



Airfreddy's Flying Stories

Stories That *All Pilots* Can Learn From

Story#9: My Worst Day As A Flight School Owner

MY WORST DAY AS AFLIGHT SCHOOL OWNER: This is another example of a day where everything was going fine and in an instant it turned to a nightmare. Everyone in the hanger was in a great mood as usual. I had one flight instructor who was an older gentleman in his 50's with a new student. They went out on one of the student's pre solo flights up to the north practice area. At that time I was not flying that much and pretty much doing phase checks with students. It was about lunch time and everyone in the hanger had gone out to lunch. I stayed in the office to catch up on the 100 things I had to do.

About 15 minutes after the student and instructor taxied out. I received probably the worst phone call any flight school owner would want to receive. The call was from someone in the group, I don't remember who it was, but he just said "Fred your plane just burned at the end of the runway, you probably want to go out there". My heart sank and my blood pressure probably went to a level that is not very healthy. Of course the first question going thru my mind what was "what happened, this can't be happening"!

I drove out to the runway and there were quite a few people and police there so I couldn't even go out to the plane. The plane had gone off the end of the runway and caught fire. From what I could see there was nothing left. I remembered that

we had just fueled that plane before the flight so it had 40 gallons of fuel when it took off.

The instructor and student were talking with the FAA and fire fighters. A few of the other flight school owners and representatives were out there and gave me their apologies. Something like this had happened to them all. This was my first time.

At this point In time I felt pretty helpless and I couldn't talk to anyone or go out and find out what happened. The only thing I knew was that the instructor and student were alive at this point. The only thing I could do was go back to the office and wait.

The first thing I did was call the control tower and see what they knew. The tower said they didn't know but the instructor aborted the takeoff and landed straight ahead. The controllers said they didn't even know anything was wrong for a few minutes until they saw the smoke at the end of the runway. It was a busy day. There were about 3 planes in line for takeoff after my plane was cleared to take off and the airspace was pretty busy. The instructor didn't even call them on the radios and let the tower know "HE WAS FLYING THE PLANE"!!

Finally the instructor and student walked into my office and the first thing out of my mouth was "Are both of you ok" ? They said yes and that was the only thing that mattered at that point. The plane could be replaced.

They said they got on takeoff roll and just rotated and the student noticed smoke coming from under the dash board. The instructor immediately took control of the plane and landed straight ahead, shut everything off and they got out of the plane. At this point in time they started waiving to the control tower but no one saw them until the plane was completely on fire. With 40 gallons of fuel on board it went

very fast. The fire trucks came about 5 minutes later but there was nothing left of the plane at that point.

Finally the FAA called. I knew this person pretty well as he had inspected my planes before and was the maintenance inspector for the air carrier who owned the hanger my office was in. He said I could go out and look. I went out there and met the two FAA people at the scene.

I have never seen anything like it. There was nothing left of the plane. There was a section of each wing from the fuel tanks to the wing tips. The tail section of the plane was there and the engine was still on the firewall. Other than that there was nothing. What was left of the wings were on the ground. There was no cockpit left at all. There were no wings above the cockpit.

The FAA inspector said as bad as it was, no one got hurt. It could have been much worse.

They never found out what happened. I had several meetings with the FAA and Cessna Aircraft Company. This was one of those freak things that can happen. Things like this don't happen very often but when they do, you want to be prepared to "Fly the plane" don't let the plane fly you.

So the good thing is that I had a great instructor in the plane and he landed straight ahead as he was supposed to.

So out of this I guess this just reinforces my rule with fires "GET ON THE GROUND NOW"!! If they had tried to make it back around the traffic pattern; they probably wouldn't have made it.

I think I had a little extra help that day. My mom sent me a bunch of Saint Christopher Medallions and told me to make sure there was one in every one of my planes. They were. I still carry one on every flight I go on.



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