



THE FLIGHT OF FRIGHT

OPSGROUP

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INTRODUCTION

BY OPSGROUP (AND EVERYONE WHO TOLD US THEIR STORY).

This is a book about Startle and Surprise. Only it isn't about how to deal with them, it's just a load of stories from pilots about how when they experienced them.

Why?

If we just wrote a book saying "Don't do this, do that!" no-one would probably want to read it. There are a thousand books like that out there already. So this is a book with amusing (but also significant) stories of when things didn't go right.

Because we think sharing the tales of when things didn't go so well is important. It's how we can all learn from each other.

Hopefully some of them will remind you of moments you've experienced and then, if it happens again, you'll maybe handle it a bit better.

If not, well then it's still a book of vaguely amusing stories to read on those long, dull, brain numbing cruises in the middle of the night when you find your brain slowly turing to mush.

Maybe you can use it to stave off the mushing.

TELL US YOUR TALE.

We'd enjoy that. We'll add it to this (but we will take your name out first.)

Send us an email at news@ops.group

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CHAPTER 1: THE T-CASTASTROPHE

GETTING A FRIGHT...

We were cruising along fat, dumb and happy. Fat because we were at 38,000' which was our max FL for our weight (or pretty close at that time). Dumb because it was horrid o'clock in the night and we only half awake. One eye flicking over the instruments now and then to check them, but otherwise mostly checked out. And happy - well, more just relaxed and complacent.

So there we are, not a care in the world when suddenly "TRAFFIC! TRAFFIC!"

Out of nowhere (well, out of 36,000') another aircraft is climbing rapidly towards us. The sudden startle and surprise (an ultimate combination of the two) hits both me and the Captain, who was PF.

My Brain: "Uuuurrrrrrrrrrrrr?" Total blank checked out freeze up.
The Captain's brain: "OH GOD! OH NO! WHAT? DO SOMETHING?"

It was just a TA. We all know that the TA memory item is a simple "Do not manoeuvre on a TA alone." But in that moment, with his fight or flight response going mental in the grey matter, the Captain's brain was saying 'Do Something!' So he disconnected and started climbing.

This all occurred in less than 2 seconds. Then our brains caught up with us. We are climbing (above our max FL), but there are no visual or aural things actually telling us to. Which I guess further surprised us. Both our brains, overloaded and perplexed couldn't decide whether to level off, descend or keep climbing so sort of did nothing for another few seconds until ATC called to ask what exactly we were going and help us put it right.

At least someone's brain was working that night.

AVOIDING THE TERROR

Don't let your brain turn into sludgy slug state in flight because it takes a whole lot longer to yank it back into productive action when you do. Take in-flight rest, read a manual, do a crossword, but keep the brain ticking otherwise the reaction it might have when suddenly jolted awake can be quite severe.

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CHAPTER 2: THE POSSUM

GETTING A FRIGHT...

It was my very first day of line training and naturally, nervous to do well and to look like a good FO, I have primed my brain with the SOPs. I've briefed the plan, run through my flows, reminded myself of every action I need to do, at every moment in the departure.

Of course, it doesn't go how I expect it to. Airborne, call for gear up and... it doesn't come up.

A short second later and we are bombarded with ECAMs about gear doors and hydraulic problems and all the beeps and whistles you'd expect. It was noisy, it was distracting and it was totally unexpected.

Which is why I turned into something similar to a possum in headlights.

Part of my brain was lucid enough to be very aware of the very many ECAMs coming up, but the rest turned to floppy grey jelly and did nothing. I could see ECAMs, but I couldn't read or process them.

Thankfully, the very experienced Captain just silenced the alerts, took a deep breath, checked that I was able to keep flying, and then slowly and clearly started to read through the ECAMs and identify what was going on.

His composure snapped me out of my panic reflex and I followed his lead, saying to myself 'Just. Slow. Down.' This internal telling off helped bring my reaction under control and then it became 'just like the sim' (just what we trained for so many times).

Turns out the green hydraulics had lost all their fluid. ECAM done, decision made, and the flight returned to land uneventfully.

AVOIDING THE TERROR...

If your brain is overwhelmed, recognise it and find a way to calm down. A deep breath, a firm command to 'Slow Down' and then take each thing a step at a time and work through what is in front of you methodically and calmly.

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CHAPTER 3: THE BRAIN IN THE BOX

GETTING A FRIGHT...

This is an old story. You may have heard it before. Once upon a time, on a clear and calm night, an experienced crew were flying to an airport. Their ship was sound, the systems were all working well, and they were cleared for a nice, standard, no stress ILS.

Alas, it did not head that way.

The crew thought they were high. Really high. They also thought they were already established inbound. And so they dived for the glide. But the glide was above them, the localiser was somewhere 70 degrees away from them... and what they were really doing was heading straight for the ground.

ATC questioned them, but they did not react. Finally, the aircraft questioned them, first with a loud "GLIDESLOPE" and then with a loud (but more urgent) "TERRAIN AHEAD - PULL UP!" They were at 395 feet and were 7.3 nm away from the runway.

This is not what our Tale of Terror is about though. It is about the startle and the surprise of getting a GPWS Warning and suddenly having your brain completely unsure where it is, what is going on, or what to do next.

The crew got the airplane back up to a safe altitude, they worked out where they needed to go but their brains were still shocked, surprised, confused. They were still wondering "What just happened? How did it happen? What did we do? What if we do it again?" Their brains were not in their heads anymore, they were still back at 395 feet.

So they tried again, and the befuddled muddle of their minds made other errors and once again (although not from a seriously low altitude) they had to throw an approach away. Only on the third one did they finally manage to safely land.

AVOIDING THE TERROR...

There was a lot to be learned from the earlier stages of this, but from the Startle part - get your brain back in the game. Don't dwell on the 'what', worry about the 'what next'. Use ANC to build your mental model back up and to keep it safe, right now.