

God Landed My Aircraft

Before I begin this short story, I need to say that this actually happened. I have recorded and tweaked this story into my “log book” of thoughts, with the many other personal miracles. I have testified to this incident to my relatives and friends, but unless this actually happened to you, how could you possibly understand. Nevertheless, this is my story.

One morning in 1971, I decided to take a small aircraft for a solo flight. At the time I would do this twice a month for I was studying to gain a private pilots license. On this morning, I climbed aboard the small four seater (low-wing) aircraft and began my flight check, gyro compass, fuel gauges, etc.. The day was a tad cool, and a bit breezy but sunny as I took off, southbound from the small airport on Hwy 224, in Boardman Ohio.

Unbeknownst to me, during my absence of about an hour in the air, a weather front had moved in from Lake Erie with very gusty winds. I was approximately ten miles south-south-west from the airport at an altitude of 8000 and descending to make an approach for landing. At about 4000ft I noticed some fairly bumpy turbulence.

As I continued my descent, the turbulence increased to a violent thrashing upon my tiny aircraft, so I radioed ahead for a weather update. The lady at the small, (single runway) airport reported that winds were now gusting to 45 mph, and I would have to deal with a very strong easterly crosswind during landing.

Still descending, the turbulence grew worse, but soon the airport was in sight and I maneuvered around to enter the airport traffic pattern, downwind leg, for runway 18 (180°). This put me parallel with the runway at a course of 000° (northbound) so I could maneuver to approach for landing.

As I leveled off at an extremely choppy 800ft, I glanced to my left (port side) to view the runway. The single engine aircraft was sliding and bouncing like a piece of tissue paper on a busy freeway. I was a student pilot and I knew that I was in serious trouble. I prayed aloud, “God, I can not land this aircraft! I need your help!”

That was it. There was no time for conversation, for my brain was overloaded to coordinate the controls with my hands, feet, legs and eyes, just to keep the tiny craft under my control. I was in a wrestling match with death but, I remembered that my flight instructor had taught me to make a fast approach during turbulent weather, so I attempted to keep the airspeed between higher than normal, 120 mph to 130 mph. Yeah, good luck with that, for the winds were not only turbulent and gusting, they were varying direction with each second!

Again, turning to port, to what is called the base leg (perpendicular to the runway) at 270° (westbound), I switched on the carburetor heat and felt the aircraft turn tail up with

a definite hard surge in ground speed. Fighting to maintain altitude while aligning the aircraft to make the last turn for final approach was like trying to aim a rifle while several big men tried to yank it from your hands. This was insane! But I had to stay with it. Within seconds I banked to port (left) to align with the runway for final approach, only the runway wanted to slide to the left, then up or down, depending upon the whim of some very harsh winds.

Using the left rudder, I forced the aircraft to point the nose of the craft at approximately 10 degrees to port (left) into the winds.

This maneuver positioned the runway approximately 10 degrees to starboard (right). Its called, crabbing into the crosswind which was now pummeling the aircraft from my left (port side). Glancing at my airspeed which was bouncing between 110 and 130+ mph, I adjusted the throttle, double-checked the carburetor heat and decided against using the flaps, for I feared they could not withstand the turbulence and if I lost one of the flaps I would surely crash.

Crossing the high tension electrical wires, which ran alongside of highway 224, and always seem to sit at the end of any runway, my aircraft suddenly went out of control, (my control). It was as if some giant monster had kicked the tiny craft. The aircraft veered up, violently, but I fought it and managed to correct the angle of descent. Instantly a powerful gust caught the port wing (left) and flipped the aircraft completely upside down. The violent action threw me to a new heading, approximately 25° off course to starboard (right) of the runway. I was now sitting completely inverted and hurtling downward, and away from the runway. The wild turbulence had taken over, for I had absolutely no control of the aircraft which was now being forced to descend into a tree-line at roughly 130 mph. I had two or three seconds at most to live, but the yoke would not respond. Some very powerful force had taken control of the aircraft! Bracing for impact, I closed my eyes while releasing the throttle to shield my face with my right arm to brace for what was surely going to be a fiery crash.

