

The Guardian

I'm pretty sure it was his doing. My guardian angel, that is. Of course, his existence is a matter of faith for me and you are free to disagree, but if you will suspend any doubts you have for the next few minutes, I think you may enjoy this story a bit more.

It was a cloudy day after Christmas, 1971 and I was sitting in the cockpit of a Schweizer TG-3 sailplane contemplating what I had done wrong. The last two auto-tow launches had not gone well and I had only attained an altitude of three to four hundred feet by the time I released. Pretty low, and now I was listening to the voice in my head of my long ago instructor berating me for being such an idiot and not putting the nose down and landing straight ahead. It was central Texas, after all, and the cow pasture on the other side of the fence looked remarkably like this one. In other words, it would make a fine landing field for a safety conscious pilot who got a bad launch. But it was on the other side of the fence, and if I landed there all the sky divers we were going to give rides to would probably go grab some food or some beer or some weed and my friend Lewis' drop zone would loose their business for the rest of the day. It had happened before when the ceiling was too low to jump, hence the TG-3. They all had expressed an interest in glider rides and I just couldn't let Lewis down. Besides, I had made it around twice from a low launch, so I guess it was't such a big deal anyway. I was pretty sure this launch would be better and if not, well, I would just have to go get some dual instruction to polish my technique. After all, I hadn't flown a glider in over two years, but I was current in powered airplanes. So, this time would be better.

"Hey, man! Can I go with you?" It was Bill, one of the jumpers who always had to be pushing the envelope.

"Well, I'm really not current yet with this thing. Why don't you give me another circuit or two."

"Ah, Hell! I'm not worried about that. Come on! Let's go!"

As I looked around to decline I heard the click of the seatbelt as he strapped in and one of the other jumpers on our hastily trained launch crew banged on the nose and yelled, "Hook up!" I pulled and released the tow hook knob while he attached the rope then watched as the tow car took out the slack and the wing runner raised the wing to signal our readiness. I did not have to go. One more step was required before the tow car driver started his run. I had to waggle the rudder left and right to signal I was committed to the launch. All I had to do to abort was to pull the tow hook knob to drop the rope and ask the wing walker to lower the wing. I just had to listen to that still, small voice and my guardian angel could take the day off. But, I was 19 and I wagged the rudder.

We accelerated like a shot and were airborne in less than fifty feet. This was the moment of truth in any ground launch. The pilot had to aggressively pull back on the stick to about a thirty degree nose-up attitude or the glider would accelerate right through the safe tow speed. At that point it would be impossible to get the required pitch attitude without over-stressing the airframe. This was where I had blown it on the two previous launches and, true to form, I blew it again. The tow was over in under a minute and we released a bit lower this time because we

were heavier. Three hundred feet. Push the nose over and land or make another low pattern back to the drop zone? Hero or zero? I rolled into the turn to make the circuit.

It is said that there are old pilots and there are bold pilots, but there are no old, bold pilots. That is pure baloney. I know now and have known many of them. What I haven't known is any old, stupid pilots. They wise up in a hurry or they don't survive and, when you get right down to it, wisdom is the ability to not continually piss off your guardian angel. That is considered bad form and results in the guardian turning his or her back when you really need 'em. Fortunately, instead of turning his back, mine must have decided I needed to be taken to the wood shed and let me tell you, that is painful. This day, I would be a zero.

On downwind it seemed like I was looking up at the top of the fence posts. We were low and this was going to be a mighty tight pattern. We were heavier, the controls were mushier, the ground was closer, I banked a little and pushed a lot of rudder and suddenly the outboard wing went over my head and the nose dropped straight towards the very close, very hard ground. A low altitude stall-spin. I knew Mom was going to be angry 'cause she told me to be safe and I wasn't ready to die and I closed my eyes and screamed NO!!!

The most incredible feeling of love enveloped me. The sounds of impact came from the left and ahead of me, but I was not there. I was in a warm embrace, face buried in a firm breast, strong arms protecting me and giving the firm counsel that, whatever happened, I would always be fine. As I relaxed, so did the embrace. I took a deep breath and opened my eyes.

My head was resting against an instrument panel that was much closer than I remembered and my right tibia was rudely poking through a gash in my jeans right in front of my face.

Folded up like I was, my chest was uncomfortable and I could not take a full breath. There was

blood on the bone sticking out of my jeans and I thought it must have made quite a hole and I did not want to bleed to death, so I should get a tourniquet around my leg...my belt would do, but I was so exhausted and I could not get a good breath and it was taking me forever to get my belt off...I felt the fuselage shift and heard the seatbelt fall away from something in the back and somebody landed on the ground to the left and this damn belt will not release so I can stop the bleeding.....

"Just take it easy, man. We're going to get you out of here. You're going to be fine." The voice was familiar and..oh, yea..whatever happened, I would always be fine. Once again, I relaxed. Somebody else could take care of the blood and the bone.

As it turned out, I was a mess. Compound fractures of both left and right tibia and fibula, fractured left talus (ankle bone), ribs broken off the left side of my sternum resulting in a flailing chest with each heartbeat, bruised heart, cuts and abrasions. My passenger, Bill, got bruised up a bit but walked away with a hell of a story.

