



Day Trip Disaster

An important lesson in visibility

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ONLY THE HAZE STOOD between my girlfriend and me and a perfect day at the beach. The relationship has been long distance, and now, after flying and driving to see her as often as I could, she had come down for the weekend and we were headed to Ocracoke Island (W95) for a day of sun and fun.

Haze is typical for Hampton Roads this time of year. It builds up around noon, and by late afternoon visibility is a few miles at best. Scattered thunderstorms are nothing out of the ordinary. So we got an early start to beat the haze, and maybe even the heat.

We rented a 172N for the day—not the newest airplane, but easy to fly. No GPS, but in terms of navigating by pilotage, the flight was as easy as it gets.

We took off at about 9:30 a.m. into calm skies and a visibility of 7 miles at 2,200 feet. Haze was certainly there, but it was no big deal. We passed Kill Devil Hills, North Carolina, 30 minutes after we got off the ground. About 10 minutes later, visibility started getting worse. I tried climbing to 3,500 feet to find some clearer

air, but that didn't work. It wasn't until later that I realized it wasn't haze that I was staring at.

I pulled power and carb heat to start a slow descent back to better visibility and immediately noticed something wasn't right.

I looked outside and felt like I was slightly pitched down in a slow descent. But my instruments were reading a 1,000 foot-per-minute descent, and I was at 140 knots—not easy in a 172. I told my girlfriend we were turning around and we would spend the day at Kitty Hawk instead. We made an uneventful landing at First Flight Airport (FFA).

The day was fantastic—we relaxed at the beach, watched a movie, and had a

great meal—but about halfway through the day, smoke moved over the Outer Banks. Visibility dropped to a mile or so down the beach for about an hour, but what did I care? I was on the ground at the beach! You could smell the smoke, but it was no big deal, and it went away fairly quickly.

Quite a few miles in the distance, I saw towering cumulus clouds forming, way off in the north. I kept an eye on those clouds throughout the day. I didn't need to call FSS to find out there was a convective SIGMET in the area, but I knew from experience that by the time I got off the ground, the sun would be on its way down and the convective SIGMET would be over.

We started walking toward the airport at 6:30 p.m. It was a bit of a hike, so I didn't expect to be off the ground before 7:15 p.m. or so. We'd be on the ground at home by 8 p.m. at the latest. I called for a standard weather briefing and found out my expectations were correct—the

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convective SIGMET had ended. All stations were reporting 7 to 10 miles' visibility with the sky clear below 12,000 feet. The flight back would be easy.

But a cautious pilot is a living pilot.

So before departure I checked weather on my own. Again, things looked great. We hopped in the airplane and taxied down the runway.

Moments later we were climbing out, and I made a right turnout and started heading northeast.

I picked a fairly low altitude to fly at—1,200 feet. The land in the area is very low, 20 to 30 feet above sea level, and there are only two towers on the way that barely reach above 1,000 feet. One we passed just

minutes after takeoff, and the other one was much farther away.

Route 168 was my guide as always. It's easy to follow, and I can track it almost all the way down. A few minutes into the flight, I realized, once again, something wasn't right. I could only see down, following the road, and I had already descended to 800 feet trying to keep track of it. Visibility straight ahead of me was barely VFR and decreasing fast.

It wasn't haze; it was smoke.

Wildfires burned through thousands of acres of North Carolina forests to our west. I heard later it was the biggest uncontrolled wildfire burning in the country at the time. I don't doubt it.



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The wind had shifted more northward and was flowing northwest, straight over my destination. What I had seen earlier in the day and thought was haze was actually smoke, but I hadn't been in it long enough to smell it or realize what it was. As the day progressed and the wind shifted, the smoke started heading north, directly over the beach I was at, before it finally settled into a regular flow over Hampton Roads. Local news outlets ran stories on how thick the smoke was.

They had no idea.

I realized my best chance was to find Currituck County airport (ONX). It was on the way, and I had landed there before.

Without GPS I had to find it in one shot as I was not willing to fly in circles to find the airport. Circles could lead to inadvertent descent, and descending could lead to death. Straight and level flight was safest.

