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# FOREWORD

In the spring of 1991, a private plane crashed in shallow waters near Key West, Florida. There were no fatalities. About a year later, the National Transportation Safety Board issued a report on the incident, but questions remained. As one witness had noted, the surviving pilot, when first interviewed, had made the strangest of remarks: “It was World War II,” he had said. But look at the conclusion of the NTSB account that is reproduced here; it makes no mention of the pilot’s initial reaction.

**THE NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD DETERMINES THE PROBABLE CAUSE(S) OF THIS ACCIDENT AS FOLLOWS:**

An inadvertent in-flight collision with birds while on final approach, resulting in the loss of aileron and elevator control as well as engine power. It was confirmed that sea gulls and other birds feed actively at dusk, flying in flocks low over water, between sea level and 500 feet. Dr. Carla Dunn of the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History in Washington, DC, identified one bird retrieved from the cockpit as a Black Vulture (*Coryagyps atratus*), which weighed 75 ounces.

Other factors contributing to the accident include

- unsuitable terrain encountered during the forced landing
- the pilot being blinded by the setting sun
- pilot fatigue after a long flight from New England, with a fuel stop at Norfolk, VA

**Note:** A review of the pilot’s medical history reveals psychiatric treatment several decades ago.

And there the matter might have rested forever. But when I happened to come across this story, I was too intrigued by the pilot’s initial comment to let it go. As executive editor of *Modern Aviation* magazine I had read hundreds of such NTSB reports and had developed a certain mistrust of them. To be sure, the board’s investigations tended to be thorough, and admirably so, with respect to the *technical* intricacies of aviation accidents, but I had long considered them to be lacking in *psychological* sophistication. Indeed, my own experience as a pilot had given rise to a regular column in our magazine that examined the psychological causes of airplane crashes. At the time of the Key West accident, for example, the column in question carried an article, entitled *Get-There-Itis*, which

noted that many pilots were dying unnecessarily (along with their passengers) due to the foolish but common belief that they *had to get there* at a predetermined time. To be sure, the belief in question was often nourished by pilots' fear of losing income or even their jobs, but such explanations didn't make their actions any more acceptable. The urge to go-no-matter-what blinded some pilots to the fact that their training or equipment could be unsuitable for certain flight conditions. Indeed, all of the past victims of this inner compulsion could have lived if they had just waited a day, or even a few more hours at times, till ice-laden clouds or violent winds and thunderstorms had moved past their route or till night had turned back into day! So you will understand why I pursued the Key West story.

After locating the pilot back in New England and, I might add, after many frustrated attempts, I finally persuaded him to explore the strange thought about World War II that he had once expressed and to let me capture the result on paper. That project, it turned out, took nearly two decades to complete and gave rise to the forty-seven chapters of this book. Each one of them is based on a separate taped interview and, with a minimum of editing, has been transcribed in the pilot's own voice, just as it was told to me. Many of these chapters are now also illustrated with historical material that the pilot kindly provided. As you will see, the story begins well over half a century *before* the Key West crash and takes us to a place far removed from where the mishap occurred. In the end, I dare say, this book as a whole makes a far better accident report than the one that is fully reproduced in the Appendix to this book. But you must judge for yourself. So come with me to Germany and visit 1937 Berlin.

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