THE VOICE OF AN ANGEL

by Sidney Dekker

I have never jumped out of an airplane. My wife considers this a good thing. I have worn parachutes while flying airplanes, and still do so regularly. But starting a flight with a wing that wasn't proven to work before takeoff takes a courage I barely want to muster. What I have done, was to fly those who wanted to jump out of my airplane. For a couple of years, I took skydivers to many thousands of feet, often in three subsequent tranches (3,000 ft, 6,000 ft and then 10,000 ft). I could look back and see them tumble out and disappear through the big sliding door while the landscape below resembled that of a satellite picture. I always found it comforting to remain in the cockpit, yank the cord to get the door to slide shut, and nurse the engine and plane into a descent. My wings were already there, thank you very much.

But then…

Ah, but then, one day I was reminded of the critical need of a working engine to have those wings get me to any height or any meaningful distance. It was a Summer day, somewhere in northern Europe. The skydiving club had recently bought a Cessna 206, as a cheaper (non-turbine) platform for getting people up to 10,000 feet. This was also useful for the club's money-making tandem jumps, in which an instructor and guest would dive out hooked together. I had been flying the 206 for a couple of days. This day had been a glider pilot's dream, but had become a skydiving pilot's challenge. Big, foamy cumulus clouds thousands of feet in height had boiled up everywhere, threatening to overwhelm the sky. Flying among them, with permission only for visual flight, was like trying to circle up among skyscrapers along the streets of Manhattan. There was also the expectation, if not demand, for a visual final approach for the jump run (into the wind, thank you) so that skydivers could see the tiny postage stamp on the ground they had to land on.

These were pre-GPS days. And we were flying from a field without navigation aids. In front of me was only the so-called steam-gauge six-pack with an assortment of engine instruments and other dials around it. A map was in the pocket next to my left ankle. No nice moving map pictures, no wind arrows on a display, nothing of the sort. Flying skydivers is thirsty business for an airplane. Climbing through 8,500 feet, I decided it was time to switch tanks (as the 206 only drinks from one of its wing tanks at a time) to balance my fuel load better and make sure I would be able to conduct the rest of the flight without having to fiddle with it. I certainly didn't want to have to do it while trying to position myself among the cauliflower clouds to find a final jump run with skydivers who were aching to get out, impatient, and jacked-up on dopamine and adrenaline. Let me just say that you don't exactly make friends with skydivers if you have to do your jump run twice because you got the first one positioned wrong.

I switched tanks and the engine died.

Immediately I switched back and hit all the fuel pumps I could find switches for.

The engine didn't come back to life.

Somehow, I managed to get the airplane to fly its best glide speed, or thereabouts, and trim it. Then I turned my head and shouted at the skydiver in charge in the back that I'd had an engine failure and that they should probably get out while they could. He looked at me as if I was making things up. Then he looked at the others, and they all looked the same. Then the door flew open and the first few choose to take their own way down, wherever on earth they were at that point. The instructor with a first-time tandem jumper attached to his front shuffled to the door, glared at me with revulsion, and then they too were gone. I had no interest in the social niceties. I had bigger problems to attend to. I declared an emergency, explaining I had suffered an engine failure, and that I had already released six parachutes and was descending myself too.

According to the airspace and its procedures, we needed permission from ATC for all of that. Now there is nothing remarkable about flying a Cessna 206 whose engine isn't working (though your trust in the airplane as your friend is dented somewhat).

A shortage of fuel was not my problem. One problem, however, was my very limited experience on the airplane. I noticed that trouble-shooting in an emergency like that became not model-driven, but environment-driven. Simply put, instead of working off a mental model of the various systems and their interconnections to try to figure out what had killed the engine, I simply pushed what was out, and pulled what was in, switched to the right what was to the left and vice versa. At some point, though, you run out of things to push and pull and twist in a Cessna cockpit. And at that point, I was out of options.

Another problem with a dead engine is that you have little say in how long the flight is going to last. And if you're over a northern European landscape with lots of rocks, forests and lakes, then you might not like where you're going to end up. That was now my main challenge. I had no idea where I was any longer. I had been largely heads-in-the-cockpit while trouble-shooting. The clouds had completely boxed me in, and I was now in a descent among those Manhattan skyscrapers, still trying to avoid them as I was under visual flight rules. This meant a lot of turning with no recognisable glimpses from anywhere. It had scrambled my internal sense of direction. It would be so nice to find the field.

