Thomas P. Turner's
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FLYING LESSONS for January 8, 2026

FLYING LESSONS uses recent mishap reports to consider what *might* have contributed to accidents, so you can make better decisions if you face similar circumstances. In most cases design characteristics of a specific airplane have little direct bearing on the possible causes of aircraft accidents—but knowing how your airplane's systems respond can make the difference in your success as the scenario unfolds. So apply these *FLYING LESSONS* to the specific airplane you fly. Verify all technical information before applying it to your aircraft or operation, with manufacturers' data and recommendations taking precedence. **You are pilot in command and are ultimately responsible for the decisions you make.**

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This week's LESSONS

A controversial event received significant publicity—in and out of aviation circles—a few weeks ago. Here's an excerpt from one account:

> A Beechcraft King Air executed a safe landing in Denver under Garmin Autoland control on December 20, reported to be the first use of the system outside of testing and certification—though a charter operator later told a television news station that the crew responded to a loss of cabin pressure by allowing the system to take over….
>
> Fire officials reported nobody received medical treatment on scene or was transported to a hospital following the landing. Garmin issued a brief statement about the event, confirming the Autoland activation and subsequent landing at **Rocky Mountain Metropolitan Airport**.
>
> Charter company Buffalo River Aviation issued a statement to CBS Colorado on December 22, explaining that the two pilots aboard the King Air reported a loss of pressurization after departure from Aspen, Colorado, donned oxygen masks, and opted to allow the Garmin system to fly the aircraft to a safe landing at an airport selected by the system. It was not clear why the King Air crew opted not to make any radio calls of their own during the descent and landing at the Colorado airport.

See https://www.aopa.org/news-and-media/all-news/2025/december/22/king-air-autolands-in-colorado

The controversy surrounded the crew's apparent decision to ride the airplane to a landing once Autoland activated, automatically declared an emergency and transmitted updates to Air Traffic Control, and eventually landed and brought the King Air to a stop. **A significant amount of discussion** centered on allowing one's self to turn control over to an automated landing system. The usual aero-Luddites decried the very existence of such a technology. "No ***real*** pilot needs or would use such a device," was asserted widely across the internet.

See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luddite

It does seem odd that a professional, two-pilot crew would ride this system to a landing when there was no incapacitation. Shouldn't they have overridden Autoland and resumed control? At the very least should they have made a radio call explaining what was going on?

One long-time friend asked me about the event shortly after it was first reported. I listed several possibilities that came to mind, including:

- The crew was incapacitated (possible)
- The crew was alert but diminished in some way, and chose to use Autoland (possible)
- Autoland activated and the crew thought, "Cool, let's see how this works" (not unlikely)

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- The crew did not know how to disengage or override Autoland once it had activated (more likely, given my experience with pilots and significant avionics advancements)
- The charter operator's Operations Specifications (OpSpecs) call for letting Autoland land the airplane once it activates (possible, but it's likely Federally approved OpSpecs have not yet been amended to include this very new technology)
- With Autoland activated, the crew consciously chose to monitor its operation but let it continue to a landing out of an abundance of caution (also likely)

Subsequent reports suggest that the last possibility may indeed have been what happened. Is there anything wrong with that? Or would a "real pilot" manually fly an emergency descent, even if potentially impacted by a condition that makes it hard for the pilots themselves to detect?

Let's work backward a step in technology. With the right avionics Garmin sells a product for single-engine airplanes called SmartGlide. When activated (manually) following engine failure, SmartGlide activates to adjust aircraft pitch to attain and maintain Best Glide speed for that aircraft, simultaneously engaging "direct to" and aiming to the nearest airport if one is within glide range. It maintains wings level straight ahead of no airport is within the airplane's current glide ring. SmartGlide doesn't land the airplane; in fact it disengages two miles from the target airport or when reaching a certain height above terrain. The pilot must take over for final maneuvering and landing. But the system flies the airplane and aims it somewhere it can land, at least initially. This that cheating?

