Washington, DC. I picked Neal up, and we took off for Ocean City, MD, where our plan was to find lunch at some waterside restaurant and talk about the past and the future. The short flight to Ocean City was uneventful, and we took a taxi into town, found a suitable restaurant, and ate and talked for a couple of hours.

I remember all of this, and I even remember calling the taxi to bring us back to the airport. I don't remember getting there, though, or preflighting the airplane, taking off, or anything else until two days later when I began to be aware that my wife and daughter were with me in a strange place that had lots of beds but was not a hotel, and I seemed to be badly hurt. And all things being equal, I think it's fair to say that I'm glad I don't remember most of it!

Bad Luck/Good Luck

Here's what happened. Our takeoff from Ocean City was normal in all respects. I leveled the airplane at 2000 feet which kept us below a scattered/broken cloud deck, and turned to the northwest toward Washington. After leaving the immediate area of the Ocean City airport, I made a radio call to Patuxent Approach Control, an air traffic facility which controls the airspace around the Patuxent River Naval Air Station, including a fairly large Restricted Area which sat in our flight path between Ocean City and Washington DC. I was calling to ask the status of the Restricted Area—to see if it was open, or closed to general traffic while jet fighters conducted flight-test and training operations inside this "protected" airspace—and also to request radar advisories (position reports on other airplanes) for our flight into Washington. Just as I was calling Patuxent Approach, the engine began to run rough and lose power.

I changed my radio call to a "mayday" and told the controller what our problem was. At the same time, I started looking for an emergency landing site, and with Neal's prompting (I should mention that Neal is also a pilot and his help was invaluable!) I ran through the emergency checklist items, trying such things as turning on the electric fuel boost pump, switching fuel tanks, enriching the air/fuel mixture, and cycling through both magnetos to try to restore power. None of these checklist items made any noticeable difference, but by this time, I had found us a good-looking emergency landing site and we were established on a power-off approach to it. (For those unfamiliar with small airplanes, when you lose power in any airplane in flight, what you have is a glider. Depending on size, weight and other aerodynamic considerations, some airplanes simply glide better than others. A good rule of thumb for a Piper Arrow is that it will glide 1½-2 miles for every 1000 feet of altitude—on the long side if the wind is behind you, and on the short side if you're gliding into a headwind.) The landing site I'd chosen—a straight section of road which looked to be 1500-2000 feet long and was in the process of being widened—was well within our gliding limits that

day. In fact, everything was going great until a construction worker pulled out onto the middle of our planned landing site in a road grader.

Now we had a real problem. I couldn't land short of the grader because we'd be unable to avoid hitting it head on. I couldn't land past it on the stretch of road we were approaching, because then we'd end up going off the far end of the road at pretty high speed. Our best choice was to raise the nose of the airplane and trade some of our remaining airspeed for altitude, and to turn toward the next open area which was about a half a mile away on the right. Unfortunately, there was also a hazard hidden off to the right, a string of high-tension power wires that were simply invisible from where we were. We didn't have quite enough airspeed to get us up over the wires, and the landing gear caught in them.

An eyewitness reported that the wires stretched close to 50 feet, but then something had to give. What gave was my landing gear, which were sheared off by the force being applied to them. From that point, we dropped pretty quickly toward the ground, and we hit in a level attitude on top of a low trailer attached to a parked pickup truck. Unfortunately, also on that trailer was a Bobcat, a small front-end loader of the kind often used by landscapers. The Bobcat's blade entered the left side of the airplane, and that's what broke my left leg.

It's been mentioned that we were really unlucky to have that road grader pull out on us like that. I guess that might be true, but I think we were also very lucky that the airplane didn't flip over after the landing gear came off. If that had happened, I wouldn't be around to write about it. Neal and I have no ill feelings toward the driver of the road grader, and we have a lot of very positive feelings toward the construction workers who ran immediately to the airplane to see if they could help us, soaked the airplane and the immediate area with hoses to minimize the risk of a fire, and called 911 to make sure that professional help was on the way.

In Good Hands

The first emergency services people were on the scene within minutes. They were volunteer firemen from Berlin, MD (where we went down) and Ocean City. They used the "jaws of life" to open up the cockpit, and pulled Neal and I out of the airplane. We were taken by ambulance to Peninsula Hospital in nearby Salisbury, MD, where the ER doctors got us stable, and orthopedic surgeons were called in to work on our broken bones. We both now have considerably more metal in our bodies than we were born with!

