

Angel Flight Pilots are not Immune to Unfortunate Events

The light rain of half an hour ago had stopped, the visibility was good. I could see the “relief” Angel Flight just turning final. It appeared that the 24+ hour wait was about over. From some distance, I watched as the plane flares and I hear this noise and think “boy does he have noisy brakes” and “why is he braking so hard, the runway is over 5000 feet long”. Then I see sparks come up from the runway and it’s clear this wasn’t a planned short landing.

The Angel Flight pilot, we’ll call him Joe, is shaken but physically unscathed. The plane has the usual gear up landing damage and comes to rest just off the side of the runway, so the airport does not need to be closed. With badly damaged pride, all Joe can repeat numerous times is “I don’t believe I did that!”.

As I witness this incident the title of a movie comes to mind, “Lemony Snicket’s A Series of Unfortunate Events”. As Angel Flight (AF) pilots, we have both common and unique opportunities to get involved in a series of unfortunate events. There have been numerous articles written about airplane accidents being the result of a chain of events and that we need to recognize and then break the chain. I can envision the potential chain of unfortunate events for this incident. In the spirit of learning from this incident, I’d like to highlight some of these opportunities in the context of this event.

The series of unfortunate events begins on a sunny summery Sunday morning at a fairly remote mountain airport. I am the third leg pilot for a trip returning a family home from a week long medical journey. It was an inauspicious beginning to that leg when we discovered that the FBO at our “hand-off” airport didn’t open for an hour and one-half after our planned meeting and both pilots wanted fuel. Finally two hours later I have our clients loaded and ready to go. Just into the takeoff roll, there is a total electrical failure. The takeoff is aborted and eventually it becomes clear that my plane is going nowhere.

I get on the phone to Angel Flight to explain the situation. They try, but Sunday afternoon is not the time to find another willing and able pilot. So we have a client that’s traveled two legs but still 300 miles from home. We now have one link in the chain, a **commitment to a client that hasn’t been met.**

After an overnight stay and an uneventful Monday morning, the clients get the good news from AF that a pilot has been located who will pick them up a little after three that afternoon.

Now I’d like to engage in a great deal of speculation mixed with some facts. Although this is poor form in determining probable cause, I merely want to identify possible circumstances that can serve as a learning experience for AF pilots.

To get a pilot commitment to a mission in less than 24 hours, there was probably more than a routine e-mail sent out. There may have been a special “urgent” e-mail outlining the need; possibly there were some phone calls made to “likely” volunteers.

Whatever the case, our subject pilot, “Joe”, volunteers to make the trip on very short notice.

What’s the likely thinking of an AF pilot volunteering for an almost immediate trip? Probably he/she feels a strong desire to help and thinks in terms of “is there any ‘business’ I can’t reschedule or work around in order to take this trip” rather than what flying issues should be concerns with taking this mission. During his contact with AF, Joe undoubtedly made some type of estimate (commitment) as to when he’d be able to pick up the clients, probably after only a quick look at the clock and the number of air miles involved. And being a good AF pilot he likes to keep his estimates, so we now have some self-generated **time pressures** (another link).

Around 1:00 PM Joe calls the clients to confirm the plans and also talks with me. He asks about the airport and what the weather looks like (cumulus clouds but none look ominous). He then remarks that he wanted to fly to the mountains some day, but hadn’t planned on it being today.

Here’s more links in that chain. It was a **short notice** mission to an **unfamiliar destination and geography**. Pilots who don’t regularly make flights on short notice miss a time period in which they can unhurriedly think about the flight. Clearly because of his question, **weather** was also on Joe’s mind. Even with short notice, he has time and probably gets a full weather briefing. Likely it’s the typical summery forecast of hazy with a chance of showers/thundershowers. If this cancelled flights, we wouldn’t fly for eight months out of the year in the South. Personally, I like to check the weather the day before a flight to see how that forecast pans out. But a short notice flight makes detailed analysis more difficult.

So Joe takes care of his personal schedule rearrangements, files a flight plan, gets to the plane and takes off. The calm sunny weather along with doing an Angel Flight makes him feel good. He breathes a premature sigh of relief. As he gets closer to the mountains, the cumulus are bigger and more numerous and of course it’s bumpy. He’s got concerns for the weather, but the AWOS for the destination looks better than what he’s in now. Here’s the actual report for the time of Joe’s arrival at the destination airport.

2:58 PM	82.4 °F / 28.0 °C	62.6 °F / 17.0 °C	51%	30.12 in / 1019.9 hPa	10.0 miles / 16.1 kilometers	South	5.8 mph / 9.3 km/h	-	N/A	Scattered Clouds
METAR KLNP 051858Z AUTO 17005KT 10SM SCT034 SCT055 SCT065 28/17 A3012 RMK AO1										
3:18 PM	78.8 °F / 26.0 °C	62.6 °F / 17.0 °C	57%	30.12 in / 1019.9 hPa	10.0 miles / 16.1 kilometers	South	6.9 mph / 11.1 km/h	-	N/A	Scattered Clouds
METAR KLNP 051918Z AUTO 17006KT 10SM SCT050 SCT065 26/17 A3012 RMK AO1										

I’m sure Joe saw some unpleasant weather that got his attention. On the ground 30 minutes before his arrival, we heard distant thunder and saw TCUs building to the south and east of this airport (the direction Joe must come from). Then we started to get some light rain, but it never got any worse than that.

As he gets closer, ATC likely asks what approach he wants. Looking at the clouds and listening to the AWOS Joe wants to **get on the ground as quickly as possible**, so he says he'll take the visual approach. ATC gives him a descent and asks him to call the airport in sight. In the mountains you don't get a particularly low AGL altitude. The lower you go the more turbulence there is which just adds to the **stress**, which leads to question, "how accurate is the AWOS?". But he's thinking this isn't anything he hasn't flown in before, there's nothing to be overly concerned about. Finally after a long wait, at 3000' AGL he sees the airport but ATC is inevitably talking to someone else and you just have to wait your turn (delays can raise the **stress** level). Finally he gets to report airport in sight. ATC then goes through their spiel of clearing Joe for the visual approach, change to UNICOM approved, report canceling IFR on this frequency or if unable then with flight service when on the ground.

By the end of the transmission, Joe is already well into his descent and can't wait to get rid of ATC and concentrate on landing. He cancels IFR and switches to UNICOM. He's set up for a short left base and fortunately it looks like the AWOS was accurate for weather right at the airport, but he doesn't want to stray far from there. Get some flaps out and back on the throttle, the descent and airspeed are faster than normal, but he wants to get down and it's a 5000' runway so there's no worry.

He starts the flare and can tell this is going to be one of the good ones. With the extra speed, the flare lasts a little longer than usual, then there is the awful screech of metal on pavement as Joe transitions from those who will, to those who have.

In retrospect and as a dispassionate observer, it's easy to speculate on how a good Angel Flight pilot ended up with the unfortunate event.

- Commitment to client who has seemingly few options
- Acceptance of short time frame mission
- Self-imposed adherence to schedule
- Unfamiliar airport and geography
- Weather

Many of these are not unusual conditions for an Angel Flight mission but all help to raise the stress level. They are "red flags". If we AF pilots see any of these "red flags", we need to take time to think and break any chains that exists. "Have I done everything possible to assure a great outcome, double checked and not taken anything for granted?" Be sure you break the chain! I'm not necessarily advocating refusing any mission that has these elements. That would severely limit the great flexibility and freedom we feel in being pilots. But as AF pilots we must be absolutely aware, break the chain and not fall victim to "A Series of Unfortunate Events".

Carl Klaiber
Angel Flight Pilot