



A shark-infested graveyard!

I watched as our pilot pushed and pulled every lever in sight; a frantic bid to re-start the engine. He was perspiring profusely, his face now a reddish colour. No clue as to what was wrong! My four workmates, from dozing to wide awake in seconds, craned forward, anxiously.



We were returning from a stint in Australia's outback. Earlier in the day when we stopped to take on fuel, there had been three attempts to land (blamed by Jack, our pilot, on roguish crosswinds). Now high in the sky again, the botched landings were a fading memory.

Our six-seater *Piper Cherokee* had large wrap-over windows and was decidedly warm. Conversations soon subsided as people dozed, content to leave the action to the guy up front; the drone of the engine - a soporific sound - the backdrop to their slumbers. Half asleep myself, I recall Jack asking control for permission to fly under a low cloud bank.

We droned on relentlessly; almost an hour. Then halfway across a 30km-wide stretch of water, everything changed. Suddenly the motor coughed and spluttered two or three times. The background noise ceased. Silence in this case was a numbing sound; within

seconds everyone was wide-awake. We were moving ahead in unpowered glide mode, as the twin-bladed propellor became visible and slowed to a standstill.



So there we were, 500 metres up and 15km from land, inside what was now a rather heavy glider. The equation did not compute. There was no way we could make landfall! As an added bonus, we were flying above shark-infested seas: the notorious home of the *Great White Shark*, a sea creature known for its formidable size and

ferociousness. It could tear a human torso apart in seconds!

Gradually the silence was replaced by a new sound: the noise of air skimming over the plane's fuselage and wings, as our craft began to lose height, rushing with accelerating speed towards the waves below.

Peering through the window, I remember an inhospitable environment: foreboding and dark; a turbulent swell. As the white-capped waves rushed across our bow, the sea appeared to be beckoning us into its depths. Whether or not those waves concealed the great white shark was more-or-less immaterial. It looked like a particularly nasty way to go.



Then the most divine sound descended from the heavens: a coughing, spluttering engine, struggling back into life! In his frantic effort, Jack with mere seconds to spare, had somehow managed to discover the remedy for impending doom. We skimmed over the dark choppy seas, then headed up and away, powering back to our rightful position, under those ever-so-friendly cotton-wool clouds.

For what remained of our journey, hardly a word was spoken. We were all in shock. The pilot explained meekly that he had forgotten to switch to the second fuel tank in the starboard wing: a grievous error. In short, we had simply run out of fuel!



I have reconstructed that incident a multitude of times,

and I can never get rid of the thought that a few seconds more delay, or an airlock in the pipes, would have without doubt consigned us to the depths!

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