After the surgery, the decision was made to send me to the University of Maryland's Shock/Trauma Hospital in Baltimore. My head injury worried the doctors at that point, but I'm pleased to report that it didn't turn out to be anything serious (or at least anything more serious than a high-grade concussion!)

I stayed in the hospital in Baltimore for 5 days, at which time we were able to arrange a transfer to Wake Rehab Hospital in Raleigh. I stayed in that hospital for about a week and a half, and was released on Friday, October 22. It was wonderful to get home! At about that same time, Neal was released from Peninsula Hospital, and he and Shellie went home to San Francisco on an air ambulance—a private Lear Jet!

Lesson #1

I can't say enough good things about the people who cared for me, from the volunteer firemen and EMT's to the ER doctors and nurses and the rest of the hospital personnel. In fact, that leads me to one of the most important lessons you can learn from my experience. For years, I've been listening to printers talk about the difficulty in finding good employees. I'll admit that I've even bought in on the idea that a lack of talented and dedicated people in our society is one of the two or three most serious problems facing the industry.

I'm here to tell you, though, that there are talented and dedicated people in the health care industry. You may not see them in your local doctor's office, but I found plenty of them in the hospitals. And I want to tell you, some of these people have terrible jobs! Imagine for a moment that you spend half of your eight-hour shift every day helping people to get on and off of toilets, and cleaning them up afterwards. Then you spend most of the other half wheeling heartbreakingly sick and injured people back and forth from their testing or therapy sessions. The people I met in the hospitals performed these functions with professionalism and with obvious care for their patients. To put it another way, they represented their employers very well and provided incredible customer service!

I asked several of these people how they stayed so motivated and so cheerful. The common theme was that it's easy because they feel valued. "You know that the patients value you," one of the "techs" at Wake Rehab told me, "but there's more to it than that. I also know that the hospital values me. They show it in so many ways. We all feel like we're part of a team here, everyone from the doctors and administrators on down." This person is not especially well-paid, by the way. He earns an hourly wage very comparable to a "good" employee in a printshop.

Here's the lesson. You can attract and keep good people by creating an organization where everyone truly works together toward a common—and well-understood—goal. As a manager, your responsibility is to set and communicate that goal, be it quality, customer service, some level of sales volume or profit, or any other definition of your company's "reason for being."

Don't expect your employees to figure all of this out for themselves, though, especially your young ones. That's not smart, and it's not fair! Think back on people who've had a positive influence on your life—teachers, coaches, managers and other role models. You will attract and keep good people if you turn yourself into one of those positive role models, and if you provide a stimulating and satisfying working environment.

If you're not sure how to show your employees that you value them, I have two suggestions: first, try asking your current employees! Second, get more involved in the networking opportunities in this industry, through PrintImage International, your franchise, or even by getting involved with a "TIP" or "focus" group. Find people who are having better success with their employees than you are, and ask them how they do it. You might also call on Debra Thompson, a consultant and *QP* Contributing Columnist who specializes in personnel issues.

Lesson #2

Here's something else you can learn from my experience. In aviation training, one of the most important lessons you are taught is to *fly the airplane*, no matter what else is happening, that must always be your first concern. "Aviate, navigate, communicate" is a phrase I've heard or read a thousand times, and I'm happy to say that those three words leaped into my mind when things started to go bad. Neal even told me that he was proud of the way we handled the situation. We didn't panic. We never gave up. I flew the airplane to what looked like our best possible emergency landing site, and we worked together to try to restore engine power. Yeah, we didn't end up with the results we were hoping for, but we also didn't lose complete control of the situation and end up dead.

So where's the lesson for you? Please never lose sight of your need to *manage the business*, no matter what else is happening, that must always be your first concern. I've spoken with, heard about, and read about far too many quick printers who literally let their businesses run them. They essentially give up, and become passengers as their businesses careened toward a bad end.

I don't care how bad things look, if you commit yourself to *managing the business*—to working with every resource you have available to you in order to try to solve whatever problems you face—you give yourself at least a chance of setting things right. And while I know that the reality of the situation is that some printers and their businesses are beyond saving, I also know that anyone who's still on the "safe" side of that point still has a chance at survival.

You can't expect it to happen overnight. But as I've been telling people lately, I'm satisfied to get a little bit stronger every day, and in time, I'm going to make a complete recovery. I'm not having much fun during my recovery—and it's hard work!—but I certainly think that the recovery process beats the hell out of the alternative!

