



CHAPTER ELEVEN [Complete chapter excerpt]

The Life-Enhancing Power of Intuition



Traditional psychology, even today, does not consider intuition a reliable data source. Orthodox researchers attempting to rationally consider psychic abilities ask this question: “If intuition is a real and measurable ability, where in the brain is it located?” Could it be that Science—with its First Reality (reductionist) blind spot—needs to *feel* more and look less?

In addition to our expanded *look* at intuition, my Vietnam stories may help give noncombatants a sense of living and performing under the continual pressure of a physical, militaristic, life-or-death existence. The following account reflects both these themes.

Mid-1960s, Vietnam

The two most-secure airports in South Vietnam were Da Nang Air Base, just south of the DMZ, and Tan Son Nhut Airport in Saigon. Our squadron (VR-21) occasionally flew into less-protected bases such as Phu Bai, Chu Lai, and on this one occasion—Cam Ranh Bay (CRB). I was the left-seat qualified Second Pilot on the very first four-engine transport aircraft assigned a cargo delivery to Cam Ranh Bay. We planned to land on CRB’s metal-mat runway, which had been recently constructed by a Naval Seal Team unit.

We found ourselves in the middle of a torrential monsoon rainstorm as we began a Visual Omni Range (VOR) approach.

Pre-Approach Background

Pilots know this Omni Range navigational aid is adequate for high-altitude point-to-point navigation, but not what we prefer for an instrument approach in heavy rain or reduced visibility. An Instrument Landing System (ILS) with

continuous cross-hair glide slope and radial direction readouts would have been perfect. ILS was available only in major, well-established airports in 1965–68. A Ground Controlled Approach (GCA) uses ground radar personnel to verbally report the same information as the ILS provides by avionics instrumentation, and would have been a good second choice.

With only radial direction and stopwatch timing, we crossed over the top of the VOR to begin a looping decent. With *accurately* provided surface winds, and *correct* seat-of-the-pants adjustment for crosswind drift, we would hopefully line up with the approach end of the runway when emerging from the cloudburst. This less-than-optimum approach procedure provided a minimum-allowable descent altitude of 500 feet above ground level (AGL).

The CRB field operations officer told us of the ground unit's desperate need for the ammunition, medical, and other logistical supplies we had on board. I convinced the Aircraft Commander (A/C) for this trip of my confidence in making a successful approach. The A/C, a full Navy Commander and jovial man with whom I'd flown many West-Pacs, wisely trusted my current abilities more than his own. With collateral duties keeping him from full-time flying assignments, the Commander barely maintained enough flight hours and recurrent training to stay qualified. It was standard procedure to match up lower-hour A/Cs with high-hour second pilots. It was decided I would make the instrument approach and landing, while the A/C flew right seat (copilot).

CRB operations personnel, safely sequestered in their makeshift control tower, withheld one vital piece of information. Foreknowledge of this little *tidbit* would have precluded any landing attempts. Later, the operations staff would tell us (lie) they thought us a C-130 Hercules—a short takeoff and landing (STOL) turbo-prop aircraft. Thus they considered irrelevant the critical piece of landing-condition information. Although VR-21 did have three C-130s, the majority of our fleet consisted of approximately twenty, four-engine C-118b/DC-6b “Liftmaster” aircraft. At this particular moment, we were more in need of a “descent-master.”

The metal-mat landing surface installed at Cam Ranh Bay comprised heavy-gauge steel, honeycombed with 2- to 3-

inch diameter holes for water abatement. Even with the drainage assistance, traction would be poor-to-worse under these conditions. I was fully prepared to use asymmetrical reverse thrust on the rollout, as anti-skid brakes would be ineffective until we approached taxi speed. Reverse thrust utilizes the engine propellers—which pull an aircraft forward during normal flight—to help push the plane backward. With appropriate speed dissipated, safe brake application could then be applied.

The asymmetrical application would be the tricky, finesse part. In super-wet hydroplaning conditions, a landing and rollout proves similar to gliding on ice. Unlike the rudder—which loses effectiveness as the plane slows—asymmetrical reverse thrust both slows *and* correctly aligns the aircraft similar to the action used to rein in a horse. Landing as close as possible to the apron (first part of the landing surface), provides for the shortest stopping distance. Freestanding water is slippery all by itself. Add unpredictable gusts and a torrential rainstorm to the metal-mat factor, and you have one delicate touchdown and rollout. We wanted to have every inch of that 7000-foot landing surface available. Running off the runway into the thick, clay-based mud would detain us indefinitely. Quite selfish in retrospect, I had scheduled a hot date for our upcoming layover in Atsugi, Japan. Becoming a temporary ground-pounder for an extended stay at the newly secured and very vulnerable *Hotel Cam Ranh Bay* was definitely *not* in the game plan.

On Final. Since this was advertised as a “minimums” approach, we anticipated the heavy moisture right down to the lowest permitted altitude. At that point we either had the field in sight or we waved off the approach attempt. As we carefully approached five-hundred-feet AGL, the precipitation was relentless. During instrument approaches, the concentration required for continual rapid scanning of pertinent flight instruments really got my juices flowing. Nothing boring about an instrument approach during a blinding rainstorm!

The engineer monitored the engine instruments, and an operative radar altimeter acted as backup to the basic atmospheric altimeter. As a warning cushion, I set the radio altimeter at 550 AGL—50 feet above published minimums.

When approaching an altitude threshold, standard procedure requires a copilot callout every fifty feet of descent.

