

This Did Not Happen

The saving of Air France 447, as told by Saint-Exupéry.

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"We had emerged from the storms. I could see the stars, the sweet, welcoming stars!"

A. Richard Allen

Jean-Claude was in the left seat. He was senior to me, but I was flying. We were near the equator, where Mermoz and Guillaumet had once flown — but they, poor fellows, had not been at 35,000 feet! We entered the clouds at what looked like a soft spot in a squall line. At first it wasn't bad, but then the turbulence came, and with it lightning that never stopped, as if ogres with lanterns were laughing around us.

Captain Dubois had gone to his bunk a little while earlier. Dubois was one of the vieux tiges, the rootstock onto which all us young vines were grafted. Behind his back, everyone called him le père Dubois — Old Dubois. I think he was kind, but it was hard to tell; he didn't have much to say. He'd been flying since the beginning of time, had flown everything. His red cells were in the shape of airplanes. They said he could fly an airplane into an underground garage and land it in a parking space.

We were trying to contact Dakar for higher when there was a kind of harsh rattling sound like hail, and then hell broke loose. The annunciator panel lit up and the auto-pilot disconnected. We had no airspeed indication. I thought we had an overspeed, and I pitched up. The plane shot up to FL 380, and we got a series of stall warnings, and then things seemed to settle down a little except for one thing — the altimeter was scrolling down like mad and the VSI said we were dropping at 10,000 feet a minute. Our pitch attitude was almost level; the wings were rocking from side to side. This seemed to go on forever, but it was probably only a minute. We couldn't understand what was happening, and we had no idea what to do.

I didn't hear the cockpit door open. There was only a voice, sudden, harsh and profound: "What are you doing?"

I twisted around to see him. Rumpled and shaggy amid the tatters of his interrupted sleep, his tie loose, his grizzled hair falling across his forehead and his wrinkled eyes squinting as though the darkened cockpit were uncomfortably bright, Old Dubois loomed in the door like a prophet of the Bible. I felt a surge of shame, as Adam must have when God demanded his accounting. What were we doing? What had we done?

"Stall! Stall! Stall!" an urgent, toneless voice was crying out.

"What's happening? I don't know, I don't know what's happening." Jean-Claude spoke rapidly, his voice tense in his throat. "We lost all control of the airplane, we don't understand anything, we've tried everything. We have no valid displays."

"I don't have vertical speed," I said. "I have no more displays. I think we're at some crazy speed."

"No," Jean-Claude said. "No! Above all don't extend ..."

"Get the wings level," Old Dubois said.

"We're still going down," I exclaimed. The altimeter tape unreeled steadily. All the while, over and over, the tireless and insistent voice intoned, "Stall! Stall!" We had lost 15,000 feet now, and nothing had changed. We could hear the engines at takeoff thrust over the strangely quiet wind and the cacophony of warnings. Our voices, like the disembodied chatter of ghosts, fluttered through the cockpit.

How could this be? We were level, at takeoff power, with the stall warning blaring, and yet falling, falling! How had we sinned, to be wrenched this way from all comprehensible reality and thrust into an impossible nightmare? Why had this airplane, our friend, our partner, our confidant, betrayed us?

Old Dubois stood in the door, one arm bracing himself against the rocking of the airplane. He stared fixedly at the panel, as though he were staring at the very face of Death himself. Twenty seconds passed. Jean-Claude and I floundered in impotent bafflement, but Old Dubois, silent as a tree, appeared grave and lost in thought. Then suddenly he stepped forward and put his gnarled hand on Jean-Claude's shoulder.

"Let me have it!"

Jean-Claude's trembling hands fumbled at his harness. He rolled out of the seat and half fell toward the aft bulkhead as Old Dubois pushed by him.

"My airplane," he said.

His left hand closed on the sidestick as if he intended to squeeze the life out of it. I could hardly believe what I saw then: He pushed the stick fully forward. I felt the airplane heave, as though awakening from a restless and tossing sleep.

But we were already going downward!

"Trim!" said Old Dubois, half to himself, half to the airplane.

We seemed to rise out of our seats. The airplane yawed and rocked with increasing violence, then shuddered like a wounded animal expelling its last breath. I felt a sensation of rolling, and my eyes went instinctively to the standby horizon. The miniature airplane — the airplane that was our airplane, that carried in its tiny white outline our lives, our loves, our hopes, all that it meant to be alive — stood in knife edge, the horizon far above it.

I became aware of the noise of air, a gathering roar that we had forgotten.

The white cutout rolled slowly back to level. Old Dubois' hand now flexed backward. I felt myself pulled down into my seat as though by the gravity of some immense planet. What was happening? The stall warning had ceased its litany, but now for what felt an eternity that massive gravity dragged us down. I stared at the instrument, fascinated. Our little icon had righted itself, its wings were level and now the horizon was coming down to meet it.

I scanned the panel. It was still a carnival of warnings, but now the sounds and sensations of the cockpit had become familiar again. I looked at the captain. He sighed, and then with swift fingers reset the autopilot. We were in normal law again. All was well; we were climbing through 7,000 feet. We had emerged from the storms. I could see the stars, the sweet, welcoming stars!

Old Dubois sat quietly a moment, then took a deep breath and rose from the seat. "À vous," he said. "Yours." And he returned to his bunk.

Only later, when the big brains of Toulouse had pondered the data-recorder files, did I learn what had happened. We had flown into a field of supercooled water droplets that overwhelmed the ice protection on all three pitots. That was supposed to be impossible. So, the autopilot had disconnected. And then I had done what no pilot is supposed to do. I pulled up, and we zoomed to 380 and stalled. We started to settle at 10,000 feet a minute, but the airplane was level or a little nose-high actually, with just 100 knots of forward speed, so we had an angle of attack of 40 degrees or so. The wings rocked but didn't roll off. It seems swept-wing planes can do that.

And all the time I kept holding the stick back because we were descending, and I had no idea what instruments to believe and what was just electronic folly, because I thought the whole system had become rotten and corrupted. But it turns out the electronic displays were right all along. And Old Dubois figured it out. He had it in his blood, like a cat that knows to spin around feet-down no matter which way you drop him. Nobody at Airbus had tested this. They didn't think it could happen, it never had happened, and yet Dubois saw it. He put the nose down 40 degrees, so we were pointed the way

we were going, like a dive bomber, like no Airbus before or since, and he flew out of it. It was basic, really.

They ferried the plane to Toulouse, and after that, it never flew. Its wings had a permanent set — more dihedral than before. I never crewed with Old Dubois again; he took retirement a year later. There was a big ceremony, but I was in Kuala Lumpur and missed it.

Funny, though — I suppose funny is the wrong word — a few years later, exactly the same thing happened to an AirAsia A320. The pilot, poor devil, did the same thing I did, like me probably without realizing what he was doing. And the plane went down to the bottom of the ocean. Because they didn't have the likes of Dubois with them. No one does, these days ... no one does.