

Auditory Hallucinations

I'll admit it. I am partially deaf, especially in my right ear. I came by it honestly. I was a jump pilot for many years, always flying with the door removed with the constant noise of the wind rushing past, long before the days of sliding doors. I usually flew with a headset on to hear local radio traffic, but the ear muff was always cocked off to the side of my right ear so that I might hear things in the cabin like heading corrections, when the spotter wanted course changes or a cut, or complaints about taco farts and the insistent whining about how long it was taking to get to twelve-five.

Moreover, I think that in addition to the wind noise, my deafness came about over thousands of hours of intently listening to engine and airframe sounds. I firmly believe that airplanes talk. They communicate with small noises that their engines, wings, wheels and cables make. And they speak softly, subtlety and adamantly, and a pilot that doesn't hear or pay attention when a cable scrapes its way through a frozen pulley, or when a flap hinge is worn and clunks, or a when a certain ticking noise develops, and the engine wants you to have the oil analysis done right now, is just asking for trouble.

More than all of that, I think one of the most stirring sounds in the entire universe short of a Rachmaninoff symphony is the full volume noise of a radial engine, or any aircraft engine, Merlins in particular, for that matter. So, over the years, my music has always been the steady loud thrum of engines, even diesels.

My wife doesn't understand how I can fly or drive for hours on end without the radio blaring and be happy as a clam. She doesn't get that I'm paying close attention to the voices of the machine. She doesn't understand why I will taxi close to a hangar and run an engine up and open a window to hear the engine's beat bounce off of the hangar wall. I do the same thing in a

car at the bank window. I want to hear the engine's noise reverberate from the adjoining wall while I'm waiting on my check to be cashed. I'm listening to the good and not so good things an engine is telling me.

So you will understand that when I say that the last thing you want to hear in an airplane, especially on a long, very low final landing approach to a runway with a threshold full of foot-high pine stumps staring you in the face that you know you will never clear – stumps, the remains of a clear cut that are waiting to turn your airplane and your dear self into a jumbled mass of twisted sheet metal and shredded, bloody flesh - is silence. You especially don't want to hear that awful silence and see the back of a stationary propeller blade glaring at you; a stopped prop that is the result of an engine that has given up the ghost when you need it the most. It's an awful silence.

Down in Louisiana, in late 1969, I had been asked to bring my brand new Cessna 180 over to Covington-Vincent Airport and spend the day flying jumpers for a meet. The plan was to use two 180's to fly round-robin loads of jumpers during the meet. The plan further called for hot refueling over the wing, not shutting the engine down, as jumpers loaded up. Once you took on ten or so gallons of fuel pumped from 55 gallon drums sitting in the back of a pick-up truck and your jumpers had crawled in, you took off, flew those ten gallons out, while the other 180 was repeating the same action. The loads were accuracy loads, so the turn-around was fast and the climb to altitude was quick, and we refueled our airplanes every two loads.

Before I go on, let me tell you a little about Covington-Vincent airport at that time.

The small airport was the new home of Southern Parachute Center. The airstrip had been carved out using a farm tractor. It was the epitome of the words, "improvised dirt strip." After dry spells, it was dusty and bumpy. After rainy periods, it was, well, muddy and bumpy. To my knowledge, it never

improved much until long after all the skydiving activity had ceased there. The real problem this day was the north approach threshold.

To create the approach threshold to the new runway, the plentiful sapling pines, four to six inches in diameter, blocking a landing airplane had been cut down and the many remaining foot-high stumps were left to rot. The trees had only been cut a few months before and the stumps, still green, were now a fortification made of many dull pikes seemingly more intended to shred an intruding aircraft than aid its landing. On final, your wing tips would easily pass through the gap in the trees but you dared not drag your landing gear across the threshold.

The day was a bit cloudy but the ceiling was high enough to conduct the meet. Both of us flying our respective 180s began picking up and dropping jumpers. The other 180 was a much older airplane that had been borrowed for the meet. The day settled into a happy routine.

Pick up your jumpers, taxi away from the fuel truck, take-off, climb to 3'000 feet, make a pass, let your jumpers out and return. Every other jump run, it was time to fuel. Usually, one or the other of us would have to wait until the aircraft ahead was fueled before the truck would arrive and gas was delivered by the fueling crew. In the meantime, some kind and thoughtful soul would appear at your open door with a cup of coffee or a sandwich.

While drinking my coffee, I would idly check my gauges looking for any signs of a problem, look at my fuel gauges, and flex my ailerons, elevators and rudder. I insisted on shut downs every ten loads to check my oil and do a walk-around inspection of the airplane.

I'm not sure how many loads I had flown when this incident began to unfold. But as I was eating a sandwich and waiting on my airplane to be fueled, I was also watching the guys turn the crank on the hand pump in the fuel drum, when the pilot of the other airplane, Leon Riche, appeared at the

open door of my airplane. He had been sitting behind me waiting on fuel with his jumpers already loaded.

"Hey!" he said, "Let's switch airplanes. I've never flown a brand new one."

"No problem." I said, and I tumbled out of my airplane and walked back and got into his idling airplane where the jumpers were already loaded. The day had been so uneventful that I had been lulled into a massive state of stupidity. As soon as I crawled in and fastened my seat belt, and I looked around briefly as he was taxiing out in front of me. Then I pushed the throttle forward and began taxing out behind him. When he got to the end of the runway, he pivoted and came to full power and passed me with his tail in the air. I did the same. We left the runway about one-quarter of a mile apart. Thinking my airplane had been fueled, I never looked at the fuel gauges.

