

So Near

Many times, in a lifetime of flying, I have observed the unfolding of events in such a bizarre fashion as to be beyond belief; the final outcome completely unpredictable - sometimes even unrelated to the earlier beginnings. And often, in retrospect, the entire tragic outcome turned on a decision made with no hint of its significance at the time it was made.

One such episode involving an Air National Guard Lieutenant occurred a few weeks before I joined the Guard squadron at Milwaukee. It was 1948. Many of the fighter pilots who had left the Service immediately at the end of WWII and continued to fly high performance aircraft in the Air Guard, found that they had been too hasty in getting out, had not adjusted to civilian life very well, and wanted to get back on active flying duty in the Air Force. One such pilot was Jim Lynch. He had sent numerous letters and applications to Washington and was encouraged enough to plan a visit to the Pentagon to try to expedite his recall orders.

He had gotten permission from the local commander to take one of the squadron P-51's on a cross-country flight to Andrews AFB near Washington in order to give the matter his personal attention. It was in winter, February I think, and on the day of his departure, there was a solid overcast over the first part of his flight. It was possible then, to clear "500 ft On Top" and cruise uncontrolled, above the overcast in accordance with Visual Flight Rules (VFR), which he did.

It was not clear afterward whether he intentionally cut across the southern tip of Lake Michigan or whether he drifted to the left of his intended course while above the overcast. It certainly was well known that Lake Michigan was a very inhospitable place to be in the wintertime. Somewhere near Waukegan, his engine quit and he had no recourse but to bail out. As he descended through the overcast and emerged into the gloom below, he must have been shocked by what he saw. He was several miles out over the Lake. As he drifted lower his spirits must have lifted a trifle as he spied a fish tug and realized that his landing point would be just 50 yards from it. He did indeed land close to the tug and got clear of his parachute but it cost him precious time when survival in the frigid water was limited to about five minutes. Finally the tug was alongside. After a few more precious minutes, a crewman who had found a long bare pole poked it out to Lynch. With the benefit of hindsight it is easy to criticize the action of the crewman. What did he intend to do? Surely not pull him aboard. And the lay out of the old tugs did not help. There really was no deck space from which to work. The topsides of the hull continued upward and became the cabin walls and the crewman worked their fishing tasks through portals - a very practical arrangement for protection against icy water of frequent lake storms but decidedly not the best arrangement for Air/Sea Rescue. As the crewman saw Jim grasp the pole, he began to pull it up but only succeeded in pulling it through the stiffened and frozen hands of the pilot. Before he could get control of the pole and try again, Jim sank and was not seen again until his body was recovered a week later.

He was THAT close to pulling it off. But why did he get over the Lake? Why didn't he have on a Mae West? Why didn't someone on the tug jump into the water with a life ring? All good questions to which there are no real answers; only conjecture. And it is occasions such as this, which cause older military pilots to

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shrug fatalistically and mumble something about "His time being up". Nonsense, of course. Still....

One positive result of this tragedy was that direct flights across the Lake in winter dropped to zero, at least for the rest of that winter. But such lessons seem to have limited instructional value, fading into oblivion in the face of the "Everyone but me" syndrome. And it isn't only limited to fighter pilots either.

It wasn't more than a year later when Lake Michigan found it necessary to repeat the lesson. General Mitchell Field, besides being the home base of the Wisconsin Air National Guard 126th Fighter Squadron, was also the base for a C-45 which had been assigned to the local Civil Air Patrol. The regular USAF officer, a major, who used it as a utility aircraft and also maintained his flying proficiency with it, flew it.

One winter day the major, with several CAP officers aboard, departed for Washington to attend a conference, a flight which drew scant attention from anyone at Milwaukee, or Flight Service either. However, the return trip did. For some inexplicable reason he tried to make it all the way from Washington D.C. to Milwaukee without stopping for fuel. He had done it several times before and had gotten away with it.

This time it was different. A little heavier load, a little more head wind and the recipe for disaster was complete. The first inkling of trouble came while he was still over the Lake, approaching the western shore. Our small ANG Operations had a VHF receiver, which was used to monitor the FAA Tower frequency. The major reported that he was over water but had the field in sight and was very low on fuel. His next, and last, transmission half a minute later was that both engines had quit. Without waiting for a request from the tower, Sy, the base commander, had a stack of Mae Wests put in the C-47 and immediately took off. It is questionable what could have been accomplished but Sy was determined to do what he could, no matter how slim the chances. In their haste to get over the site of the crash, the emergency crew somehow neglected to remove the right aileron lock. The locks on the C-47 were external chock-like affairs, which were held in place by a bungee cord. As soon as they were airborne Sy noticed the extreme stiffness of the ailerons and was horrified when he looked out and saw the right lock still in place. He got it back down safely and it was removed by the crew chief but the lost time resulted in the evaporation of any small chance that remained to help the stricken C-45 passengers. They searched the area until dark but no sign of the downed aircraft was ever seen. And no flotsam was ever recovered along the shore so a successful water landing had probably been made and the aircraft had sunk with its pilot and passengers.

Some of the local pilots thought that the Lake had struck again but that was only partially correct. Pilot error and bad luck had struck again. The Lake merely extracted the penalty.