After a few minutes of flight at 800 feet, I realized I was in very bad shape. My girlfriend and I couldn't find the airport, and I was heading toward scud running—flying low to stay visual—a practice I laughed at as a student pilot because I believed a careful pilot would never need to do that to stay safe.

And there I was.

It was then that I made the hardest decision of the flight. I am not an instrument-rated pilot, but I do have instrument training.

I gave up on the outside world—I could barely see the ground, I couldn't see in front of me, and I couldn't see to the sides. My instruments were the only things offering me reliable information, but I hadn't brought approach plates with me. The sun was high up above, but the sun isn't a good reference for anything. I knew I needed help as soon as possible. First I had to climb, and then I had to call up ATC. I asked my girlfriend to be quiet, and we climbed to 2,500 feet. Nothing in the area was anywhere near that high, and I knew it was a safe altitude.

I punched in Norfolk Approach and asked for help. I told them my tail number and my heading, adding that I thought I was a few miles north of Currituck.

When they started offering me help, such as what headings and altitudes to fly, I knew I would be okay. I had three hours

of fuel on board, and I had switched, mentally and physically, to instrument mode. Sure, I was nervous and scared, but I was level and I had help.

Approach told me I was 5 miles south of Chesapeake airport, and it was at my 12 o'clock. They told me to descend to 1,500 feet. Finally, I thought, this is almost over. I checked the AWOS and found out the airport was reporting 1,000 overcast—a far cry from the 7 miles' visibility and sky clear below 12,000 I had heard only 30 minutes before.

Approach asked me what I wanted to do. I needed to make a decision. They told me Norfolk International was reporting VFR, and that practically made the decision for me. They told me to maintain 1,500 feet and fly heading 320, updating me with occasional position reports.

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It took only a few minutes to realize Norfolk was not VFR. The mistake is in the system, not the controllers. Their ATIS was reporting 7 miles' visibility, and visual approach to Runway 23 was in use. That would've been great if the conditions that existed at 10 feet above the ground existed at 1,000 feet. The ATIS was reporting surface conditions that were useless to any pilot doing something other than taxiing—like me.

A few minutes later, approach told me I was 3 miles south of the airport, and a de Havilland would be coming up at my 10 o'clock. I was supposed to follow him in. I asked my girlfriend to help find that airplane.

Two minutes later I told approach I couldn't spot the de Havilland. It was no problem for them. They gave me vectors to

final, asking over and over again if I could spot the runway. Two miles out? Negative. One and a half miles out? Not yet.

Finally they transferred me to tower, which told me I was a half mile out and to the left of final approach. I looked out my right window, and there it was: 9,000 feet of runway. They asked me if I wanted to turn a 360 to land or if I wanted to try to make it from there. In all of my years of living, that's the easiest question I ever answered.

"It won't be pretty, but I'll get it down from here."

I idled the engine, dumped in full flaps, and pitched down to maintain airspeed. I crossed the numbers at 400 feet, and saw an airliner ready to take off, wondering what he was thinking while he watched this stunt.

As ugly as the approach was, the landing wasn't bad. A nice, gentle touchdown and a short taxi over to the local FBO that offered plenty of help getting a taxi home.

In hindsight, there was a lot to learn from that flight. I made two glaring mistakes that could've been deadly. The second I entered instrument conditions and had to descend lower and lower to keep an eye on the ground, I should've turned around. My bosses knew I was a pilot, and they would respect my decision to call in sick instead of call in dead.

My second mistake was staying low, following the road any longer than a few seconds. I probably stayed at 800 feet for five to eight minutes. Once I got that low, I should've immediately climbed higher.

From now on, I will always carry my approach plates with me. You never know when you'll need them. And a GPS would be nice, too.

But the biggest lesson is never be afraid to call for help. I am not the first pilot ATC has helped, and I'm certainly not the last. They don't want to see a pilot die any more than pilots want to die. Forget proper FAA phraseology. Forget sounding good on the radio. Tell them you need help, and you will get it. I also know why no one forecasted or saw the smoke until it was too late. Smoke is not a meteorological condition, so it won't show up in weather data, and there were no pilot reports out there to warn me of zero visibility. It took training, levelheadedness, and a bit of luck to make sure my latest trip to First Flight was not my last trip to First Flight. *EA*