Stan/Eval Newsletter
CIVIL AIR PATROL
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The Sad Story of N887CC

On 1 February 2024, a recently refurbished Grumman Cougar crashed after takeoff killing the pilot and destroying the aircraft. The NTSB (ERA24FA103) probable cause was brief:

"The pilot's inadequate preflight inspection, which resulted in a loss of engine power due to water-contaminated fuel, and his subsequent loss of control. Contributing to the accident was an inadequate annual maintenance inspection, during which maintenance personnel failed to detect and replace the missing right fuel cap gasket."

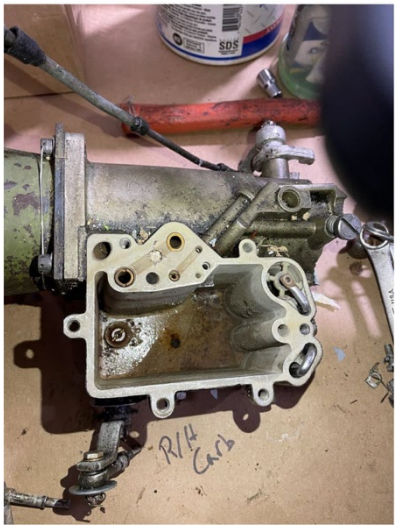


As in most accidents, there was an accident chain that led to the demise of the pilot and aircraft. The Grumman Cougar is a very capable light twin with two 160 HP engines and is often used for training. It is easy to fly and has adequate performance. This particular Cougar, was the subject of a restoration project that was documented in a series of YouTube videos. The restoration had been completed, and the fatal flight was a flight to deliver the aircraft to its new owner.

The first item on the accident chain occurred on the last annual that was done in December 2023. The right tank fuel cap gasket was missing but went unnoticed during the annual. The plane was flown from Michigan to Chester County Airport (KMQS) without any reported incident. The second item was that the aircraft was parked outside for a week during heavy periods of rain. The third item was the preflight. When the pilot arrived at the airport, he made it clear to line personnel that he was in a rush and complained about how long it was taking to get fuel. He had 80 gallons put in the tanks which can hold a total of 116 gallons. He did a perfunctory preflight checking the oil and walking around but certainly not a thorough or complete preflight. Witnesses noticed he did not obtain fuel samples after refueling. There is some confusion on whether he performed a runup before takeoff, but the engines appeared to run smoothly on takeoff. Just after takeoff an engine made a loud pop and began sputtering. The aircraft veered sharply to the right. The final item in the accident chain was the pilot's failure to control the aircraft with an engine failure resulting in a VMC rollover.







None of this had to happen. The accident chain could have been broken at any time even up to the VMC rollover. None of these are new lessons. Of course, being the consummate armchair quarterback, I would not have made any of these mistakes. Never. Well maybe. Anybody ever missed anything on an annual? Ever been in a rush and shortcut the preflight? Are you ready for an emergency at the worst possible time? As is often said, aviation can be very unforgiving.

Be careful out there!

Asleep at the Yoke (LtCol J. Proctor, AZWG)

There I was, okay it is time to start this story again with that classic line. There I was, giving a check ride for my aviation instructor. The one that trained me and checked me out in the very plane he was now flying. So, as I often do, let us get a little context for this situation. I instruct in both Mooney's and CAP C-182's. I have many more hours in a Mooney, so the 182 is fun challenging. It was time for the individual that was the unit Check Pilot, and standard bearer to get his annual check ride. Since I am the only other check pilot, the student (me) is now testing the instructor, whom I will call Jim.

Jim has been a flight instructor for years and has over a decade of flying CAP C-182's. He is one of the more experienced 182 pilots in the state. A claim, I doubt, I will ever be able to make. However, he, after 12 solid years of denying himself and his wife extended travel, has recently taken several longer duration vacations. Good for him. He also has had some minor medical issues, thus resulting in limited flying in the last 6-8 months.

We first scheduled a dust-off flight, one that we just do some upper air and take offs and landings. He did okay, but a little rusty. Then, some more down time due to funding issues and maintenance annual; we did not fly for almost a month. I am now in the left seat as he is flying a check ride for a CAP instructor, thus he is in the right seat. A clear and finally cool day (for Arizona) arrives, perfect for flying.

