

FLYING BLIND

Imagine you're driving your car down the highway and you suddenly lose your eyesight. Now imagine that same scenario—only you're flying a plane.

THE PREDICAMENT

TOn a bright November day in 2008, Jim O'Neill, a 65-year-old Cessna pilot, was flying solo from Scotland to Sheffield, England. All was going fine until about 40 minutes into the flight. Cruising at 5,000 feet over the English countryside, everything started to get blurry. At first O'Neill thought he'd been blinded by the sun. He rubbed his eyes, but the feeling didn't pass. In fact, it was getting worse. He started to panic and immediately radioed for help: "Mayday! I can't see the dials! It's all a blur!"

Controllers at Full Sutton Airfield, near North Yorkshire, attempted to guide O'Neill to the runway. He flew right past it. Growing more stressed each minute, he sounded confused and his speech was slurred. That and the sudden blindness pointed to one thing: O'Neill had suffered a stroke.

THE WING MAN

The U.K.'s Royal Air Force overheard the mayday call and offered to send help. A few minutes later, Wing Commander Paul Gerrard, the chief flying instructor from nearby Linton-on-Ouse Base, flew his Tucano T1 turboprop plane to within a few hundred feet of the Cessna. "Mr. O'Neill," he said over the radio, "I'm going to take you back to my base." Gerrard then kept in constant contact with O'Neill for the 20-mile trip, giving him course corrections along the way: "Left a bit, right, descend, level, left." (Gerrard had to fly in a zigzag pattern to keep from zooming past the much slower Cessna.) By the time the two planes reached Linton, O'Neill was having trouble keeping his composure. He kept apologizing for all the trouble he was causing and worried that he'd crash onto people on the ground. "Everything's going to be fine, Jim. Just keep listening to me. Now, you're above the airstrip, can you see it?"

"No," replied O'Neill. "I'm sorry, sir, I just can't see."

Of the two choices available—try to talk him down, or send

him to a secluded area to crash where no one else could get hurt—Gerrard and the base personnel never even mentioned the latter choice. “We’re going to get you down safely, Mr. O’Neill. You just have to follow my instructions to the tee.”

THE APPROACH

Once O’Neill aligned his plane with the runway, he was able to begin his descent. In order to land safely, however, a pilot must have visual contact with the ground. O’Neill couldn’t even see his instruments, let alone the ground, so he pulled up at the last second. “No worries,” said Gerrard. “Let’s turn around and we’ll try again.” And they did—six more times. On a couple of the attempts, the plane bounced off the runway; on others O’Neill pulled up early, apologizing each time. Gerrard was patient, though, as both planes had enough fuel to remain up there for a long time. But O’Neill was the wild card: No one knew how much longer he could keep flying. What they did know was that a second stroke near the base and neighboring village could mean disaster, so they had no choice but to keep trying.

Finally, on the seventh attempt, more than 45 minutes after Gerrard took O’Neill’s wing, the Cessna hit the runway hard and bounced back up. O’Neill was able to keep it steady; the plane bounced again on the runway and started veering to the right, then hit ground a third time—and stayed down. O’Neill engaged the brake and the Cessna rolled to a stop in the grass...without a scratch. When paramedics met him at the plane, he was confused and disoriented but otherwise uninjured.

THE REUNION

O’Neill spent several weeks at the hospital and several months recovering. By the following April, his vision started slowly improving. He still couldn’t fly a plane or even drive a car, but a friend flew him—in the very same Cessna—to Linton so he could finally meet (and see) his rescuers. Gerrard was humble about the ordeal: “I was glad to help a fellow aviator in distress, but I was just part of a team. There were 12 people working at the base that day that helped get Jim safely back on the ground.”

“I owe my life to the RAF,” said O’Neill, “as well as the lives of those dozens of people I could have crash-landed on.”