

Lots of lessons in the following real life experience. With GPS technology leading us all the way to the airport it may be tempting to say “field in sight,” when you don’t really have it in sight. This could lead to some big surprises when you get to the end of the blue line on the GNS 430. Read on . . .

Never Again Online: VFR Limbo

By Bob Robertson

Another beautiful, sunny day in South Florida; I was on my way back from Bimini in the Bahamas, one of the literally dozens of similar runs that week. The day was fraught with the usual mid-summer Floridian challenges such as sun glare, burdensome humidity, and a horizon-obscuring blanket of near-IFR haze. Add the ever present speckling of level five summer thunderstorms and you really have to be on your toes. This was especially true of this particular day.

Leaving base that afternoon I checked the radar. With no flags coming up, I headed out on my typical run. As I returned home with nine passengers and a lap child, my WWII era weather detection equipment showed the usual coastline interference (it could be a thousand miles of heavy linear thunderstorm activity or just the coast line popping up on the weather radar). I noticed as I cranked the “angle” knob to “eight degrees up” that all but about ten miles went from “red/orange” to clear. The remaining bit was a level five monster heading east from over the Glades straight to KFXE, Ft. Lauderdale Executive—also my destination. It would be close.

Arriving, I had easily outrun the storm and despite a small sheet of opaque-ish rain near the approach end of 26, I was cleared visually to come in. With the sun shining on all sides and no other apparent obstacles, I called the field in sight and asked to be worked into the sequence. The controller’s response was the first clue to an upcoming mistake, and my first break in the “error chain.”

“Confirm you have the field in sight?!” he asked, incredulous.

“Affirmative,” I quickly replied, ignoring his cautionary tone.

His second transmission had a pregnant pause, “You’re ... uhhh ... cleared to land runway two-six.”- hinting again that he lacked my conviction. I ignored the second subtle cue to rethink my approach. This led him to a more blunt response, “Be advised there are showers over the field and in the vicinity.”

“Copy.” The third and final warning unheeded, I rounded final and committed to the landing.

At 250 feet I penetrated a sheen of what appeared at first to be a light drizzle. I dropped a few dozen more feet in a slight downdraft and lost total visibility from what was actually sheeting rain. Still convinced I was just passing through a transient bit of weather, I realized I could only push on ahead. I leveled at just under 200 feet (i.e. well

below the circling minimums for that field). In that moment that lasted seconds longer than it should have, I realized I was now quite lost and as well, in half-in-half-out of control limbo. Now, sightless over the field amidst towers and buildings unseen, I finally added power to initiate go-around. Having cancelled IFR ages ago, I was ill-prepared for the VFR answer to this scenario. I had no “missed approach procedure” to follow, having stowed the plate, and I was without a doubt IFR. I was quite outside of the realm of preparation and safety.

A passenger looked out the window as I nosed up and saw the airport going past underneath us. She innocently asked, “Is that the runway there?”

“Uhh ... yeah,” I answered abruptly, attempting a show of Captain’s confidence.

I hadn’t thought to look out my small side window as I was so focused and diffused between the instruments and the front window. I looked down and saw the large “26” below me. I idled the PT-6(a) immediately and dropped a scant hundred feet and change to the tarmac. I flared and landed quite smoothly ... on the last third of the runway.

Looking back, there were several “outs” granted me, all of which I ignored. Though I am very safety conscious, having survived a serious accident in my recent past, I let repetition and anxiousness to be done with my workday nudge me into a bad situation. My hard learned lessons of the day: If you are unsure at all, rethink, and do it early. Secondly, heed the information you are given by the professionals helping you ... it almost always means something important. Third, be deliberate. In the future I will be IFR or I will be VFR—not something in between. Maybe the best schooling of all is the kind that can only be learned by the [expletive] that happens.