

“James, I have a problem.....” by Marc Turner

-“Yeah ..what’s the problem ?”

“The engine is running rough – vibrating.”

-“Can you get back to Hawker airstrip?”

“ I’ll try to limp back. No; she’s died.”

We had had an exciting several days, up to Lake Eyre, and were heading home via the Flinders Ranges for a look over Wilpena Pound.

The other aircraft in the group (“Hubbard’s Harriers”) had flown over, But I chose to stop at Hawker airstrip for a pit stop and oil check.

Then we headed down the valley towards Wilpena Pound, at 2000'.

We were about 10 miles from Rawnsley Park – time to turn back and gain height, I thought, before venturing over tiger country – and it was on that thought the engine started to run roughly. I thought it was as if a plug lead had come off (but the engine has two spark plugs per cylinder!)

I throttled back, a natural reaction, commenced a gentle 180 degree turn back towards Hawker airstrip, and spoke to James, who was in the air about half an hour south.

We had straightened up, and I opened the throttle a little (10 seconds).

The vibration was heavier for several seconds, and then the fan stopped.

The valley from the airfield is quite open and flat, bounded by hills for several miles past the airfield, narrowing, then small hills appear in either side, and the road twists and turns and ducks down over wide creeks...we had just passed into this area.

So I was positioned heading back to the airstrip, about 100 metres north of the road, upwind.

Landing on a nice straight flat bitumen road

would have been a piece of cake, but by now I reckon we were about 800' to 1000' AGL ...apart from height lost without power, and 180 degree turn; in retrospect the terrain is probably 300' to 500' AMSL.

I did not even consider the road – I think the straight stretch was obscured by trees and hills – nor do I remember consciously considering the paddock: flat, low scrub, about 400 metres long, bounded by hills and scrub on two sides, and the road on the third side.



Even as I realised this was the spot for a short field I was turning to line up, scanning for power lines, full flap, nose down, nose up a little; scrape over the trees on the hill bounding the short side, nose down – check speed – a little fast – small S turns..... (10 seconds).

Nor was there time for a PAN call, switch off everything, brief the passenger etc.

Lined up, still a bit fast.... but there is a break between the trees close to the end of the field where we might be able to turn away rather than running off the field into the roadside draining ditch and bouncing onto the bitumen – aiming point. “FENCE!” Shouted Bev (my wife).

I do not remember looking at the clocks at that point (James had hammered at me many times: “Feel it! Don’t watch the clocks!”).

I pulled back very slightly, expecting to feel the wheels scrape the fence.

Clear of the fence but settling fast – stick forward a little, I was expecting to hear the crunch of the undercarriage coming up through the bottom (10 seconds).

I think I heard the stall warning bleat.

THUMP!

We were rolling fast towards the road, and I was concerned that we would hit that drainage ditch and bounce into the middle of the road in front of a truck. Nose wheel down and haul on the brakes, (flaps up ? – no: both hands on the brakes).....stop (10 seconds).

Switch off, unbuckle, brakes lock, ease out, take off the bonnet & check oil; wonder where the Cavalry are...walk our wheel tracks....

We had stopped about 6 metres from the road...in 169 metres...not bad for a short field with a fully loaded Jabiru.

No – I did not sweat; I was too busy and focussed; my life did not flash before my eyes (would only need 10 secs anyway). All credit to my trainers – for short field practice, and “feeling it”.



The aftermath was entertaining. A couple of local lads stopped to see what we were doing (Just waiting for the Cavalry). Several rubber neckers slowed down to gawk.

The Rawnsley Park Ranger stopped to assist, and phoned James (we were in a Null area).

James was about a half hour ahead of me, and

had phoned the cops – who duly arrived about half an hour later (Steve was just so nice).

Then the ambulance!

Then SES!

Then some official looking Government character who had a swift look and disappeared – no one knew who he was.

Then the Cavalry (James and Vic) had landed around the corner, and double – timed on foot up the road; and who promptly had the engine apart in minutes.



Steve was swiftly onto CASA for clearance to shift the aircraft, and shot into town to ask a friend of mine to collect us, and to organise a tow truck to shift the aircraft to Rawnsley.

And suddenly it was all over. My mate kindly put us up for the night, and we had a leisurely bus ride home the following day (What an anticlimax!).

Later

I am not as tough as I fondly had imagined. “It was just another short field landing” but the first thing I did was to check the oil. I had just topped up at Hawker. A week or so later I went up for a half hour or so, but I was just going through the motions.

Then I got busy at work, and was too tired by the weekend...had not had time to plan a flight...it was too hot...too busy to book a flight.... absentminded... after several weeks I flew for an hour – and was sweating for half of it.

I had long talks with anyone who would listen. It

seems the first emergency happens in a flash – the next one is when one remembers to apply the drill.

And it also seems that we all have our little “uncomfortable” spots; flying alone, or high, or low, or X winds...etc.

But the excitement of that trip keeps pulling me back.

What did I do wrong? - What did I learn ?

1. **Read the map, stupid!** – We were flying over yellow map country (to 500' AMSL) so my height was about 1500' – I had not considered this.

– The Jabiru loses at least 200' on a 90 degree turn, so with two turns I would have had about 1000' – adequate for a close field, but no spare air for any distance.

2. **Do not fly low over Tiger Country** – including: do not even approach without reasonable height.

3. **Know your landing parameters**– e.g. (for a Jabiru LSA) about 1000' is adequate, IF you are positioned downwind, close to the end of the landing point, and about “standard circuit” distance away...but can I judge this from a right handed circuit perspective; how much more height do I need to complete a circuit to land upwind? What should I allow for wind, including cross wind? How much further can I glide on an extra 1000' etc.

4. **Practice Short Field Landing, including Sideslip** – I landed too fast – luckily, or I may not have made it over the fence. I read that many forced landing prangs are caused by landing too fast.



5. **Any engine problem is a potential failure** – it might not recover power to get you out of a scrape; it might recover enough power to put you in a worse situation.

When the engine started vibrating, I closed the throttle, waited a few seconds, then opened it again, possibly in the hope that the engine might have cleared itself. I should have immediately gone into emergency mode... I was also over a nice curving bitumen road which, about half a kilometre distant turned into a flat straight road through a flat wide valley, but in the few seconds hesitation I had lost height to the point that the flat stretch of road was obscured by trees and hills.

6. **Save height** – I should have immediately raised the nose to best gliding speed – and gained a few feet; and pulled 1 stage flaps, to save height on turns.

7. **Visualisation practice** – the full thing: “Pan”, switches off, hatches unlocked, scan for obstacles, “crash position” etc – so that in a real situation you do all the proper things.

8. **Expect power lines and fences** – I should have realised that there may have been a fence across the paddock; we saw it in time – right on my aiming point.

By Marc Turner (Hawker Hero), August 2009