That was where my saving angel came in. In the Centre responsible for our airspace, a female controller had quickly taken my flight (or what was going to be left of it) as her priority.

"Centre, Victor Romeo, descending through 5,000 feet, you got vectors to the field?"

"Victor Romeo stand by"

Double click.

"Victor Romeo turn heading 170, should be straight ahead."

I turned 170, trying to keep the best glide speed, and was instantly looking up at a wall of cloud the size of Niagara, but then higher, much higher. Cloud base was still far below me, so going underneath was no option either.

"Victor Romeo, you have field in sight?"

"Stand by."

Silence.

"Negative, too much cloud."

Silence.

I yanked the plane around to stay in the clear. This was not a time to take the thing into the clouds. Instrument flying is fine, but with a heart rate that is slightly more normal and a plane that's actually got its instruments checked out and certified for it. I really didn't want to end up plummeting from the base of all that cloud in bits and pieces because of overstressing the airframe. And, by the way, how well was I going to find the field from inside the cloud?

"Victor Romeo, how are you doing?"

"Negative field in sight. Engine still dead."

Silence.

She may have given me more vectors. I don't remember. I do remember the sheer presence of her voice – of her – in the cockpit. The sense of not being alone while desperately alone, of having contact with another human with an extra pair of eyes to help me look out for that field, of being able to talk with someone who was clearly concerned for me: It was the best experience of the whole flight. And research shows that it's not just the feeling of not being alone. The relationship between controller and pilot, even if conducted through 'thin air' and across a large distance, can be so heartening because of a controller's ability to introduce a couple of key things to the conversation and the pilot's thought process. The first is candour. If the controller says you're descending through 3,000 feet in an area with terrain, then that's very likely true. As a flight crew, you may not have been looking at the altimeter winding down right then, so it's crucial to hear it from someone who has. The second is purpose. A controller can help keep a crew focused on the purpose they've said they want to achieve, like finding and reaching that airfield. The third is rigour. An emergency can mess up a crew's response necessary to address it. A controller's prompts can help a flight crew keep track of what's done or what needs to be done. The fourth is collaboration and compassion. The crew has someone who is working with them in real time to address a problem, and someone who actually cares about the outcome, too.

"Victor Romeo, turn 230 now."

"230."

I did. Well, I didn't, because Niagara or one of its many brethren were still there, but I was able to fly around it, and then some more, and some more, and there, there was a glimpse.

"Centre Victor Romeo contact."

Silence for a bit. I like to think she exhaled. As if she, too, had been holding her breath. Then all she said was, "good."

And it was good. I was able to work out a high circuit around the field that would bring me in for a dead-stick landing. The skydivers were nowhere to be seen. I hadn't actually thought of them for the last few minutes.

"Victor Romeo, you good?"

"Affirm, got the field, should make it."

"That's good."

And then, and it still makes me all warm and emotional as I write this:
"Give me a phone call when you're safely on the ground."

Bless that angel.
"Thank you," I said. I meant it.

There was something poetic about my callsign too. How I had been longing to be a Victor over the Romeo (a Cassanova-ish lover who, after all, ended up quite dead himself).

I switched over to the field frequency, now having all but given up on the engine. Then I looked at the electrical fuel pumps. There was a normal one and a high-pressure one. Both were on. I reached over and switched the high-pressure one off.

And the engine came back to life.
I instantly hated it.

I hated it for all it had got me into, and for all that it had made me, and others, go through. Not that I trusted it for a moment: I kept my profile so that I'd make the field independent of whether it would keep on turning or not. Later, I learned that on that model, switching high-pressure fuel pumps on at high altitude can flood the engine. After landing, I learned that the skydivers had ended up in an orchard and had been invited in for afternoon tea by the owner. I borrowed a phone and called the controller. We ran through the scenario again together, and I told her about the skydivers. I thanked her again for her help. Then she had to go back and attend to the needs of other pilots. The tandem guest had had the day of her life. She got out of the airplane at a lower height than planned, the instructor hated me for a moment, but she had ended up in a spontaneous afternoon tea! She probably went on to tell many others about it. I suppose that an experience is either good, or a good story. Then again, mine is perhaps both. Not because of a fickle 206 engine, or because of a hospitable ward for my skydivers. It was both good and a good story because of my angel; my angel in the sky. Thank you.

Sidney Dekker is Professor and Director of Safety Science Innovation Lab at Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia. Author of best-selling books on human factors and safety, he has had experience as an airline pilot on the Boeing 737.