As we hit minimums, I already had partial power back on to prevent further loss of life-sustaining elevation. After carefully maintaining that lowest-safe altitude a few seconds, the right-seat copilot—entrusted with getting a visual on the runway—reported, “NO FIELD...NO FIELD!” I immediately shoved the throttles to advanced stop position while commanding; “WAVE OFF...WAVE OFF!” Just as full power came back on, the rain mist cleared and the runway’s approach end became barely discernible. The copilot’s visual came too late—we were past the decision point. Any attempt to land now would likely result in overshooting the landing surface.

Try, Try Again. Since we belatedly saw the runway in the pulsating squall, we decided to try the approach again. With Monsoon weather conditions quite variable, rainfall density can change dramatically from moment to moment. Making a successful instrument landing—or not—is often just a matter of fortuitous timing. I had a momentary thought of wishing Lou, our squadron’s best flight mechanic, in the engineer’s seat. First-Class Petty Officer Lou and I had a running debate about which of us was the *real* rabbit’s foot; regarding our mutual ability to extricate ourselves from hazardous circumstances. After dismissing that non-productive thought, I immediately psyched myself up for another go. Instrument approaches are both mentally and physically draining, and this would be our final attempt. We would not risk a third effort in a fatigued state.

The second approach proceeded just like the first, but just as we reached the minimum descent threshold, the field came into view. After the copilot reported “runway in sight,” I coaxed our bird down to a perfect landing on the very tip of the hardpan. Because of the mist and pummeling rainfall, we could see only a short distance down the runway. I took no chances, as something told me to get this baby stopped—ASAP. I quickly reversed the engines [actually the pitch or angle of the propellers reverse], keeping my toes away from the top of the rudder controls where the wheel brakes are actuated. I cautiously began a combined directional rudder adjustment and asymmetrical reverse thrust. When comfortable with my rollout alignment, I called for maximum

redline throttle. Preventing over-boost of the engines was the flight-mechanic's job. In perilous landing and rollout conditions, the pilot can ill afford to take his or her eyes off the runway—even for a fraction of a second—to look at cockpit instruments. Fortunately, there was no significant crosswind during our touchdown and rollout. Everything proceeded perfectly...until horror reared its ugly head.

Looming ahead—*like a ghost emerging from a gray fog*—was the little secret that ground operations had kept from us. Somehow I wasn't totally surprised to see the last forty percent of the runway totally under several feet of water. When the submerged section first came into view, we judged our reduced speed still too fast to stop in time. Just starting to ease on the anti-skid brakes, I now risked skidding and possibly spinning the aircraft as I gave those landing brakes more pressure. I could feel the perfectly performing pulse of the anti-skid function through the brake pedals. Prior to plowing into the human and nature-made duck pond, I instinctively put the four engines at idle. This action automatically brought the propellers out of reverse. Firmly grasping the hydraulically assisted nose-wheel steering, we slammed into the floating debris. Muddy water and foliage blasted up and over our cockpit windshield, temporarily blinding us. The windshield wipers, on high for the entire approach, took a beating but continued to function. After the jungle flotsam receded, we were astounded to discover our aircraft still on the narrow, metal-mat landing surface they called a runway.

Finally at rest, with legs and arms trembling from both the adrenaline rush and isometric stiffness, we congratulated ourselves on dodging the bullet. The A/C joyously slapped me on the shoulder. He'd just become my greatest fan. I don't know whether one would consider our survival *miraculous*, but I can say with certainty that it qualified as an "E-ticket" thrill ride. Before we were done, we had some choice words for the ground and approach control folks. As luck (?) would have it, because we had brought in so much cargo and had so little remaining fuel on board, our low takeoff weight allowed us to get airborne even with the modified runway length. My recollection: after the A/C's official report on this incident, none of our DC-6 aircraft ever attempted another landing on the CRB metal-mat surface.

After extended maintenance time for water extraction, cleaning, lubing, and final safety inspections of landing gear, brake systems, and fuselage, we left this forsaken place for Da Nang Air Base. Upon refueling, we continued our flight plan to Atsugi.

After reflecting on the ground units' desperation for our life-sustaining supplies, I reconciled, without excusing, their actions. I gave thanks I was not living in the trenches where the *real* fighting took place.

Napalm Anyone?

Aware only that I had been a Naval Aviator in Vietnam, someone once asked me whether I had ever dropped napalm. That got me thinking: of all the flying jobs in a combat zone, mine was perhaps the least psychologically challenging. Although the work I did was indirectly just as deadly as dropping bombs, after talking to POW pilots and infantry veterans with more direct and horrific war involvement, my post-war adjustments seem almost insignificant.

My performance grades during basic flight training gave me a full choice between helicopter, multi-engine, or the jet pipeline. Many of my classmates that went Jet or Helo ended up dead, or worse—a prisoner of war. I'm both sensitive to and appreciative of my Vietnam brethren. Today I'm even thankful the CRB folks lied to us so we would deliver those much-needed supplies.

Summation

Remembering those questions my nine-year-old self asked Lockheed's *finest*, did I intuitively know something was wrong with the metal-mat runway? I took some risk executing the short-field landing procedure. A 7000-foot runway length, combined with plummeting rainfall, did not call for STOL measures—yet I availed myself of them without consulting the A/C or even consciously thinking about it. Why? The next chapter addresses those good, probative queries, as well as the “BIG Tough Questions” from the agnostic venue. In the meantime, let's see what you come up with on your own.

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