

When JFK Jr. Crashed

John F. Kennedy Jr., son of the late president, died on July 10, 1999, when the Piper Saratoga light aircraft he was piloting crashed into the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts.

His wife, Carolyn Bessette, and sister-in-law, Lauren Bessette, were also killed. People across the country and abroad were glued to their television sets when the news broke, eager for details about the accident involving this much-admired young man and his family.

The National Transportation Safety Board determined that the plane had crashed into the ocean with the probable cause being pilot error: "Kennedy's failure to maintain control of the airplane during descent over water at night, which was a result of spatial disorientation." Kennedy, the NTSB concluded, was not qualified to fly a plane by instruments only. The crash occurred in conditions not legally requiring such qualification. Other pilots flying similar routes reported no visual horizon due to haze.

In the aftermath of Kennedy's death, amateur pilot Stephen Hedges wrote about the difficulty of flying a plane by instruments alone – a necessary skill if you want to fly at night or in fog. Without this skill, it is easy for a pilot to fall into an uncontrolled bank and crash.



During one instrument lesson, Hedges noted, "I flew the headings and turns as instructed, but even with 10 hours of instrument flying in my logbook, I was amazed at how quickly the plane slid into a banking turn if I diverted my attention for just a few moments. The first time it happened, a pang of panic shot through me, a momentary fear that made it even more difficult to comprehend what the plane was doing."

But when he heard his instructor next to him calmly say, "Watch your bank," Hedges quickly leveled the plane.

Herein is a spiritual lesson. There are many times in the Christian life when we're forced to fly in fog or at night, when it's hard to get our bearings, when we can't see the horizon and get the perspective necessary to stay level.

At such times, it's doubly important to keep our eyes fixed on God's guiding Word and stay attentive to His calming direction.

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path (Psalm 119:105 NKJV).

– Beecher Hunter