

WHERE DID IT ALL GO WRONG?

Brian Hope tells the story of a pilot who could have done with a little more patience...



> Dave was a busy man. Despite less than ideal trading conditions, his small building business was forever busy as householders decided to upgrade rather than move in these uncertain times. In the past three months, he'd managed just three rounds of golf, his handicap was suffering and his best mate Mike was no longer the pushover he once was.

"Après vous," said Mike, as they strolled to the ninth on the picturesque golf course just outside St Omer, a long-promised trip across the Channel for a round having finally come about – albeit a non-flying trip.

"Oui, merci, mon ami," said Dave with a cheery laugh.

As Dave set his tee, a Robin DR400 passed overhead, probably a training flight from the local aeroclub, which was based on the old WWI airfield across the other side of town. Though its passing went unobserved by Dave, Mike glanced skywards as his thoughts returned to a somewhat less happy outcome to a trip they had taken together one summer's day some years previously.

Dave and Mike had known each other since schooldays and Dave had always been interested in aeroplanes. He'd scraped enough money together by his mid-20s to take flying lessons and, despite working hard to establish his small business, he'd stuck with it and got his licence. His total flying time was barely 150 hours since he started to learn to fly almost eight years previously – an hour snatched here and there wasn't exactly how he had imagined his flying would be. He wanted to stretch his wings and use his south coast location as the ideal stepping stone into mainland Europe, but he either had the cash and not the time, or vice versa. He'd finally managed to steal a couple of days from his busy schedule and he and Mike were planning an overnight trip to Le Touquet in one of the club's 152s.

This was the second time he had planned the trip, the first, earlier in the summer, being scuppered by torrential rain setting in for an entire weekend. This time didn't look like it was going to be plain sailing either; low cloud was forecast along the South Coast, possibly burning off by late morning. Dave had checked all the TV forecasts the previous evening and picked the most optimistic on which to pin his hopes. The nine-hour TAF that morning also

Note the merging of hills and sky in the distance



Scud running below a low cloudbase always carries risk. Aerials, tall chimneys and high ground can quickly catch you out

"...his clammy hands gripping the yoke for all he was worth"

held a flicker of hope, so he rang his mate and picked him up as planned at 0830 for the half-hour trip to the airfield. With a generally low ceiling and fog and drizzle for the last five miles to the coast, it was a pretty gloomy couple of friends that pulled up outside the aeroclub that August morning.

Kicking their heels for a couple of hours and regularly checking the TAFs and Metars, come midday the promised improvement was very slow in arriving. Visibility had improved and the cloudbase was now at least discernable, but clearly little more than a few hundred feet. Le Touquet's telephone ATIS was sounding better though, 1,500ft and 10km. If they could get out under the cloudbase and head straight across the Channel then, in theory at least, he convinced himself, they would be flying into an improving situation.

"I think we may be in luck," said Dave. "The CFI isn't in today, and he's a real stickler, maybe the duty QFI will let us go. I'll assure him that if we get airborne and don't like it, we'll come straight back in."

"OK," the instructor eventually agreed, "but if that base is lower than 600ft, make sure you just nip around the circuit and come straight back in."

SHOULDN'T WE TALK?

Strapped into the C152, checks complete and sitting at the end of the runway, Dave's

"The once-solid 152 buckled and wrenched itself to destruction"

optimism was somewhat less buoyant. The windows were steaming up and all before him was overwhelmingly grey. Mike's happy chatter about the trip didn't help either; he was beginning to wish he'd been less persuasive in his discussions with the duty QFI. Still, in for a penny, if the base was too low he could always complete a low-level circuit and come back in. Low-level circuit – it sounded straightforward enough but he couldn't remember that he had ever actually flown one before, even with an instructor.

The instructor watched from the clubhouse as the 152 disappeared into the murk, while in the cockpit Dave was taken aback as at less than 500ft the ground disappeared. He instinctively lowered the nose and gingerly banked a little left to head out to the coast, and by the time he had broken out, Dave caught sight of the beach slipping past below, with little more than 400ft on the altimeter and the sea and clouds seeming to merge ahead, with no discernable horizon.

"I don't like this," he thought, as he started a 180° turn back towards the beach, and as the aircraft turned, the view ahead was little better. Expecting to see the airfield, all he could make out were houses and then open fields. He knew there was high ground only five miles inland, the South Downs rising to almost 900ft. He'd have to climb. At 1,000ft he came through the first layer with 45° of bank on and the ASI showing just 60kt. 'Jesus!' he thought, his heart thumping in his chest, 'What the hell am I going to do now?'

Mike had been very quiet, realising all was not well. "Shouldn't we talk to somebody?" he suggested.

Between layers and just higher than any local terrain, Dave settled a little and keyed the mic. "Golf X-ray Yankee is returning, but I am uncertain of my position," he stammered.

The calm voice of the controller asked for his height and whether he was in sight of the surface.

"Negative," came the response, "And I'm at... 900ft," realising that he had lost 100ft in his attempts to stop climbing into the higher cloud.

Using his VDF, the controller managed to ascertain that Dave was north-east of the field and heading generally northwards. ▶

> COACHING CORNER

"Turn onto 230° and try to climb to 1,500ft," he said. "There is high ground in your vicinity."

