

# Subtle Incapacitation

*When the Captain's flying skills seem to lose their sharpness, there comes a time to realize a serious problem may exist. When does another crew member take action?*

*by*

*A First Officer*

I was the First Officer on a trip to Los Angeles. The Captain was a man I had known for 28 years. We had flown together many times, and I suppose we had logged more than a thousand hours together. I considered him to be the finest pilot I had ever seen and one of the finest human beings I had ever worked with. My confidence in him and his ability was unshakeable.

Our trip was cleared to proceed direct to Santa Monica VOR and to cross Bayst Intersection at 10,000 feet. Center announced that we were overtaking the airplane in front of us and requested that we make a 180-degree turn to the right for a delaying vector. Several minutes later, we were cleared to make a 180-degree turn to the right and proceed direct to Santa Monica VOR and cross Bayst at 10,000 feet. After reading back the clearance, I noted a bank angle of 60 degrees and a rate of sink of 6,000 feet per minute. I sang out, "Watch your bank angle." The Captain acknowledged, "OK" but allowed the attitude of the airplane to remain as it was.

On at least two previous occasions, I had observed airline captains execute 60-degree-bank turns. It was unpleasant, unnecessary and contrary to rules, but not unheard of. I could not understand why he had found it necessary to make such a radical turn. I concluded that he was angry with the delay vector and that it was the intemperate act of an angry man. I had never seen this man behave like this before, but perhaps he was under personal stress I was unaware of.

The remainder of the approach was normal, and the touchdown was smooth. Passenger reaction was bad — several complained of circus flying and said so. I was embarrassed. The Captain made no comment. The remaining five legs of the trip were flown without incident.

One week later, I was flying from Los Angeles to San Francisco with the same captain at the controls. He held the airplane on course heading, even though we encountered a strong west wind, which should have been countered with at least 10 degrees of drift correction. I mentioned several times that we were off course and made many comments about the strong west wind. He acknowledged all of my comments but made no corrections. Three times Center called and gave us vectors to get back on course.

San Francisco was VFR, and we were cleared for a visual approach to Runway 28, cross Dumbarton Bridge at 4,000 feet or above. The bridge was several miles in front of us. When I noted our altitude of 3,800 feet, I said, "We are cleared to cross the bridge at 4,000," and he acknowledged, but the airplane continued to descend. When the airplane reached 3,600 feet, I said loudly that our altitude was 3,600, and we were supposed to cross the bridge at 4,000 feet. He leveled off and we crossed the bridge at 3,600 feet.

In the Boeing 737 we often encounter landing weight problems on short runways. Medford, Oregon, is a place where summer heat and restricted flap settings make landing a very precise operation. I had often marvelled at the way this man could put an airplane on the end of a runway so he had maximum runway for braking and stopping. I mention this because he now

began a visual approach to Runway 28 below glideslope, and I assumed he was practicing his low approach.

When we passed 500 feet agl. I began to comment that we were low. I continued to talk about how low we were until we reached 200 feet, and I began to yell. "We are too low!" I noticed the rate of climb go to zero, and we held our altitude, but the airspeed began to decay. I began to sing out airspeeds, and then I yelled, "We are at reference speed!" He applied some power, but not enough: the airspeed continued to decay, and my callouts became frantic. The stick shaker began, and he instantly applied more power.

The airspeed increased, and the touchdown was smooth. I was shaken; I thought I was going crazy. The greatest pilot I had ever known was flying like a student, and he did not even seem concerned or upset about it. He was oblivious to our danger and even made several comments to the fact that I was becoming overly critical.

The Second Officer and I walked into the terminal, and he said, "What are we going to do about this?" I said, "I don't know what to do. This man has the finest record on the airline, and if we go into the office and tell them what happened, they will never believe us." He said, "Thank goodness the next leg is yours."

The next day we departed Eugene, Oregon. for San Francisco with the Captain at the controls. He maintained an airspeed of 250 kt. through 10,000 feet and then allowed the airplane to accelerate to 280 kt. for the next few minutes. We were cleared to 33,000 feet.

After leaving 20,000 feet. we were IFR in the clouds and some light chop when I noticed the airspeed begin to decay. It is not unusual to trade a little airspeed for altitude, if you feel that an expedited climb will give a smoother ride, and I assumed that was what he was doing.

The airspeed continued to decay until it reached the point where I found it necessary to comment. Because of his remarks about my being overly critical, I had reverted to the old military system of hand signals to alert him to his oversights, and I began to point to the airspeed. He turned and looked at me and said, "What are you pointing at?" I said, "My airspeed." He said, "Well, what about your airspeed?" I said, it reads 200 knots." He said, "So what." I said, "That's much too low." He said "Oh." and pushed forward slightly on the wheel, and the airspeed began to increase, but several minutes later, it was decaying again, and soon we could feel the air burbling under the wing, and we knew this to be the pre-stall burble.

By this time, the Second Officer and I were both looking at him, and he looked at us and, with a big smile on his face, said, "Whatever do you think that is?" We knew that he knew what it was. Any student pilot would have known. He then, laughingly, put the autopilot on altitude hold, and the airplane began to accelerate, and the remainder of the trip was normal.

The Second Officer and I discussed the flight. He shared my fondness for this man, but something had to be done. We wondered if he was testing us in some way. He seemed so unconcerned and disinterested that it was obvious he was not aware of any problems.

On the ground and in the air, his speech patterns were normal, and his pleasant, good humor was unchanged.

I knew one thing for sure. I could not fly with this man again. I was a nervous wreck. The Second Officer said, "What happens if we drop the trip, and he ends up with a couple of less experienced crew members — it could be deadly."

We decided to tell our troubles to the flight office. The office requested a medical examination, and my friend of 28 years was found to have a brain tumor.

In retrospect, with the whole series of events placed together, it is easy to diagnose illness as the cause, but when these incidents come one at a time, covered with a blanket of perfectly normal behavior before and after each incident, it is very deceiving. Had I been flying with anyone else, I certainly would have been a great deal more aggressive in demanding correction. I should have taken the airplane on the low approach at 500 feet, but don't forget that this man had been my friend for 28 years—and confidence like that is very hard to shake.