I do the startup and runup, as easier to do in the left seat, then he has the controls for takeoff and climb out. He expresses some rusty feelings, but to me nothing unusual. We proceed to steep turns, and he does ok, bouncing close to the ACS limits but not past them. Slow flight is fine, hard to mess up. Stalls, well a subject for another article I will write in the future, this is my stay tuned encouragement like before a commercial on TV.

Finally, time for takeoffs and landings. There were two military King Airs in the pattern, making it interesting considering the speed differences. Thus, we ended up extending, vs. a base turn at the 45-degree point. Not to worry, as Jim has ten times the hours in this plane vs me. So, some minor corrections on final, and then he aims for what we call the Captain Bars. We are both retired military. He is coming in fine. Then, I learn afterwards, he wants to "squeak it in." However, he is leveling off about 10 feet above the runway. It gets rather fast at this point, rather than easing the back pressure, he adds more again, wanting to squeak in, and we are now still 8' up. I am about to say something, and the plane goes down more but also nose up more. I should have said or done something, but he did add more power, and due to a little crosswind, he starts to get closer to the left edge of the runway. Finally, we plop down…by now he is not that high and a little cockeyed. He is very embarrassed; I am frankly quite surprised.

We went on to do two more, less than great landings. I said I would do one to give Jim a break. Embarrassed to say I did squeak it in too. And we finished with an ok landing finally. In retrospect, I will only talk about me vs. Jim now. I was asleep at the yoke. I assumed Jim would land as well or close to it as he has always done in the year and a half we have flown together. Hindsight being closer to 20X20, it really was a long time since he flew that much. He was under some medical potential issues and had done lots of yard and other work thus physically was not at his peak. Nor was I as I assumed he was. I write this not to say anything negative about my great friend. We all

have been there, to have our occasional off day. However, my job as PIC was to act as PIC. I did not keep my alertness up. I relaxed in the saddle. I also learned a lesson that day. Each landing is a challenge; most will go okay but always be ready for when it is not. What should I have done sooner on that first landing? Yelled, Go Around. Landings are taking an airplane from the fluid environment of air and transitioning it to the much harder environment of turf. There is always a chance (in some cases a greater chance) that transition will not go as planned. So always, keep your wits up, regardless of the seat you are in.

Ya'll be safe out there and be alert.

It's IFR out there. Can I take off?

It's IFR out there. Can I take off? Well, legally speaking if you are flying Part 91 you can take off even if it's zero/zero. The only time that I know of (as a Part 91 pilot that you legally can't take off) is when there are known icing conditions. Assuming your airplane is not certified for flight in icing conditions. Otherwise, you are legal unless there is some other prohibition.

In CAP, you cannot take off with less than 500' ceilings and 1 mile of visibility (and your FRO must be a SFRO). You can be released at lower minimums, but that takes more than an SFRO and is a rare event so fuhgeddaboudit.

However, the question we ask ourselves is not whether it's legal but whether it's a good idea to take off. Every instrument pilot asks this question before an IFR flight, and I will offer a bit of practical, but by no means binding, advice. You may have some better criteria than what is offered here.

This assumes that there are no conditions which might prevent you from taking off even VFR such as a strong cross wind or severe turbulence and so forth.

The first consideration is visibility. Part 135/121 prohibits single-engine planes taking off with less than 1 mile of visibility. I think that is a good rule to follow for Part 91. You might even want to add to that depending on your skill level. One mile visibility can be challenging.

The next consideration is the ceiling. Part 135/121 has no ceiling requirement per se, but I think it is a bad idea for a Part 91 pilot to take off with 1 mile visibility and a zero ceiling. CAP does put limits on the ceiling, both for the departure and arrival airports. Again, the minimum ceiling you would want depends on a lot of factors, but I have found barring other factors, that a 500' ceiling provides time to transition from VFR to IFR and is high enough (minimally) that if your engine started to run rough you could turn back to the airport and remain visual (lots of caveats here like obstacles and terrain).

