

A Personal Take-Off Briefing Pays Off



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By Mike Jones

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One of my best flying friends is Ken Haenlein. The majority of his work is single-pilot. “Even though I was flying by myself,” he told me, “I always talk out my take-off briefing. I go through my standard take-off briefing on every flight.” He related the harrowing tale of one briefing that really paid off:

“I was flying the Navajo, a big twin, 530 Juliet Bravo, from Wilmington, NC. The conditions were IFR, six hundred feet and overcast. I did my regular pre-brief, including putting an instrument approach into the GPS. I already had rotated and I was ten feet in the air when the right engine let go. Which is the worst possible moment to lose an engine.

“In this particular case, I was lucky. I didn’t have any passengers on board. I wasn’t super-heavy. My POH said I should be climbing 300 to 400 feet per minute but I only was getting about 125 feet per minute because the engines were coming up on TBO. Anyhow, I had rotated, I was committed, and now I had to fly.

“I’m not climbing fast. I got smoke pouring out of my engine. I’m trying to keep the plane going in a safe direction before I go to IMC. I’ve got all these things going on and the guy in the tower was calling me on the radio, yelling at me, to tell me what’s going on.

‘Wilmington,’ I said, ‘Shut the puck up. I know I got problems. I’m dealing with it. I gotta concentrate on what I need to do.’

“The plane continued to climb very slowly. I needed some altitude. I was very worried about hitting trees and stuff at the end of the runway. I dragged myself up to about 1,300-1,400 feet until I knew I had [no obstacles] in my area. So I was safe. I could back off on my other engine a little bit because I was making 110% power, everything I could get.

“I was lucky to have really great avionics. I had a Garmin 600 and two Garmin 530s. I activated the approach. I had to get myself far enough out to intercept and come back around. I popped out of the clouds at 600 feet and the runway was right in front of me.

“Smoke was still billowing out of the engine as I landed. There wasn’t a fire; it was just oil splashing onto the turbocharger and burning off. A big ass fire truck came rushing down at me, ready to hit me with full foam. I was like no, no, no, no, we’re OK! So they shut down the airport for a couple minutes, and towed me off the runway.

“The problem? A connecting rod let go. But it happened at the very worst moment. That’s why in my pre-flight brief I decide what I am going to do if I lose an engine. And, if the weather is IMC, I always set up an approach in the GPS that I can pull it up if anything goes wrong. The couple of seconds you save doing that are seconds you can do other things — like fly the plane.”

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About the Author

Dr. Mike Jones has been writing for this magazine and other aviation journals for a decade. He flies a 1979 Cessna Centurion and has flown 800 Young Eagle missions, about a hundred AngelFlights, and put 4,000 hours in his logbook. Email him at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.