One second, two seconds, three seconds passed, but there was no impact! No sound of ripping, shrieking metal! No agony of burning flesh! What? Was I dead? No, I was not dead, but I suddenly realized that I had no fear. I was at peace. This is really difficult to explain. I opened my eyes to see that I was still sitting in the pilots seat of the small aircraft, which was now on the ground, and hurtling down the runway at over 100 mph!! But-who-what-how? My mind was electrified with a thousand thoughts, one of which, "I never felt the aircraft touchdown upon the runway!!" Then it hit me! It really hit me! God had answered my short, but very sincere prayer. God had taken over! God had yanked the aircraft, and me, from certain doom, and placed it ever so gently on the runway!

I began shouting praises, and thanks to the Lord, but then I realized that my tiny aircraft was rolling straight as an arrow, over 100 mph, and passing the halfway mark of the gravel runway, which ended at, of course, another tree line! In a millisecond I decided that there was no way that I was going to do a go around to make a second landing. Committed to remain on the ground, I quickly pulled the throttle back to idle while engaging the brakes, but I knew that this was going to be close, very close.

As I wrestled with the controls; the ailerons, brakes, rudder, and flaps to slow the craft, and keep it on the ground, the speed began dipping below 60 mph. Then I dumped the flaps, full down. The combination of brakes, full flaps, and God's will, brought the aircraft to a sliding stop at the very end of the runway! Of coarse there were trees overhead, looking down upon me at the extreme edge of the runway.

The craft sat idling with the nose pointing about 90° off center to the runway, pointing more or less, due west. There would have been huge cloud of dust, but the wind had swiftly removed any lingering particles. No-matter, for with a great exhalation (whew), I throttled up to maneuver the craft back towards the hangars, while I resumed to praise the Lord for saving my life!

As I slipped the aircraft into its parking station I glanced towards the airport office where several people, including the lady who had presented me with the dreadful weather report, standing at the windows, staring in my direction. I shut the engine down and locked the brakes. Then grabbing my map and flight calculator (similar to a slide rule), I tossed them into my flight-bag and exited the aircraft. As I stepped upon the earth I looked up to heaven and gave thanks to God. The chilly wind was tearing at my clothing, but the sky was above me, God was in control, and I was still alive in this realm, and unharmed.

I then spent several minutes anchoring the craft with tie down lines. Then headed for the office to check in.

When I entered the airport office, I was immediately inundated with questions on how I had managed to gain control, and land the aircraft amid such awful weather conditions and so on. I don't recall all of the questions, nor exactly what I said, but while trying to maintain my composure, all I really wanted to do, was to praise God for landing that aircraft. My legs were kinda shaky. I needed to sit down.

One young pilot who considered himself an “Ace”, and in fact he was a very good pilot, said, "That was some fancy recovery, how in the world did you do that?"

I could not answer him, for I think I was in shock. Besides, my eyes were closed during the “landing”. I gave him a small shrug, and a slight shake of my head back-and-forth, and then turned and walked away. I did not land that aircraft. I really needed to sit down so I took a few steps to an old comfy couch and collapsed to stare at the floor.

After a few minutes of silent prayer I realized the “Ace” pilot kept looking towards the runway approach, and then he would glance to me. I stood up and tried to casually walk to the service counter to pay for my flight time. Even this was a struggle but after paying, I began to record my air time into my flight log. I noticed my hands were shaking from the adrenalin overload, so I tucked the log book into my flight bag and turned to leave.

“Come on” said Ace, “that was some landing! How did you do it”?

I managed a weak smile, shrugged, and walked out the door. How could I tell him anything about that landing? I didn't see the landing, for my eyes were closed and I was braced for a fiery death.

I should have asked those folks, how the aircraft landed, but my thoughts not exactly calm. Years later, upon reflection of this miracle, the following scripture came to mind.
John 6:21 NIV

"Then they were willing to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading."

Hallelujah! God does hear our prayers....

-William Piergiovanni