A practical rule (that many Part 91 pilots use on an IFR takeoff) is to consider having to come back to the departure airport. If you have some sort of problem where an immediate return is needed, you will now need to make an instrument approach to your departure airport. So, you must look at what the conditions for a successful approach might be. If your departure airport has an instrument approach which requires 2-mile visibility and 500' ceiling, then that becomes your takeoff minimums (actually, I'd bump that up a bit to give me more confidence that my approach

would be successful). So do not take off unless you have weather that would allow you to return to the departure airport.

I have seen many pilots load the approach to their departure airport and brief it before takeoff, so they are ready to come back. Not a bad idea.

A modification to that might be if you have a very nearby airport where it would be easier and faster to make an approach if I have a need to get on the ground quickly. Then I might use the approach minimums plus a margin for that airport for my departure minimums.

As a final consideration, whatever personal minimums we establish for our takeoff minimums, we must always consider the possibility of an immediate return. If we must return immediately, we are going to be under a bit of stress, and it is helpful to have some healthy margins. Having to return immediately and make an unexpected approach is challenging enough without having to fly to minimums.

As an aside, I was discussing this article with a fellow IFR pilot, and he has a really clever way of making the go/no go IFR departure decision. He carries a piece of blue cardboard. Before takeoff, he checks the sky condition and if it does not match the blue card. He does not take off.

Be careful out there!

Listening to the ATIS (LtCol J. Valone, NVWG)
All aviators are familiar with the Automatic Terminal Information System (ATIS), but are you familiar with the technique of listening to ATIS just for the weather and the alphabetic identifier? It is a bad technique, and it could easily lead to an aircraft mishap.
As a CFI, I was able to instruct student pilots in all aspects of aviation, including the seemingly minor detail of listening to ATIS.

Occasionally, a student would demonstrate their technique for ATIS by listening to the recorded information solely for the identifier. In one instance, a student heard the following: "North Las Vegas Information Bravo..." and abruptly switched the frequency.
I asked him what the weather, winds, landing runway, and NOTAMS were. He stated that they were “probably the same as when we took off”. I pointed out that the identifier on ATIS at takeoff was Alpha, so something had been updated. We listened to the entire ATIS broadcast and found nothing significant had changed.

You might be questioning the significance of this article. Everything worked out, so why highlight something that is not a big deal? Here is the problem; someone taught this student that the only thing he needed was the alphabetic identifier. Maybe he thought he would save time by not listening to the entire ATIS recording. Why would I stress the importance of ATIS when other CFIs glossed over it? The reason is simple: ATIS contains information that every aviator needs to be aware of. Here is a good example.

Several years ago, I flew for a small regional airline. I was returning to my familiar home airport after an unusually long day of flying. Complacency set into the flight. I tuned in to the ATIS

frequency and heard that the weather was great, so I flew a night instrument approach to a full-stop landing. After taxiing clear of the runway, I noticed a construction barrier ahead of me on the taxiway. I asked tower about it, and they informed me that I was on a closed taxiway and I should have exited the runway at a different point. The worst thing that happened to me was that I kept the passengers on the airplane for a long time while ramp personnel cleared the construction equipment. I was embarrassed. I was also given the proper amount of ridicule by my fellow pilots.

What if ATIS had stated that the runway had a large hole in it? Since it was dark, I would not have seen a problem with the runway until it was too late. The aircraft could have been destroyed, and passengers could have been seriously injured.

What if ATIS had stated that the first 2,000 feet of the runway were closed? Again, I may not have known if anything was wrong until it was too late. I learned a valuable lesson that night:

Always listen to all of ATIS!

Articles for the National Stan Eval Newsletter
These articles have been written to present ideas, techniques, and concepts of interest to CAP air crews rather than provide any direction.

The articles in this newsletter should in no way be considered CAP policy. We are always looking for brief articles of interest to CAP aircrews to include in this newsletter. CAP has many very experienced pilots and aircrew who have useful techniques, experiences, and tips to share. Please send your contribution to stephen.hertz@vawg.cap.gov.

You can view past issues here.