What about the Cirrus' CAPS (Cirrus Airframe Parachute System)? CAPS has its own detractors, but it also has an impressive record of saves. Surely no one should criticize a pilot who makes the difficult decision to pull the "red handle," mostly likely sacrificing the aircraft to save its occupants. Or is CAPS cheating for a "real pilot" too?

Scale down the technology a bit further. Something goes wrong and you need to divert in a hurry. You hit "Direct to" on your GPS, then activate the autopilot to fly there as you divert some of your attention to other preparations for an immediate landing. It that ok? Or would a "real pilot" pull out a paper sectional, a plotter and pencil to draw a line, measure an angle and determine a heading to fly to the airport?

I think back to the early days of commercial aviation, 100 years ago. The prevailing view at the time was that a pilot could not fly in an enclosed cockpit, unable to feel the wind on your cheek or hear the wind in the wires. The first generation of passenger airliners put customers in the relative comfort of an enclosed cabin but left the pilot exposed to the elements, to be a "real pilot."

Boeing's Model 40B represents an era when passengers flew in a cramped cabin between the wings, but the pilot remained in an open cockpit

Obviously that philosophy quickly disappeared. The new technologies of enclosed cockpits and, soon afterward, flight instruments took over until they, too, became archaic.

Of course I'm using hyperbole to describe what "real pilots" should do in an emergency. But is there a limit to what technology we should use in the event of an emergency? Or should we use **all available resources** to get the airplane safely on the ground?

Don't be too quick to criticize the pilot who uses what's available in the aircraft to improve the chances of survival. I'm adamant that pilots must practice and maintain the ability to fly smoothly and accurately by hand. But I'm equally insistent that pilots must **master *all* equipment** on board the aircraft, and use it to their advantage if the need arises.

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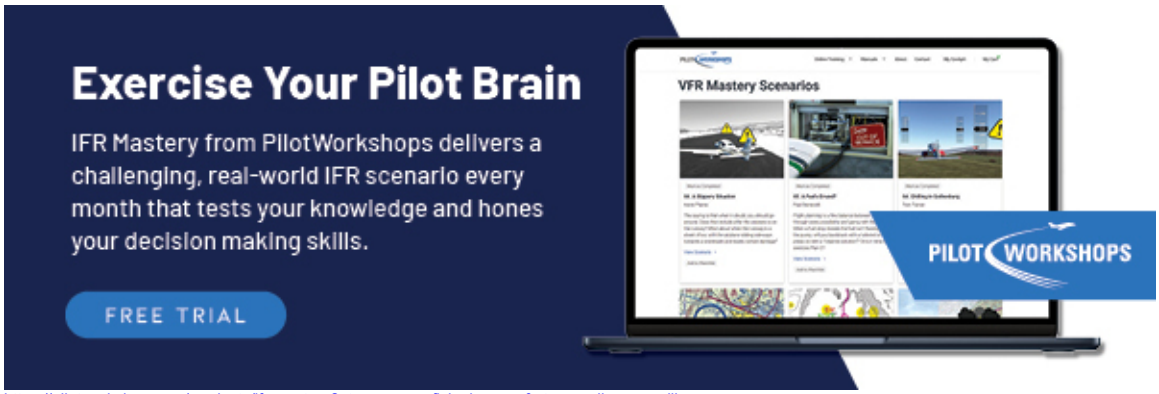

https://pilotworkshop.com/products/ifr-mastery?utm_source=flyinglessons&utm_medium=emailbanner

Debrief

Readers write about recent *LESSONS*:

I'll get into my large email folder of reader Debriefs next week.

More to say? Let us learn from you, at **mastery.flight.training@cox.net**

See https://nafimentor.org/

Share safer skies. Forward *FLYING LESSONS* to a friend.

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I apologize to my donors for missing publication last week because of a family emergency.

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Thomas P. Turner, M.S. Aviation Safety
Flight Instructor Hall of Fame Inductee
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