

Thunderstorm Encounters

This pilot's inadvertent encounter demonstrates you can survive if you stay calm and maintain basic control.

We always talk about the proper procedure in the event you inadvertently penetrate a thunderstorm or one of its associated parts. This pilot's story proves you can survive if you remember the basics of aircraft control and don't panic.—Ed.

By Harry Kraemer

MY PREFLIGHT BRIEFING WAS typical for a flight from Orlando, FL to Washington, D.C. in early June. As you can probably guess, thunderstorms were out there and in the forecast. The Piper Malibu I was flying (a pressurized single) was equipped with both color weather radar and a Stormscope.

We departed Orlando at 1600 hours. The flight was smooth at our cruising altitude of 13,000 feet. At this altitude, we were above most of the cumulus clouds and deviating around higher build-ups. My preflight briefing called for some serious weather near Savannah, GA. I was comfortable that with my equipment and a little help from ATC, I could avoid the worst of it.

As I went through the Savannah area, I told the passengers to ensure their seatbelts were tightly fastened. We were still on top of the cumulus, and occasionally we would enter a stratus layer. Using the radar and Stormscope, we remained out of all precipitation and rough air. The Stormscope showed some activity 50 miles ahead, and the radar showed nothing on the 60-mile range.

Without warning

Then without warning, we encountered extremely heavy rain. The airplane was tossed up and down within 1,000 feet of our assigned altitude. I glanced at the radar, which now showed solid red. The rain was

so intense I couldn't hear ATC in my headset. I was being tossed about so much my headset came completely off. Then the headset got tossed around and came unplugged from the panel.

The entire episode lasted about 10 minutes, but it seemed like an hour. At some point, the cabin depressurized. I contacted ATC, after finally locating the headset. Once I was comfortable that the airplane was okay, I turned around to see how the two passengers were doing. They were amazingly calm. One of them had hit the ceiling so hard he had cut his head.

The turbulence had been so violent it shook the wallet out of the pocket of the other passenger. The

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cockpit and cabin were a mess. Charts and anything else that wasn't secured were scattered all over. Items stowed in the cargo area (in the back of the cabin behind the passenger seats) were now in front with me. The passengers had attempted to catch the items as they flew forward; afraid something would hit me from behind.

On the ground

After assessing the situation, we decided to land at the nearest airport, which was Florence, SC. We all needed a break at this point. Once on the ground, we examined the airplane and couldn't find any damage. It was a lot cleaner, however. Two weeks earlier, I had used a power washer (with 200 pounds of force) to clean the airplane and couldn't get all the bugs off. They were com-

pletely off now.

As the two passengers and I discussed what we had just been through, they remarked how calm I appeared as events unfolded. Although I'm certain my training helped in this situation, everything happened so fast, there was no time to panic. I had a feeling something was about to happen when we entered what I thought was just a thin stratus layer and the rain started. I immediately reduced power, slowed to maneuvering speed, and lowered the gear.

I held on to the yoke with both hands and stood on the rudder pedals. The only instrument I remember looking at was the attitude indicator, as I did my best to keep wings-level. The stall warning sounded several times.

Aftermath

I stayed in Florence that night, while my passengers took an airline flight home. The next morning I awoke with a large bruise on my chest. After returning home, I went to the doctor and discovered I had two broken ribs. This was probably from getting bounced against the shoulder harness.

I've related this story to a number of pilots. The question most asked is, "Why didn't you turn around or go higher?" This is one experience you truly can't appreciate until you've been through it. Although I was PIC, I was just along for the ride during this encounter.

Hopefully, you'll never find yourself in this situation. If you do, stay calm and maintain aircraft control. Those hours spent in recurrent training will get you through.

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