



Bullied into silence

Former part-time airline pilot **SIDNEY DEKKER** recalls a night on the flight deck which still leaves him feeling deeply uneasy.

I recall flying with a crusty old captain whose idea of communicating with a co-pilot (me, in this case) was pretty much "Gear up, Flaps up, Shut up." He was the flying pilot and it was my job to do as I was told.

We were directed by air traffic control for an approach to a runway in dark, stormy conditions, close to midnight. It turned out that the electronic glideslope was not working, which meant that we had to make our own descent path toward the runway. This is legal, but always riskier. Some airlines have stopped flying such approaches altogether, but not my airline at the time.

We were crunched for time, on the last flight of the day, and the captain kept motoring towards the top of the descent. Never bothering to brief me about his plans for the new approach (in fact, pretty much ignoring my existence and turning all the knobs and levers himself), he started bringing the aircraft down toward what I hoped was a runway.

We could not see a thing in the cloud and rain. We dipped a full hundred feet below the so-called minimum descent height before I caught a glimpse of runway lights. "Contact!" I said. The lights weren't straight ahead but refracted through the rain that was exploding against my side window: there was that much crosswind. We slid down and landed without incident.

But what I should have said, some nine hundred feet above the ground, was "Negative contact, go around!" There was no runway visible when there should have been – which is when you pull up the aeroplane and give it

another try or go to the alternative airport. It was my job to say so. It was my job to say it again if he hadn't listened. It was my job, even, to say "my controls!" and wrest the yoke from his hands and fly the aircraft myself if he still hadn't listened. This is specified even in the airline's procedures.

And, even before that, I should have demanded that he brief me about the approach and his plans for it so that I'd have had a fighting chance to follow along. The 150 passengers in the back would have expected nothing less from me, and rightly so. But I did nothing of the sort. I was bullied into silence, I was meek and passive, along for the ride. I was, on this occasion, exactly the sort of co-pilot that aviation disaster books and television programs love to hate: the co-pilot who dies rather than challenge the authority of the captain. I failed at my duty ethic. Miserably.

In my own defence, I reasoned that if I had intervened forcefully, this captain would have handed the aircraft to me and let me bumble around in the dark for a while, with him spitefully grunting at my incompetence, gleefully seeing me get totally lost in the stormy, lousy conditions with a heavy jet in my hands.

I was both relieved and troubled to learn that many other co-pilots have similar experiences, even today. Was this traumatic for me? In a way, absolutely. The memories of that night are stark and clear, and still fill me with disgust and regret and a creeping, icy sense of failure. My sleep during a number of nights afterward was disrupted



Cockpit career: the author in his airline flying days.

by waking, by intrusive dreams. And the cold, crippling realisation that I should have acted but did not is almost as real today as it was when I sat in the crew bus on the way to the hotel. The fact that there were ultimately no negative consequences, that everybody walked away from the approach and landing, was, and is, strangely irrelevant.

The next day, I decided to call the airline's technical pilot, a friend of mine. I told him about the events of the night before, and asked him whether we could get our hands on the flight data recorded on the aircraft's computers. Together with the weather information from the night, I thought I could show how we went below the minimum height before seeing the runway. This in turn could help me write a convincing safety report so that the company could learn what had happened and perhaps do something with it. The technical pilot agreed to look for the data.

He called me back the next day and announced that this particular jet had had some problems with its data recorder. The last part of our flight was not on it. I was mildly devastated. What could I do now, without any evidence? "Should I write a report anyway and send it in?" I asked him. He was silent for a bit, then said: "Think about it. Who are they going to believe? A thirty-year veteran with the airline, or a rookie part-time co-pilot? I'd drop it if I were you." I did. I didn't see how I had a choice. As a result, I never did get to respond meaningfully to the stress of that stormy approach. Not on the night, nor ever after.

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