



From the Cockpit – A Landing is an Aborted Go-Around

When landing an aircraft, it's important that the approach is accurate, with the aircraft always at the right place at the right time. If it isn't, and it isn't possible to sort it out easily, or if there's an obstruction on the runway (perhaps a dog or another aircraft that hasn't cleared yet), the landing should be aborted and a go-around is necessary. It isn't always easy to make this decision early, as the focus can be on trying to sort out a problem. There's also a view by some pilots that a go-around suggests incompetence on their part. However, a go-around is always a better option than having someone pull you out of the wreckage. To me, a go-around suggests a pragmatic and sensible approach – the sign of a good pilot, not a bad one.

A few weeks ago, I was flying a C42 microlight with a very experienced colleague. We returned to the airfield, with the wind from the south. This is a tricky situation at Hunsdon, as our south-landing runway involves landing over trees, with very little room to complete the approach and a short runway. For this reason, most pilots, apart from the flex-wings, use it just for take-off. As we had left from runway 08, this was the obvious alternative. Again, it's slightly tricky as it's down-hill, so the approach needs to be just right or the aircraft touches down late, with too little room to stop. To add to the fun, there's a bump waiting for those who touch down early. The southerly wind meant there was a cross-wind, but more importantly no headwind to help slow the aircraft. As we descended, it was obvious we wouldn't land early enough to stop before the end. I let the aircraft land, just to see where it would touch down, but was already setting up for a go-around, just as my colleague suggested it. I applied the standard procedure – full power, take-off flaps and wait to regain flying speed. Back in the (empty) circuit, we returned to the runway and landed the opposite way, which was an easier choice.

I always refer to a landing as an aborted go-around, rather than the other way round. This leads to a go-around as an option in the pilot's thinking, rather than becoming fixated on fixing the landing.

Several other recent instances, at various airfields, show the consequences of not being prepared. On one occasion, two inexperienced pilots were approaching a runway that is quite short, with obstructions at the end. They were too high and too fast, but persisted with the landing. Realising they would have trouble stopping, the pilot in command switched off the engine before they touched down. Trying to get the aircraft onto the ground quickly, they then landed too early, and the aircraft bounced. With no engine to rescue them, they landed again on the nose-wheel, which collapsed, resulting in over £1000 of damage.

The correct decision in this case would have been a go-around. Switching off the engine, presumably in the vain hope the aircraft would stop more quickly, removed their best option – a go-around – even after the initial bounce. Some pilots also believe an aircraft will slow down more quickly on the ground, where the brakes can be used. This is wrong – an aircraft slows down quicker in the air, greatly shortening the ground roll, and is less likely to bounce as it will land more slowly.

In another incident, a pilot flew into an airfield that has a short runway. The pilot knew the brakes were poor, but still elected to land there, putting himself and the passenger at risk. The approach was too high and too fast, and the passenger, another pilot, suggested a go-around. Instead, the aircraft landed quite long, with a thump, and slewed around as the pilot tried to stop before running off the end. When it became clear the aircraft wouldn't stop in time, he turned the aircraft, at speed, off the side onto the taxiway. Still travelling too fast, the aircraft ran off the edge of the taxiway and the nose-wheel dropped down a small step in the ground, stopping the engine as the propeller struck the ground. Not realising the prop strike had stopped the engine, he then re-started it, smashing all three blades, which flew in all directions.

The result of several errors, all of which were easily avoidable, was an aircraft that had to be left overnight at the airfield, a new propeller at the cost of over £1500, a potentially damaged engine, and one rather embarrassed pilot, who was experienced enough to know better.

There are many reasons why a landing can go wrong, some outside the pilot's control, but many can be resolved by going around. Pilots are taught this during their training, and some practice from time to time as well. But to my mind, simply treating every landing as an aborted go-around is the best choice.

Ray Wilkinson



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image: NTSB*