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- Troy Lennon HISTORY EDITOR

Pilots at best when staring at disaster

EMERGENCY LANDINGS PART OF AVIATION, FROM BIPLANES TO JET AGE

THE pilot of a Boeing 767 has been praised for his skill after he made a successful emergency landing in Warsaw this week, saving the 230 passengers on board. The pilot landed the plane in a “belly flop” on the tarmac after an electrical fault prevented the landing gear from deploying.



1994 Heroics: Pilot Rod Lovell ditches his DC3 in Botany Bay and (below) the crash landing of the Avro Ansons at Wagga Wagga in 1940

Pilots throughout history have become heroes by keeping their cool in emergency situations. Even Orville Wright made an emergency landing while demonstrating the Flyer 3 to the military. Wright was carrying Lieutenant Thomas Selfridge as a passenger aboard the aircraft when the right propeller broke. The machine began to vibrate so Wright made the decision to shut off the power to stop the vibrations and to descend as soon as possible. Had he not done so, it is likely the machine would have simply plummeted uncontrollably toward the ground from a greater height.

Still the plane fell from the sky with Wright unable to do much to control the fall. Selfridge may have survived the crash had he been wearing protective headgear, but his head struck a wooden

upright, fracturing his skull. Wright was badly injured.

World War I pilots lacked even parachutes, partly because it was reasoned that there was not enough time to deploy them given the height that most planes flew. It was also to discourage pilots from abandoning their planes at the first sign of trouble. Pilots therefore often did whatever they could to bring their “kite” in to land. French air ace Roland Garros is said to have glided his plane for several kilometres after it was disabled by either a clogged fuel line or gunfire from the ground. Unfortunately the skilful emergency landing delivered him and his plane into the hands of the Germans.

Between the wars the growth of the aviation industry also saw a rise in the number of emergency landings. In 1936 an Airlines of Australia Monospar aircraft carrying federal health minister and former PM Billy Hughes was having trouble in a “blinding mist” in Queensland. Locals in Beaudesert organised cars to shine their lights on a paddock outside town and lit flares to guide the plane in. The pilot, J. McLaughlin, was able to bring the aircraft in for a “perfect landing” but for the fence he clipped, damaging a wing and the undercarriage. Hughes broke his collarbone but he and the pilot were otherwise not injured.

World War II threw up even more amazing stories of emergency landings. Among them is that of two Avro Anson planes that took off from an RAAF base at Wagga Wagga in 1940. The two planes were heading in the same direction when they collided; one plane piloted by Ldg Aircraftman Leonard Fuller stuck on the back of the other piloted by Ldg Aircraftman Jack Hewson. Hewson parachuted out but Fuller was able to land the piggybacking planes in a nearby field. The bottom plane was a write-off but the top one was repaired and flew again.

In 1943, Flt-Lt William Reid was pilot of a Lancaster bomber on its way to attack Dusseldorf when his plane was attacked by a Messerschmidt fighter. Reid was wounded in the head and shoulders and had to cope with intense cold and lack of oxygen from breeches in the hull and windows. The controls were also damaged in the attack, but Reid continued on to the target only to be attacked by another German plane, compounding his wounds and the aircraft damage.

He made it to the target, dropped the bombs and headed home. Reid landed the crippled plane safely, successfully dealing with landing gear that collapsed on touchdown. His actions saw him awarded a VC.

In Sydney in 1994, Pilot Rod Lovell was taking off from Sydney Airport in a DC3 bound for Norfolk Island with 25 passengers aboard. When the engines failed after takeoff, he had seconds to take action and he managed to safely ditch the plane into Botany Bay. All of the passengers and crew survived.



In 2009, one of the most amazing emergency landings happened in New York. Captain Chesley “Sully” Sullenberger was pilot of US Airways Flight 1549, an Airbus A320 flying from New York to North Carolina. Shortly after take-off the plane ran into a flock of birds, disabling the engines. Sullenberger, a former air force pilot, knew he had to act quickly and brought the plane down onto the surface of the Hudson River. No people were injured. lennont@dailylegraph.com.au