There was some banter between the jumpers I had piled in the back, and I listened to them laughing at something one of them had said about heading down to the French Quarter when the meet was over and getting smashed on Hurricanes at Pat O'Briens. I radioed Leon my position trailing him and we fell in tandem on our jump runs. As he was ahead of me, he put his last jumper out and headed back to the ground. My first two jumpers needed no corrections or a cut and departed about three seconds apart. Then my last jumper got in the door without asking for a correction, and he silently left the airplane, and I then proceeded to follow Leon down.

I began making S-turns during the descent to lengthen the distance between us to about a half mile. I was getting low behind Leon, still about a half mile back and I watched his touch down at the end of the runway. Then just as I added power to maintain my altitude, which was only about 200 feet, very low, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a white flash off to my left. It was a Super Cub who proceeded to cut me off and jump in front of me for final. I instinctively pulled the throttle back to idle. That's when the awful silence struck! My engine quit.

It only took a nanosecond to see that the needles for both wing tanks were resting on the big 'E.' Still, praying they lying, and hoping for a miracle, I quickly ran a cockpit check, first dropping my hand down to the fuel selector valve on the cable tunnel to make sure someone had not inadvertently, or purposely, switched it to "off." It was turned to "both." Then I checked the magneto switch. Left and right were on. The mixture was full rich. There was no time to try a restart. I had to commit to landing. Making the runway was out. I might make the stumps in the threshold. Not an option. A fast look to my left showed me something I didn't want to see - a small canal, a large ditch, actually, that I knew I would not be able to clear. To the right was a scrub field of young sapling pines dotted about in such a way that I could see that if I was very fast on the rudder at just right time, I might be able to make a very, very, very short field landing without bending too much sheet metal.

Now, here's the odd thing. At the time, I had maybe 2,200 hours of flight time. I had not flown with an instructor since getting my pilot's license. But, clear as day, when the engine quit, I heard the voice of a man named Barney Kelly. He was my first and only flight instructor throughout my time as a student pilot, and he saw me through to getting licensed. I had done so very quickly, in about 40 hours, the required minimum at the time. In fact, I began flying jumpers, day-in, day- out, the day after I got my Private Pilot's license with less than 45 hours of total flight time.

To Barney's great credit, early on, he knew that I was an instinctual pilot, having grown up the son of a Naval aviator who flew TBMs off of a carrier deck in World War II. Barney soloed me with less than eight hours of instruction. He knew, at the time, that I was only working to get my license so that I could fly jumpers and had no grand plans for an aviation career. He placed a heavy emphasis on low-level engine out procedures, stalls, stall avoidance and recovery, spin recovery, weight-and-balance computations, teaching me to fly the airplane more by feel than textbook adherence to airspeeds. He leaned on me heavily to master short-field landings preferring to use cow pastures as

practice fields over long, concrete runways. Fact is, in retrospect, he had put himself in my shoes knowing what my purpose in learning to fly was, and he tailored my lessons in that manner.

From the second the engine quit to the time I landed that day, Barney was, in his calm, reassuring way, talking me through every move. He was there, in my ear, as real as you are there reading this. In the many thousands of hours that I've flown since, in the 56 years that I've been a pilot and many other close calls, I never heard his voice again. I did that day. You can call me crazy if you wish. He talked me through every move of the ailerons, every adjustment of the elevators to maintain my airspeed, every jab of the rudder pedals to maintain a course; I clearly heard him tell me to use the starter to bump the prop horizontal so that it wouldn't strike the ground that day - which I did. And most importantly, his words instilled the expectation that I would walk away in one piece.

As I said, I did land. It was a jarring, bumpy, swerving, stand on the brakes, full elevator in my lap, grit my teeth, landing. When the bird had stopped, the instrument panel had popped from its mounts and was resting half in my lap. I pushed it away, unhooked my seat belt and tumbled out on the ground scrambling to get to my feet looking for any sign of fire. Of course, there was none as there was no fuel in the airplane - at all.

Standing one foot away from the nose of the airplane was a pine tree and I can tell you that it was just as surprised as I was that I did not mow it down. There had been just enough clear ground for the landing that there was not one dent in the airplane when it was over.

I walked back towards the airstrip as people rushed up to me - those who had seen me disappear below the trees and expected to find me injured or worse - and at the edge of the runway, and sat down to calm my shaking knees.

Sitting there, I replayed the entire episode over and over in my mind and all the "what ifs" began to flow. Chief among them, what if that had happened on take-off with a full load of jumpers? Back in those days, at least within my sphere, there was never a safety briefing of any sort to talk about loose pilot chutes in the airplane, students hung up on static lines, stalls, fires, a canopy or a pilot chute over the tail, mid-air collisions with another aircraft, bracing for a crash, a dead or sick pilot at the controls, much less what to do if your doofus pilot swaps airplanes and doesn't check his fuel gauges before he takes off. There are a lot of old school skydivers lucky to be alive today, not because they are old, but because they were just lucky. Most of them got their "safety briefs" through hearsay and the osmosis of being around more experienced skydivers.

Auditory hallucinations are not uncommon. People in great peril have often reported them. Many psychiatrists see the condition as a pathway to the next BMW payment. Naturally, there are those that regularly hear voices and walk the street answering them. They are just nuts. But, I think that what I experienced was the voice of a guardian angel named Barney. At least, that's the explanation that works best for me.

Photo cap and text. (Think more about this.)

The photo shows Leon's airplane, a Cessna 182, that ran out fuel in precisely the same spot that I did. Despite his mouth being wired shut for a few weeks and a lavish laceration over his eyes, Leon managed to walk away and continued to fly as I had.