

Download a copy of the OU Risk Management Checklist when you read the following article by David Kenny. What hazardous attitudes might have come into play? How many red flags would have been raised if the pilot had run a PAVE checklist? Some might think that risk management is only for the newbies. Anybody who's survived for a few thousand hours must know what it takes to be a safe pilot. Think Again!

Nowhere to turn: Scud runner loses control near wind farm

By David Kenny

It's tempting to think of VFR-into-IMC flight as the province of low-time pilots, a rookie mistake made by aviators too inexperienced to realize how quickly they can lose control without visual references or how fast obstructions come rushing up out of one-mile visibility. Evidence says otherwise. Over the past 10 years, one third of all VFR-into-IMC accidents involved commercial or airline transport pilots, and neither higher certificate levels nor hours in the logbook mitigated the consequences. Eighty percent of these accidents were fatal.

One spectacular example took place on Feb. 8, 2008, near Grand Meadows, Minn. A 21,000-hour airline captain was killed trying to fly a 1948 Cessna 140 from New Richmond, Wis., to a planned fuel stop in Oskaloosa, Iowa. The complete route to his final destination of Fulton, Mo., spanned 380 nautical miles, and surface observations confirmed the widespread IFR conditions forecast along the way. The pilot was presumably aware of this, as well as of the advisory for moderate icing below 8,000 feet MSL: Beginning the evening before, he had obtained three weather briefings from FAA DUAT. All predicted instrument meteorological conditions for most of his route.

The only attitude instrument in the Cessna's panel was a venturi-powered turn-and-bank indicator. The only navigation equipment mentioned in the NTSB report was a handheld GPS receiver found in the wreckage. No flight plan was filed, and the pilot never made contact with air traffic control.

The 54-year-old airline transport pilot held seaplane and commercial helicopter ratings in addition to type ratings in four transport-category aircraft. He had bought the Cessna 140 the day of the accident and planned to fly it to Fulton for a family event the same afternoon. When he took off from New Richmond, the weather barely qualified as marginal VFR, with a 1,500-foot overcast and visibility of a mile and a quarter in light snow. Conditions were significantly lower farther south; the airport closest to the accident site reported overcast skies at just 400 feet, with a mile and a half visibility in mist and a one-degree temperature/dew point spread. The airplane impacted level ground nose-low while banking to the left; the 300-foot debris field suggested that it hit at flying speed. The main wreckage was found just 100 yards from a field of 400-foot-tall wind turbines. That day, their blades would have reached the bottoms of the clouds.

Investigators found no evidence that the Cessna hit any of the windmills. Instead, data recovered from the pilot's GPS suggested that it tracked the direct line from New Richmond to Oskaloosa at altitudes from 300 to 600 feet agl until a little more than two minutes before the crash, when it abruptly turned 90 degrees to the left and flew east for about a minute. It then made a figure-eight turn at altitudes between about 900 and 1,500 agl--well above the reported ceilings--before the GPS data ended. While the report doesn't specify whether the wind farm was depicted in the instrument's database, the track data suggest that the pilot hadn't known it was there. The sudden emergence of towers reaching into the clouds must have come as an unpleasant surprise.

There is no knowing how often pilots try to sneak below the scud. A lifetime of flying may have left this pilot so much at ease in the air that coaxing a slow airplane over flat country seemed like a reasonable risk, even when ceilings dropped below the 500 feet of altitude required above uncongested terrain. But low ceilings and marginal visibility leave little margin for error or time to react to the unexpected, and those thousands of hours in the logbook won't soften the impact if the aircraft runs out of airspace.