

THE SHOWOFF DEMON

IF YOU HAVEN'T MET HIM, YOU WILL...

He's invisible, unpredictable, unaccountable, and he's deadly. The ShowOff Demon makes a living teasing egos of pilots and convincing them to do things that they would never consider in a normal state. He's the guy who's talking when you hear that little whisper that's not coming out of the radio... Oh, go ahead, make that low pass...it will be fun and it won't hurt anything. Go ahead and try a low level roll, everybody will think it's really cool and your reputation at the next pancake breakfast will be hot stuff.

About the only real way you can tell the SOD has taken possession of an otherwise sober and safety minded pilot is to listen carefully for his catch phrase...

"Hey, watch this!"

So I wasn't too surprised when I received a letter from a friend who had just survived an encounter with the SOD. This friend is a professional pilot who flies everything from his RV-4 to really big jets and flies them as well as anybody...but this does not make him immune to the Demon. Oh, no...if anything it may make him more vulnerable. But the Demon is vulnerable too...usually if he misses his prey on the first attempt, the

now sobered and perhaps terrified pilot learns to recognize that sneaky voice and he wants nothing, nothing, nothing to do with it.

So here's the story. It's short. It's simple. But it is very real and if you read and consider it, perhaps you will recognize the traps the Demon sets and won't need to experience the rush of fear and later mortification of our anonymous author.

This scared the living daylights out of me. Read on and learn dear RVator.

The scene was a barbeque fly-in at a private airfield on a grim grey overcast day with low cloud and a very poor horizon. I'd flown in with a passenger, a highly experienced instructor, for whom I had great respect. He had been very impressed with the handling qualities of my RV-4 on our short flight out. Now that it was time to leave, every one on the ground was watching our departure. I doubt they never saw the wisp of smoke out of the back of the tail as the ShowOff Demon slid under the canopy skirt and sent my brains back out the way he'd come in.

I never noticed his presence, but within a few moments he was in complete control of me...and my airplane.

We climbed out above the small airfield, curving back toward our departure track. At this point, the Demon was in firm control and under his influence I did what no sane pilot would do...I rolled inverted in the grey misty sky and continued a gentle climb. Due to lack of horizontal reference, I concentrated on the altimeter instead of the ASI and assumed with full power that the airplane would still be accelerating. Big mistake! The next thing I know the airplane is shaking, hard, in pre-stall buffet, I have no visual horizon and I'm not nearly high enough above the ground.

As he always does when the situation turns ugly, the ShowOff Demon slipped silently out the back and left me holding the

bag....So now, how do I get out of this?

I'm a professional pilot who has had good training, and who's practiced flying his airplane. These things saved me. As the Demon and I came to my senses, I spent no time on disbelief or self-recrimination. I unloaded the wing by taking off the forward stick pressure and aileron rolled to come upright again, but I stayed in the stall buffet almost all the way round. All this was done without conscious thought.

Most of you will wonder how I avoided going into an inverted spin. So do I! No need to say that a recovery from that low an altitude would have been beyond me. God does sometimes smile on the total idiot. Only Van's inspired design created a plane with such forgiving handling qualities that an idiot like me could get away with his life.

Now putting aside the obvious idiocy of attempting this without being prepared and having a watertight escape route (i.e., lots of height) the real question is WHY?

I am a professional instructor/check pilot on big jets and flying safely is the culture I live and teach. So why did I ignore my normally hopefully high standards of aviation judgment?

Well, let me tell you, I don't care who you are, it could happen to you if you ignore the signs.

I was a fool because I didn't plan the flight properly and safely. My ego, stoked by the ShowOff Demon, persuaded me to try and impress the people on the ground and my

backseater with the fine capabilities of my much admired RV-4.

There was absolutely no reason to put my passenger at risk, nor my airplane, nor me. I have a young daughter and a wife I love and friends who would miss me and spend endless hours trying to figure how a man with all the training that has been lavished on me could do something so stupid. Put into the balance against a few seconds of ego gratification, it makes no sense at all.

And I guess that's my point. The SOD doesn't have to make sense. He bypasses sense, rationality, and reason altogether and appeals directly to our egos. We've all got egos, and for the most part that's a good thing. But when we fly, the rules of physics apply, and they make no allowances for egos or wishful thinking. When we allow that part of our personality to control our airplanes we can die in an impressively short period of time.

Our only weapons are our common sense, our training, practice and, through our own experience and others, our learned ability to see the Demon coming and fend him off. While I'm think of it here's a couple more rationalizations that commonly allow the Demon on board...see if they sound familiar:

- No car at the alternate airport, so you keep pushing to the intended destination, despite the weather.
- A voice on the radio, entering the pattern at your intended airport...the weather must be better farther along.
- There ought to be enough fuel...I've seen the gauge that low before.

I've avoided those, although I've heard the voice of temptation. But this last episode has left me quite ashamed.

I am now much wiser...and very grateful.

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