Lesson #3

OK, enough of the "heavy" stuff. Lesson #3 is something I myself learned from this experience...that we live in an incredibly small world! As I mentioned earlier, the first emergency services people to arrive at the airplane were volunteer firemen from Berlin and Ocean City, MD. One of those volunteer firemen is a printer in real life, Thom Gulyas of A.C.E Printing & Mailing in Berlin, and when Thom got to the airplane, he recognized me from seeing my picture in this magazine so many times!

I think it's fair to say that anyone who does what I do—especially the speaking part—is likely to have a larger-than-average ego, but I also think people who know me will agree that I don't take myself too seriously. I'm pretty well known in the quick printing industry, sure, but I've described myself many times as being really nothing more than "a medium-sized fish in a fairly small pond." I think what's truly amazing is that the day I fell out of the sky, I fell right into that pond!

Thank you, Thom, for helping Neal and I to survive this experience. Please pass along our appreciation to everyone else on the Berlin and Ocean City VFD's.

More "Thank You's"

I'd like to finish up with a few more "thank you's"...first of all to the hundreds of quick printers and suppliers and franchise executives and staffers who sent me their best wishes right after the accident. Your heartfelt support was very much appreciated!

Second, I want to thank my friend John Stewart, who called me in the hospital as soon as he heard word of the accident, and then made sure that others in the industry could learn the facts by posting an e-mail on the PrintOwners' list. And while I'm on the subject of John Stewart, there's something else I'd like to say. John takes a fair amount of heat for expressing his opinions on industry issues (and just about everything else. Sorry, John, I couldn't resist!) I want to go on the record and say that I think very few people in this industry are as entitled to express their opinions as John Stewart is. Check out the resume before you jump on his case, folks: successful quick printer, held every officer's position in NAQP during it's formative years, columnist and consultant who gives a lot more than he gets for sharing his experience and advice. There are more than a few quick printers past and

present who will tell you that they owe their survival and/or prosperity to John. If you're having problems managing your business today (see Lesson #2), maybe you should give him a call!

Finally, I want to thank Richard Liccione, the owner of an Alphagraphics franchise in Parsippany, NJ. Richard was my contact with the Alphagraphics Owners Group I was scheduled to speak for in Baltimore on October 9. On that Saturday morning, it got to be 15 minutes before the seminar was supposed to start and I was no place to be seen. Richard called my house, where my father-in-law answered the phone and told him that I'd been in a plane crash. Richard learned that I was in the University of Maryland Shock/Trauma Hospital, which is just a few doors away from the Marriott Hotel in Baltimore where the seminar was to be held.

After explaining the situation to his fellow Alphagraphics franchisees, Richard walked over to the hospital to see if there was anything he could do for me. I was still in the critical care area, but he ran into my wife and daughter—who had just arrived in Baltimore—in the hospital lobby. At the time, my wife was trying to make arrangements for a hotel room at the Marriott, which the hospital staff had told her was the most convenient hotel (in fact, the only hotel within any reasonable distance.) The people at the Marriott were telling her that they had no rooms available. On hearing this, Richard asked my wife to wait right there, and he walked back to the Marriott where he found the manager and explained certain things to him. "You have rooms," he said. "I know that you do because some of our people who had reservations didn't come. This woman needs one of those rooms, so let's get her taken care of!" My wife and daughter soon had accommodations at the Marriott!

Thank you Richard, for taking care of my family while I was unable to. I am terribly sorry to have inconvenienced you and your group, and I look forward to having the chance to make it up to you when I get back on my feet. For today, I want you to know that I'm writing a letter to (Alphagraphics President) Mike Witte, nominating you as Alphagraphics Franchisee of the Year. I've been working with quick printers for more than 10 years now, and I've known right from the start of that time that there are great people in this industry. I hope to see you formally recognized as one of them!

Take A Look?

As I said all the way back in the first paragraph, by the time you read this, I should be well on my way to a complete recovery. The same can't be said for my airplane, however. If you have any interest in seeing what a crunched-up Piper Arrow looks like, you are welcome to visit <http://crash.checkoway.com>. Neal's son Dan Checkoway took the pictures and added some explanation and put it all up on his website. There's no blood or gore, just a lot of bent metal seen from various angles.

If you do go and look, though, I would ask one more thing of you. Please take a moment and say a prayer for the families of those who have died in airplanes. During the week that I'm writing this, the news has been dominated by stories about Payne Stewart and the passengers on Egypt Air 990.

I'm one of the lucky ones—in a lot of ways!—and you can be sure that no one knows that better than I do.