The jumpers saved my life. In the farmlands of central Texas in 1971 there were no paramedics, no life-flight, not even a proper ambulance. After a 45 minute extraction process where the jumpers cut the nose off the glider with an acetylene torch, I got to ride 40 minutes to the hospital in the back of a hearse. Even as out of it as I was, the irony of that was crystal clear. I'm sure my guardian was laughing into his hat and still has braggin' rights in the Guardian Club or wherever it is they go to unwind. My trip to the wood-shed had been a success. I had survived and received, loud and clear, a hard lesson on personal responsibility and the consequences of poor judgement.

In 1971 there were nine glider stall-spin crashes in the United States and eight fatalities. I was the only survivor. The steel tube and fabric construction of the TG-3, the quick actions of the jumpers who got me out, the availability of the hearse and the willingness of the undertaker to fill the role of ambulance, the doctors and staff of the hospital and myriad other factors all contributed to keeping a critically injured pilot alive. But why did I survive the impact? Was it God, an Angel, Karma, destiny, good luck or just a coincidence? There is no proof of any of these so each of us will have our own belief. For me, I'll tip my hat to my guardian angel.

Even with all the angst and trauma, I was still 19, in the best shape of my life and I was out of the hospital in fourteen days. But that was the beginning of a year long recovery. Two months were spent flat on my back with a two pound sand bag holding my heart in place while the rib cartilage mended. That gave me an opportunity to experience the exquisite agony of bed sores. These were flavored with second degree burns on each butt cheek compliments of a red hot seat pan from the jumpers cutting away the fuselage tubing. Fortunately, my girlfriend was wonderful at providing frequent, uhhh, distraction from the discomfort. Angels are definitely in our midsts, some conveniently disguised as cute, little devils.

Soon, I became a wheelchair master. With casts on both legs from toe to crotch there was no choice if I wanted to see anything outside of my 10x10 bedroom. Of course, this advance was soon viewed as just a larger prison. What I really needed was a car. Pappy, my grandfather, encouragingly offered his second car once I could get from the house to the car unaided. Within a week I had figured out how to wheel out the back door, down the ramp, over to the car, open the trunk, slither to the ground, fold the chair, muscle it into the trunk, crab walk on my hands and butt to the door, lever into the seat and start the engine. Though this was not exactly what

Pappy had expected, he was a man of his word. I had wheels! The casts complicated things a bit, but where there is a will there is a way. The orthopedist griped about the repairs to the heels of the casts, but I considered this to be an easily endured cost of freedom. The only tense moment came when I was stopped for a burned out taillight and the deputy asked me to step to the back of the car. After convincing him I was not being a wiseass when I said I would have to crawl, he was most gracious and wished me continued good luck.

During this period, there came a night when the phone rang at 3:00 AM. It was my father, a pilot in the Air Force flying F-4E Phantoms out of Osan, Korea. Shortly after takeoff for Okinawa an engine caught fire and was unable to be extinguished. The fire soon involved the other engine and multiple aircraft systems began failing. As they tried to recover to Osan, Dad had his back-seater eject over the base and then attempted to land. Abeam the touchdown zone of the runway there was a large explosion, the flight controls went limp and the aircraft pitched nose down. Reaching for the overhead ejection handles, he thought he had waited too long to get out. Fortunately, he only weighed about 150 pounds and the aircraft was equipped with the remarkable, rocket powered Martin-Baker ejection seat. The seat did its job and Dad suddenly found himself wading in a rice paddy a few hundred feet from the burning wreckage of the F-4. He had only minor injuries. Once again, I tipped my hat. Mom just muttered about how much she disliked airplanes.

Despite my impatience, recovery proceeded at its own pace. In July the right leg got a walking cast and I graduated to crutches just in time to attend the second summer session at school. An unintended consequence of the boredom of my long convalescence was a remarkable

interest in study. My frequent flirtations with academic probation ended and I actually started to enjoy college. The miracles never cease.

In October all the casts came off but I was instructed to apply only partial pressure to the left leg. The damage to the talus was devastating and the ankle would never fully recover. Still, it recovered enough that I was able to modify my gait so there was no apparent limp and in December of 1972 I gave up the crutches for good.

Now, I am happy to look back at 41 years of "bonus" time. I have often pondered why I did not join the other 1971 stall-spin pilots in the "long sleep". Why was I given the time to find the girl of my dreams who was actually willing to endure 35 years of marriage to a gypsy pilot? Why were we blessed with two great kids who have provided new playmates in the form of three beautiful granddaughters (so far). Why did my dreams of flight come true, allowing me to travel the world, to view the Milky Way in the breath taking dark of a moonless night over water, to mingle with many cultures and religions, only to find that people everywhere are pretty much like people anywhere. So many why's and all unanswerable for the moment. Perhaps there will come a time when all will be revealed. I hope so. Until then, I am content to fully understand the meaning of Providential Grace, for I have been the grateful recipient of blessings undeserved.

So here's to all our guardian's. Thanks for everything.