Interrupted checklist

By Dick Peiffer

Throughout the 1980s, I had a 1962 single-engine Comanche 250. N7959P, a great airplane. This 250 came with two 30-gallon mains and two 15-gallon wing aux tanks. Eighty-six usable gallons at about 12 gallons per hour, was a good three hours beyond the capacity of ones bladder.

Comanche's and some others of that era had a different system to check for water in the fuel tanks and lines during preflight. There are no quick drains below the wing tanks. The tanks are drained from inside. A tank selector is located between the front seats. A fuel strainer unit is located just aft of the tank selector.

The preflight procedure was to select a tank, open the strainer quick drain for a couple seconds to drain any water from the line and the tank selected. Then change to the next tank. The fuel comes out below the center of the fuselage aft of the tank selector. Most owners kept a container on the hangar floor below the tube. If you miss the container and the floor is asphalt, eventually a hole appears in the floor. In addition, it is difficult to judge water content and from where it came, unless you crawl under and check the results of each tank release.

During my years in Alaska, I heard stories where some pilots during the winter did not get all the lines flushed, water froze and the airplane went down. Therefore, to ensure I emptied all possible water, while taxiing, I had a habit of again selecting a tank and opened the quick drain for another second or so. Moving through the tanks right to left. Then back to left main for takeoff. I just felt more comfortable doing it a second time under power. Particularly during the winter. Having said that, like most, my fuel management system on that airplane was always the same. Left main, right main, left aux, right aux. then right main for the approach and landing. Each hour I changed tanks.

My late wife and I made many trips, in that Comanche, between Harrisburg, PA area and St. Pete or Melbourne, FL to visit family. For those long flights, she sat in the back with a small cooler of sandwiches, fruit and water. She normally read and listen to music through her headset. We had CD player plugged into the intercom that I could isolate. If she wanted me, she would tap me on the shoulder.

Before the Comanche, we made those same trips in a Cherokee 180 and that included stops for fuel as well as a nature break. Now we could go nonstop, and much quicker, but she insisted on a stop for a nature break. Southbound it was still Savanna. She could stretch her legs and I could get a bag of popcorn. Northbound, we normally stopped at Fayetteville. It was about halfway and the FBO always had donuts and coffee. Eventually, I convinced her on nonstop because any stop added an hour to the trip.

From our central Pennsylvania area, the IFR route for southbound through Dulles airspace was via Hagerstown, V501 Martinsburg direct Savanna. A route west of the Dulles traffic. That worked for years then, Dulles Approach revised their procedures. Unless you filed above 10,000, the routing after

Martinsburg was, "…V433 Luray direct Savanna…" It added a few miles but worse, it kept you directly over Appalachians and if the wind was out of the west or northwest, you could expect moderate to severe turbulence below 14,000. It is on the forecast about 300 days of the year.

Washington Center was sympathetic and as soon as you cleared Dulles airspace, they would issue direct Savanna. The Center also had the duty prior to entering Dulles airspace to revise your routing if you filed Martinsburg direct Savanna by adding the trip down to Luray. Once, after I complained to the Center that V433 south of Martinsburg was the roughest road on the east coast, the controller said, "Dulles airspace is the largest restricted area on the east coast."

On one southbound, trip to St. Pete we were about an hour out and time to change from the left to the right main. Dulles called and changed me to Washington Center. We were south of Martinsburg approaching Luray intersection. I checked in with Washington Center listening for the "…proceed direct Savanna". Suddenly silence.

The engine quit without warning. Now I had lost an engine before in a Cherokee when a cylinder apparently began eating a valve. That made a lot of noise. This was instant silence. We were over the Appalachians. Terrible terrain! I'm thinking, that tank cannot be empty; fuel was right up to the cap. What seemed like eons but likely, a nanosecond, by muscle memory, I hit the electric fuel pump switch, mixture and reached between the seats for the tank selector. Non-pertinent word! It was on left aux and obviously finished the last of usable fuel.

I changed it to the left main detent, and the engine came back to life. We lost about 100 feet and some speed. The controller said something about turbulence. I said, "No I just let too much air in a fuel tank. We'll be back at 8,000 in a second to two." I think the controller chuckled, "…proceed direct Savanna."

Something interrupted me while quick draining during taxi. I have never figured out what. While adjusting the power settings again, my wife managed to yell, "**WHAT HAPPENED**?"

Now I am Joe Cool, calmly saying, "I just waited too long to swap tanks."

She said, "Don't **EVER** do that again!"

In marriage, sometimes it pays to keep quiet.

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