

New Guinea 1961



The Watch and the Two Cent Coin

I learned a lot of lessons during my years in New Guinea that have served me well in my later years.

The following story will, I hope, serve to illustrate how even other person's lessons learned the hard way can provide you with guidance when you need it.

The company that I was working for reported an aircraft missing, which called for "all hands on deck" for the search. The missing pilot was a young Australian who had joined our company only a few weeks earlier. I had had a beer with him at a get together to welcome him and he seemed to be a nice, friendly guy out to build up his hours for bigger things. It didn't take long to hear that the natives had heard a loud noise in "the gap." It was a short cut through the mountains you could take if the weather cooperated and you had altitude to spare in case of common downdrafts. Once you committed to fly through the gap, there was no turning around.

It appeared that the new young pilot had thought he had enough altitude to fly through the gap. He didn't! He had stalled, crashed and burned right in the gap.

I was chosen to go to the site to help retrieve the body and anything left of value from the wreckage. It was about a 6 hour walk from the nearest landing strip

The Cessna 185 wreckage was completely destroyed by an intense fire as a result of the low speed crash. Only the navigation lights were salvageable. He was carrying two drums of diesel fuel in the cabin and two 100 lb. sacks of sugar in the cargo pod. The sugar had helped fuel the fire and the drums were burnt, but still about ½ full of fuel with the rest having boiled off.

The remains of the pilot were very badly burned and unrecognizable except for one very strange thing. What was left of his body was in the fetal position with his hands up in front of what once was his face. He was burnt so bad that the steel springs in the seat had burnt into the body and had to be cut in order to get him out and into the body bag. In spite of the severe fire the watch on his right hand was untouched and there was even a bit of skin with hair under the watch that for some reason had not burned. The leather strap, while stiff, could be undone and the watch was still working.

I wrote a letter to the parents and sent them back that watch. It turned out that they had given him that watch as a going away present when he left for New Guinea only weeks before.

That watch made me think for a long time, **why** did this all happen? Why did he bet his life to deliver two drums of fuel and sugar? Why did he not take a little more time to climb higher? Why did he not take the longer lower route around? What could have prevented this and **why did that watch survive?**

Shortly after this accident, I read in an Australian Safety magazine about a tragic accident that had resulted in two fatalities. On reading it, the **why** came back to me.

An owner of a successful charter/training school had a DH 82, WW2 Tiger Moth bi-plane, trainer that was his pride and joy as he had trained on such an aircraft before becoming a fighter pilot in the Australian Air Force in WW2.

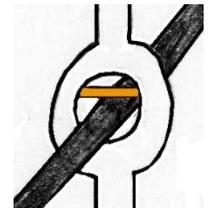


The aircraft was kept in pristine condition and had just undergone an annual inspection. The LAME (Licensed Aircraft Maintenance Engineer) doing the inspection had dropped a two cent coin in the



aircraft during the inspection and was unable to find it after. The Australian two cent coin, in use at the time, was made of copper and over an inch in diameter. His thoughts likely were “what’s 2 cents” and forgot about it. The chief instructor agreed to take it up for a test flight and the owner’s 7 year old daughter begged if she could go along.

They went up and were doing aerobatics with the owner watching when, during a loop, the aircraft stayed upside down at the top of the loop. It began to spin to the ground upside down until it impacted and burned in front of the owner’s eyes. The investigation revealed that the 2 cent coin had floated down at the top of the loop and caught in the controls when he pushed the stick forward. This prevented the stick from moving back.



Somehow it reminded me of the watch and how and why this could possibly happen.

The Safety net in this case was obvious. **NEVER EVER** leave something dropped in an aircraft. Find it no matter how long it takes to find it.

About ten years later I was changing an anti-ice bleed air valve located on top of a B-737-200 with Pratt & Whitney JT8D engines, when a nut slipped out of my cold fingers and dropped down the side of the engine. My first thought was to go and get another nut but I recalled the two cent coin and the watch.



I opened the side cowls hoping it would be laying in them. It wasn’t. I searched for ages until my crew chief came out to see what the hold-up was. When I told him he said it will

probably fall down when we tow it to the gate. If so we would find it then. Opening the cowls at the gate still showed nothing. There was no way this aircraft was going anywhere until I found that nut. With the aircraft at the gate and ready to go, I got a stronger light and a mirror and with passengers loading, finally found the nut way in the accessory drive area, sitting on an electrical cable connection to the generator. How could it have possibly travelled so far under the engine? Would it have caused a problem? Probably not. Besides, they have two generators and the pilots would never shut down the wrong generator, would they? (Read case study “Flight to Tuk” at www.system-safety.com Safety Videos)



The Safety net that I thought about later was to simply spread a rag out under the component you are installing in order to catch anything that might be dropped. Just a minute of time to think what could go wrong would have saved me a lot of stress that night. I call that time, “**a minute for Safety.**”

If not for the watch and the two cent coin, I might have been persuaded to forget about it. I’m glad I didn’t. If you are ever tempted to think, “it’s probably ok”, please remember the two cent coin and the watch. **Probably** is never good enough.

A word that comes to mind with all of these happenings is **Impossible**. The watch surviving the fire seems impossible but I saw it with my own eyes. A small coin jamming controls of an open cockpit biplane seems impossible as well but it happened. That small nut somehow travelling on the accessory gear case until it stopped on a generator lead like a ball in a pinball machine seems like an impossibility but it happened. Thus if you ever think something threatening Safety is impossible,; change that thought to improbable, add Murphy’s law and you have possible, Take a minute for Safety and do what you know you have to do.