

Excerpt: CIA Super Pilot Spills the Beans by Bill Collier

Often, when I say I flew helicopters for 32 years, folks will ask me, “Did you ever have any close calls?” My immediate response is, “Of course.”

I read recently a report by an old-time WW2 pilot when asked that same question. His response: “Every time I take one of these sumbitches off the ground it’s a close call!” I can honestly say I came up with the same phrase before I read it in that old-timer’s report.

And...I can beat that. One day I had a close call before I even started my engine. One morning at Tango, I climbed into my H-34 to go out on a six day trip. I started the pre-take-off check list.

First item:      BATTERY ON

I flipped the electrical switch down to the Battery Only position.

Second item, “Electric Driven Fuel Pump--ON.”

I flipped up the electrically driven fuel pump switch to ON

To create fuel pressure in preparation for the start.

As soon as I flipped on the fuel pump, switch raw fuel of the highest octane (115-145—Purple) began to spray all over the cockpit –and me, instantly creating a cloud of highly explosive fuel-air mixture. I knew that the smallest spark would ignite that fuel, and I probably would not survive the explosion. Raw fuel in the proper air-fuel mixture is more explosive than dynamite! I also knew that even if it did not explode, as soon as the raw fuel reached any ignition factor I would be on fire ...fuel was dripping down from behind the instrument panel, across the back side of the battery switch, which was energized, and dripping into the radio console. Sure, none of the radios was yet turned on, but the relay busses near them were now armed with electricity.

I had to make an instantaneous decision. Faster than you can snap your fingers, I had to choose between abandoning the helicopter and perhaps having it burn to ash in the usual 15 seconds, or trying to correct the situation by switching the battery switch to the OFF position.

I knew that if I bailed out of the helicopter, the fuel would continue to flow, and that if the helicopter caught on fire, the magnesium alloy would soon ignite and in 15 seconds the helicopter would be ashes. This choice would also put my crewchief at high risk. He stood beside the helicopter with a fire extinguisher in case of engine fire on start. He might be seriously burned or killed trying to extinguish the fire once the magnesium body of the helicopter ignited and the fuel tanks exploded.

My choice was: did I want risk being some of the ashes, or should I bail. I might have escaped with nothing more than fuel-soaked clothes, but the helicopter might very well burn up.

I could lose my job! I had to make the right decision.

I chose to take the risk and throw the battery switch to the OFF position. There was no spark. So here I am telling this simple story when the results might have been very different. It seems I made the right decision.