

Why? Why?

I snatch my hand back and forth again to bang the stick hard against the forward stop. Just to make sure.

It was there anyway.

The spin goes on.

The ground is horribly close. The details are not a factor, one bit of farmland being much like another to die in. But you only ever see revolving ground from very much too low once in a lifetime, and that briefly. The spectacle is impressive.

The sunshine is bright and warm, and the world will go on.

I will not be with it.

The Extra will probably not burn — the engine having been idling for half a minute there won't be the red-hot exhaust to flash the fuel — but the aeroplane and I will certainly be an impacted tangle in the earth, mute and crumpled testimony to my ineptitude.

If I should have any small — and by this performance, undeserved — reputation, then the wreckage may cause some puzzlement among those whose job it is to look into such things. The Air Accident Investigations Branch will peer at the remains, check, measure, piece together shattered parts, trace twisted control runs, search for mechanical failure. Not finding it, they will look for evidence of pilot error.

Because they are very conscientious and because I was known as a long-lasting aerobatic pilot at least up until this point, they will look very hard, lest whatever caught me should rear up again and claim further victims.

Well, I wish you luck, AAIB. Much luck. Because I fear I am going to leave you precious little evidence.

The spin goes on.

Of course, AAIB, you will question the witnesses and also look at my record. The witnesses will furnish colourful variations on the central theme (the plane was stunting, bits fell off it in the air, there was an explosion, etc.), but my colleagues in the business may offer more seemingly pertinent clues. They may tell you, for example, that my normal display routine includes a five-turn full-power flat spin entered from 1,400 feet. And you may thereby conclude that this was what I was doing and for once I lost count of the turns or fumbled the recovery . . .

But you will be wrong. This is not a power-on flat spin — the nose is lower, the rotation is much faster, and the power is most definitely off. I wish it was a true flat spin because I can recover from a flat spin in an instant with reflex motions as familiar as breathing. So benign is the Extra that you don't even have to throttle back; just lead a quarter-turn and smash in hard out-spin rudder, in-spin aileron and forward stick.

Aileron.

I look down at my right hand. It is a distant member, frozen in effort. It is holding the stick hard forward.

And central.

I move the hand to the left. Into the spin.

The spin stops.

It stops immediately and without the slightest fuss. The sudden sanity is absolute after the turmoil.

We pull out of the dive. The ground is 200, maybe even 300 feet beneath us.

We soar up into the warm sky, the Extra and I. Snarling at full power away from that dread place in the innocent farmland. My heels are drumming on the alloy footwells and my mouth is sticky-dry. The shaking of my hands is echoed by the wild pounding of my heart.

Even before we level off I am an older and wiser man. I know with hideous clarity the extent and simplicity of my sin.

The truth of this day is not flattering.

In the knife-edge spin one hits, among other things, full-forward-full-left stick. When this knife-edge spin went berserk my first act of recovery was to hastily remove all such extreme control inputs. The Extra then translated into an ordinary spin, while I doggedly hung on to out-spin controls for the knife-edge.

Which of course did not include in-spin aileron.

In the ordinary way this would not have mattered overmuch. I had the correct rudder on, and normally if you have that the Extra will come out of a spin eventually even if you've pulled the stick out by the roots.

But this was not an ordinary spin. The incredible violence of a knife-edge gone bananas imparted such rotational velocity that the spin was maybe twice as fast as the Extra's normal cadence. It may well be that this is the only way you could ever get an Extra 230 into a spin that fast.

And for *that* extra spin, as I can now testify, it turns out that you do most definitely need in-spin aileron for recovery.

Simple.

My already dry mouth is host to the ashes of mortification. Because of course I knew this; I *know* that in nasty spins any aeroplane may need in-spin aileron on recovery. It is a fundamental which is branded in letters of fire through the very fibre of my being.

So how came I to sit there fat and dumb, if not exactly happy, holding a recovery action which was half-a-leftover from a previous embarrassment? How came my oh-so-experienced reflexes to be so mesmerised as to permit such an elementary lapse?

We fly around in a large, aimless circle. My face itches with sweat and I wipe my sleeve across it, leaving dark damp patches on the Nomex.

Oh, I know how come, of course.

Sudden shock of the unexpected. *Idée fixe* — fixed idea that I'd already done the right thing, the whole right thing, and nothing but the right thing. Failure, dismal failure, to recognise gut-feel reflex as unreliable and instantly replace it with proven rote. Idiocy. The human condition. Premature senility . . .

All the usual things.

But I have learned. Oh yes. Another twig on the sometimes creaking edifice of experience. This will — may — be a mistake I shall not make again.

Doubtless I shall find others.

But when I do, just may they please be not quite so low. Or quite so persistent.

Realistic low-level practice for display flying is absolutely vital for all concerned. You practice high at first and then slowly bring it down low; this is fundamental for the safety of the performers, the spectators, the organisers, even the careers of the bureaucrats who claim to control these things. Everybody. It is a primary imperative. Unarguable.

But in the nature of the beast it does mean that somewhere, sometime, somebody is going to screw up at that low level. This is equally unarguable . . .

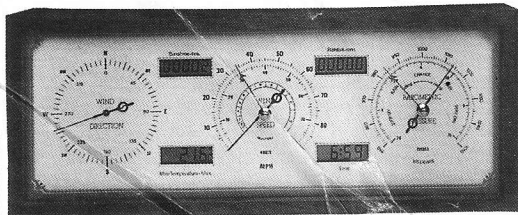
So Lord, next time I make a screw-up on this scale, please help it to be in earlier practise. Just a bit earlier, when I am just a bit higher . . .

The cockpit is now normal again, and I am one small bit wiser.

We wheel round, the Extra and I, clearing the sky. Then we pull up to the vertical.

There are those knife-edge spins to look at again.

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