

‘Get There-itis’

by

Richard A. Hansen, M.D., AME

Winter seasons are fraught with many health hazards. Public health clinics and even pharmacies line up the senior citizens for their annual flu shot. Sweets such as cookies and chocolate set the stage for a winter cold, with the sniffles and cough that makes flying a potential pain in the ear, or a severe sinus headache. There is another risk to winter flying, though, that relates to the weather. It is a potentially fatal disease, called ‘Get There-itis.’

There’s a quaint saying, “If you have to be somewhere, you ought to fly commercial.” However, when we look at the security lines, and the hassles of lost luggage, not to mention the risk of unscheduled landings and interminable delay, the attraction to private piloting is obvious. And, general aviation is getting safer, according to accident rate statistics. Better training, improved maintenance, and government regulations have helped greatly over the past twenty years. Still, the accident rate for private pilots remains twenty-seven times higher than for scheduled airlines.

Flight instructors frequently harken back to the John F. Kennedy, Jr. crash in a single-engine Piper Saratoga II HP, that fateful July 16 night (1999), as he flew from Essex County Airport, New Jersey, across the ocean for a family wedding in Martha’s Vineyard. The night sky was hazy, but with no thunderstorms or cloud obscuration. Night visual landmarks over the ocean were nonexistent, and spatial disorientation overrode the flight instruments, as a trio of high profile people entered the sea. Like his president father, JFK, whose presidency lasted exactly 1000 days, “John-John’s” marriage to Carolyn Bessette also lasted 1000 days, for she with her sister-in-law Lauren were passengers that sad summer night. Remember, night flying over water is basically IFR all the way.

Get There-itis is a totally preventable syndrome; but there is no vaccination to stop the virus. Holiday seasons are especially notorious for such ‘get there at all costs’ cross-countries. The weather may be marginal, and pilots may be tired from long work hours or last minute shopping sprees. Others may be fighting a cold or just getting over some illness. Preflight checks of the plane may be too brief to know for sure the fuel status, or the en-route weather, or more likely the health status of the pilot-in-command. And, how about currency, especially if a night flight is contemplated? No reunion or appointment is so important as to risk spending it in the hospital, or even worse, as one of those holiday statistics to increase the NTSB workload.

When I passed my checkride, the examiner asked what new privileges a private pilot would be able to exercise. One of my replies was that I could now fly ‘VFR on top.’ While that answer is correct, the hole in the clouds that ‘beckons one toward patches of blue sky’ may also be known as a ‘sucker hole’! Remind yourself, that what goes up must eventually come down. And, where is that hole in the clouds that we assumed would hover over the destination airport?

Further, winter flying involves more freezing temperatures, especially at altitudes in and above

the clouds. Rime ice is bad enough, but what will we do with the carb ice, or a frozen pitot tube? Pull on the carb heat knob, the check list says. But, maybe it would be better to avoid the emergency in the first place.

The determination to reach a destination, combined with marginal or hazardous weather, is called 'Get There-itis,' which claims the lives of dozens of pilots and their passengers yearly. Self-imposed goals as well as peer pressure can lead pilots to a strong desire to get away for their vacation destination or a fly-in event. Even more intense is the perceived need to get home on schedule. The reasons may be compelling, but cutting corners or pushing prudent limits is risking more than your plane. The life on the line, or someone you care about, may be even more compelling a reason to spend another day on the ground, to travel rested, to double check everything on the plane, to triple check the weather forecasts – METARs, TAFs, and DUAT briefings.

To summarize, remember these aviation adages: "If it doesn't feel right, there's usually a reason." And, "Never ignore that voice in the back of your mind telling you something is wrong." I want to help you avoid this preventable pilot infection, 'Get There-itis.' Enjoy your flight . . . but always, fly safely!

*[Doctor Hansen, author of the popular book on home health care, **Get Well At Home**, currently serves as medical director of the **Emerald Valley Wellness Clinic**, and its **Live-for-Health Seminars** in Creswell, Oregon. Pilots who for health reason are having trouble passing their medical should contact us. For further information or inquiries, contact: clinic1@emeraldwellness.com]*