By now Dave was getting quite frantic. As he turned, he was in and out of the upper cloud and now barely able to maintain 900ft. Trying to stay even close to 230° was impossible while dodging around trying to stay between layers. Suddenly the cloud below him parted and a green patch flashed past literally just feet below. Instinctively he hauled back on the yoke and pulled up into the cloud above him, his clammy hands gripping the yoke for all he was worth. Airspeed was diminishing quickly and the horizon was showing a bank to the left, so he lowered the nose, but too far and the engine revved past the yellow arc so quickly it gave him a start. Rolling right and easing back a little he popped out of the clouds almost in a wings-level condition and with fields just 400ft below. He hadn't even noticed passing through the shallow, between-layers gap as he stared desperately at the artificial horizon trying to make sense of what control inputs he should be making.

Luck was on his side that day – had he come out of the cloud in a spiral dive he would almost certainly have become a 'loss of control in IMC' statistic, but with wings level he was quickly able to get his speed under control as he decided to land immediately; probably his best decision of the day. He lined up on the nearest field straight ahead and eased back on the throttle, trying to gather his thoughts but totally unable to do so. With no flaps, no thoughts about the direction of what little breeze there was and no Mayday call, he just closed the throttle and flared. Luckily there was another field beyond the hedgerow as the 152 floated across the chosen field, and touched down in the ploughed one beyond... but it was, thank God thought Dave, Mother earth. The aircraft touched down hard and bounced, going over as the nosewheel dug in on second contact. The noises were sickening as the once-solid 152 buckled and wrenched itself to destruction.

The ensuing silence was deafening as Dave and Mike hung inverted, shocked and afraid but otherwise intact. They extricated themselves without further ado and sat on the grass at the edge of the field some way from the wreckage, utterly dejected but thankful for being alive. An hour later, as they were ferried to the local hospital for a check-up, a watery sun peeped through the breaking cloudbase. 'Patience is a virtue,' thought Dave.

Mike never did get his flight to Le Touquet; Dave couldn't get over the fear he felt as, helpless and terrified in that cockpit, he'd held not only his own but an innocent friend's life in his hands. By the grace of God or simply good luck they had been spared, but he never flew again. "I think I might take up golf," said Dave as they took a taxi back from the hospital to the aeroclub to pick up his car. ■

WHERE IT ALL WENT WRONG

BRIAN HOPE OFFERS SOME CONCLUSIONS ABOUT WHAT WENT WRONG WITH THE FLIGHT

CLEARLY THERE ARE many issues with this flight but the underlying one is that oft-quoted alpha male pressure to perform. Here we have a reasonably capable man, running a small business and generally in control of his life, and having promised his mate a trip, and already had to cancel once, he is feeling pressured to do all he can to make this flight happen.

The forecasts the previous evening were doubtful, but don't we all check out several to seek a glimmer of possibility? The TAF that morning too held only little promise, but rather than warn his friend that the likelihood was, at best, a late afternoon departure, he seized on that possibility of an improvement. He so desperately wanted to believe the TAF that it clouded his judgment (no pun intended) even when he could see out of the window that the general condition was not good and was not meeting the TAF's expectations.

He also took the opportunity to persuade the QFI to let him give it a try, which raises concerns about the QFI's judgement. Even when self-doubt does finally creep in at the hold, he still persists.

There is no place for you and an ego in the cockpit, you must make every judgement call based on the best facts that are presented to you, what you can see with your own two eyes, and what you know from experience and can glean from those who have more experience than you do. It was a bad weather day with little chance that it would improve, and if it did it would be later rather than sooner. Heading out across the sea in poor visibility at very low level in the vague hope that it will get better as you go is foolhardy in the extreme.

Taking off in these conditions was always going to be courting trouble, obscured high ground to the north and sea to the south and a cloudbase that turned out to be just 400ft. There just weren't enough options should anything go wrong, and go wrong it did all too quickly.

Sadly, even as a low-hour, out-of-practice pilot, Dave is not alone in making the errors of judgment that he did, plenty of more experienced pilots have done likewise, and some were not so lucky with the outcome. Never let the fear of losing face make you get into an aeroplane when conditions are beyond your experience level. If you don't make that first mistake, you are unlikely to make all the others as the options reduce and your brain gets addled.

Where did it all go wrong? In the clubhouse where pressure to perform and a weak QFI overrode basic airmanship and commonsense. Those of us who have an aircraft available outside a club environment ultimately make our own decisions but in this particular instance, had the QFI suggested that he and Dave fly a circuit to see what the weather was really like, a lot of heartache could have been avoided.

Postscript. It is worth remembering that we are now at the time of year when the onset of fog in mid- to late-afternoon can be rapid and unexpected. Make a point of noting the dew point when you check your TAFs and Metars; the closer it is to a typical winter's afternoon temperature the more likely fog could form as the sun goes down and the temperature falls. A friend of mine had a very lucky escape recently, by his own admission totally down to luck rather than ability, when he set off for home late in the day and ultimately found himself above fog, low on fuel, darkness approaching and his options rapidly diminishing... but that is another story.

Flight into terrain is never pleasant



Left: "Cloud on hills," as the Met man might say

