

# A Break in the Chain

by Stu Simpson

Most stories start out leading the reader step by step to the climax or high point of the tale. Not this one. So here's your spoiler alert. The next sentence you read takes all the mystery out of my story.

I nearly had an aircraft accident. Like most of these events, there was a chain of happenings that lead up to it. But in this case, I broke the chain and the accident didn't occur.

I was flying my Cavalier on a spring evening after a long and tenacious winter. Each minute of flight seemed precious that evening because such moments had been scarce since autumn. I was at a private airstrip south of Calgary, the third airport I hit that night in my bid to put some sky beneath me and the ground. I wanted to work on my crosswind landings.

I approached the field from the south, made my calls and searched the airport circuit for a Mooney whose pilot was also practicing her crosswind technique there. The wind blew from the south at about 8 - 12 knots and the Mooney was using runway 25. I entered the circuit in a left downwind and in due time turned final approach.

So here's the first link in the chain I eventually broke; the wind was stronger even a few hundred feet aloft, than on the surface. It pushed me further off the centre line than I anticipated. To be fair, though, this is why I was practicing crosswind landings.

The second link was the fact that I could see power lines near the button of runway 25. Third, I couldn't see if the power lines were buried or not because of link number four. That was the sun, which was right in my eyes and seriously diminishing my view as it scattered through the Cav's dusty windscreen.

Link number five in the lengthening chain, was the very narrow runway. This is not a criticism, it's just a fact. If you don't like the runway, go somewhere else. But I wasn't running. I was enjoying the challenge. That'd be link number six.

I must tell you now, and I admit I'm bragging a little, I knew this accident chain was building. Really, it was like starring in an aviation magazine crash article.

Perhaps strangely, I was pleased I could see it all happening, and to me that meant I could avoid the final paragraphs where the writer speculates why the pilot continued on when so many things piled up against him. Because I recognized the chain, I'd be around to be writing the article and explaining why I didn't crash.

Your opinion may differ, but I continued my approach because I felt there weren't enough reasons not to. I knew exactly what was going on. For instance, I stayed high in case I needed to avoid power lines. I flew the Cav better to counter the crosswind and to try to regain the centre line (the whole point of this exercise). I pulled my hat brim a bit lower to help shield the sun from my eyes. And I had an escape plan - overshoot and go-around - if things got too hairy.

I pressed on because this was an exercise in reality. I don't only fly in perfect weather. So very often the weather has changed to something unexpected and I've still had to land my airplane. And I know for certain it'll happen again. I have to be ready and able when it does. I need to stretch my abilities, to find my limits and the Cavalier's, too. I need to know when to say "no". I was close, but I wasn't at "no" just yet.

That's why I continued the approach.

As I got closer to the button, I saw the final link in the chain; lucky number seven. It was the windsock pole, situated off to the right side of the runway and closer than most socks are to the runway edge. My right wingtip was headed straight for it.

I was surprised, but only mildly, since I was very cognizant of all that was happening. And seeing it allowed me to break the accident chain.

I had a quick choice to make; either continue, or go around. But because of my awareness, I was in control. I had extra height due to my uncertainty about the power lines (which I now saw were buried); I knew the wind was strong and needed extra attention. I knew the runway was plenty long enough that I could stay high, avoid the sock, and land long.

I chose to flatten my approach, keep my height and land about a third of the way down the asphalt, though the landing was awful. My touch down was such that any observer could be forgiven for thinking me afflicted with a palsy. After a few humbling bounces I powered up and flew into the overshoot. Then I went around for another circuit and landing.

This one was much better since I'd gained the practice and knowledge from the first one. I anticipated the wind properly; I tracked the centre line better; I planned for the sun; and headed straight for the button because I knew there were no power lines and that I must avoid straying to the right and into the windsock. And this landing was actually pretty good.

I'm not preaching to you because I loath being preached to. I merely wanted to tell you what worked for me. I've read many accident reports and they've had the desired effect on my decision-making process. I've wondered what other pilots were thinking, why they ignored the signs and fooled themselves straight into a

smoking hole. I vowed I won't be one of those guys. That's why I recognized the accident chain and that's why I broke it.