



# WORST-CASE Scenarios

Last year I bought a parachute, not because I wanted to jump out of a perfectly good airplane, but just in case my airplane suddenly was no longer perfectly good.

I fly gliders most weekends, and my Pilatus is a nice aircraft with decent performance. I enjoy the sport and I have few safety concerns if I pay attention to what I'm doing. The one major concern I do have is about the risk of a mid-air collision. Our club's base is just west of the Chesapeake Bay, north of Baltimore, and a lot of north/south traffic cruises through the area. Plus, there is always the threat of collision with another glider while working the same thermal, even though our wariness about that situation verges on paranoia.

When I bought the 'chute from Alan Silver, a wise and experienced parachutist and rigger, he talked with me in some detail about my approach to the 'chute. It is important, he counseled, that I rehearse the act of bailing out of my aircraft should it become crippled. The rehearsal should not only be in my mind — walking myself through the procedure of jettisoning the canopy, unbuckling my five-point harness, getting clear of the fuselage, pulling the ripcord

and guiding the 'chute to a good landing — but I also should physically work my way through that process as much as possible while sitting in the cockpit.

For someone who has never wanted to jump out of any aircraft into thin air, it was a sobering process, but the benefit in coming to grips with the reality of the event before it happens is quite clear.

I started to relate this thinking to some of the accidents I read about and came to the perhaps unsurprising conclusion that in many accidents pilots had become so dedicated to landing on a runway they did not seriously consider the idea that at some point, when things started to go bad for whatever reason, they had to accept the fact that the airplane was going to get bent, perhaps badly, and that the survival of those on board had to be the sole focus of what was done next.

When we learn to fly, we all practice forced landings; for the most part, that involves a total loss of power, and in that event, there is little question about priorities. But we see over and over again tales of pilots losing engines and systems or experiencing onboard fires that make flying difficult, at best, who end up impacting the ground in an

uncontrolled manner, and that never turns out well. In an emergency version of get-home-itis, pilots want to land normally, even when that seems nearly impossible.

In probably the most popular accident of all time — if there can be such a thing — Chesley “Sully” Sullenberger made an early decision that he would destroy an aircraft in order to give his passengers the best possible chance of survival. Although he briefly sought alternatives, he immediately turned toward a survivable solution and didn't waver.

So, this isn't a complicated training point or procedure, but rather a mental exercise. Walk through a number of emergency scenarios in your mind, with a variety of situations and alternatives, and get your head to accept the fact that, sometimes, bending the airplane is the better choice if everyone walks away.

A large, stylized handwritten signature in black ink that reads "J.A. Donoghue".

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