



Fly the Aircraft First

NTSB accident data suggest that pilots, while distracted by less essential taskings, have lost control of their aircraft and crashed. In light of this pilots are reminded to maintain aircraft control at all times. This may mean a delay in responding to ATC communications and passenger requests, or not responding at all unless positive aircraft control can be maintained throughout. In other words, ***Fly the Aircraft First!***

It's as Easy as A-N-C

From the earliest days of flight training, pilots are taught an important set of priorities that should follow them through their entire flying career: Aviate, Navigate, and Communicate.

The top priority — *always* — is to aviate. That means fly the airplane by using the flight controls and flight instruments to direct the airplane's attitude, airspeed, and altitude. The instruments directly in front of the pilot provide important information on how well the pilot is doing with respect to basic aircraft control. Starting from the top left and moving clockwise, the pilot gets information on airspeed, attitude with relation to the horizon, altitude, vertical speed and rate, magnetic heading, and turns and coordination (i.e., is the fuselage aligned with the direction of flight).

Rounding out those top priorities are figuring out where you are and where you're going (Navigate), and, as appropriate, talking to ATC or someone outside the airplane (Communicate). It seems simple to follow, but it's easy to forget when you get busy or distracted in the cockpit.

A famous example of failure to follow the established aviation priorities is the crash of Eastern Airlines Flight 401. In December 1972, the crew of a Lockheed L-1011 *TriStar* became focused on the malfunction of a landing gear position indicator light for the nose gear. The plane subsequently descended into the Everglades northwest of Miami, killing 101 of the 176 people on board.

Despite all the advantages the crew in this situation had (there were four professional aviators in the cockpit), the outcome was still disastrous because the entire crew became engrossed in the mechanical issue and no one was left to keep the airplane in the air. While there were other contributing factors in this accident, the most critical was *failure to aviate*.



Disconnect from Distractions

As we can see from the Eastern Airlines example, distractions can be deadly in an emergency situation and can rob your focus from more critical items or tasks.

Do everything you can to minimize distractions from every source. If you have passengers aboard, explain sterile cockpit practices during the preflight briefing and again when you conduct the pre-landing briefing. Even if you are alone, it is a good idea to self-brief. Verbally reviewing sterile cockpit procedures can help you establish the focused, no-nonsense mindset you need for critical phases of flight. Also consider giving your passengers a job to do such as scanning for traffic or calling out altitudes.

Staying ahead of the airplane is another good way to stave off distractions. That way, if something comes up during a flight, you'll have more time to assess its impact on safety and determine an appropriate course of action.

It's All a Matter of Priority

Part of the PIC's responsibility for preflight planning and conduct of the flight is to avoid situations that require a choice between breaking regulatory barriers (e.g., Class B airspace) and breaching physical barriers (e.g., the ground or an obstacle such as a building). But when such a choice must be made, it's important to evaluate the risk, make the best choice for safety of flight, and remember the mantra of Aviate, Navigate, Communicate.

A final thought: if you think you might be in an emergency, then you probably are. Use the PIC's

authority and declare an emergency. It's always better to explain your actions from a safe place on the ground than to have the NTSB speculating about them in a report you aren't around to read.

Resources

NTSB Accident Report for Eastern Flight 401

<http://libraryonline.erau.edu/online-full-text/ntsb/aircraft-accident-reports/AAR73-14.pdf>

FAA Airplane Flying Handbook, Chapter 16, Emergency Procedures

www.faa.gov/regulations_policies/handbooks_manuals/aircraft/airplane_handbook/media/faa-h-8083-3a-7of7.pdf

FAA Risk Management Handbook, Chapter 6, Single Pilot Resource Management

www.faa.gov/regulations_policies/handbooks_manuals/aviation/risk_management_handbook/media/rmh_ch06.pdf

Aviate—Navigate—Communicate: FAA Safety.gov Online Course

www.faasafety.gov/gslac/ALC/course_content.aspx?cID=40

"Setting Priorities," March/April 2013 FAA Safety Briefing

www.faa.gov/news/safety_briefing/2013/media/MarApr2013.pdf

