Preparedness in Practice: Navigating an In-Flight Emergency

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As pilots, we often discuss the importance of emergency preparedness, but it's in real-world situations where training truly proves its value. In early March, I experienced an engine anomaly during a training flight that underscored the critical nature of readiness.

We were conducting an IFR training flight in actual IMC conditions at 4,000 feet. Without warning, the aircraft began to shake. I noticed that Cylinder 3's CHT and EGT readings dropped to zero, Cylinder 2's EGT was high though its CHT remained in the green, and Cylinder 6's CHT was low. Cylinders 1, 4, and 5 appeared normal. Fuel flow was steady, and the rest of the engine indications were within acceptable parameters.

Recognizing the seriousness of the situation, I took control of the aircraft and declared an emergency. Although we had the VOR 33 approach loaded for Worcester (ORH), I requested vectors for the RNAV 33 approach to simplify the procedure. Throughout the descent, I closely monitored the instruments: oil pressure was high but within green limits, and oil temperature remained normal. We managed to maintain approximately 35% power, which allowed us to sustain 100 knots on approach. We broke out of the clouds at 1,300 feet and landed without further incident. After taxiing to Atlantic Aviation, we debriefed with the responding firefighters.

Know Your Aircraft Systems

In any abnormal situation, understanding what your aircraft is trying to tell you is half the battle. When the engine began behaving irregularly, I relied on my knowledge of what normal parameters should look like and, just as importantly, what combinations of symptoms might indicate deeper issues. Knowing how our engine works allowed me to interpret what I was seeing and rule out distractions. That confidence came not just from reading a manual, but from regular training, scenarios, and conversations with other pilots

and instructors. When things start to go sideways, systems knowledge turns noise into actionable information.

Train for the Environment You Fly In

There's no overstating how different an emergency feels in IMC. With fewer visual cues, more reliance on instruments, and less time to troubleshoot, everything compresses. Practicing emergencies in VMC is valuable, but if you're often flying in more complex environments like IFR, busy airspace, or unfamiliar terrain - your training should reflect that. Having previously run through "what if" discussions about engine trouble in IMC helped me stay calm and focused. Flying an aircraft safely is only half the job; managing the environment and workload when things go wrong is just as critical.

Memory Items Matter

There wasn't time to grab a checklist or scroll through screens when things started to escalate. The actions I needed to take were already ingrained — and that made all the difference. The engine partial power loss checklist wasn't something I had to look up; it was something I had internalized. That's exactly why we emphasize memorizing the bold boxed items in the POH/AFM. It's not just a recommendation; it's a lifeline. In the moment, rote recall of the correct actions gave me both time and bandwidth to manage the rest of the emergency calmly and methodically.

Recurrent and Scenario-Based Training Pays Off

We talk a lot about training, but it's easy to underestimate just how much it shapes our reactions. The six-month recurrent training program at Mike Goulian Aviation isn't just about checking boxes, it's about creating a rhythm of review, scenario practice, and systems reinforcement that makes emergency response feel familiar. I've never had a flight review or recurrent session where I didn't walk away sharper. The ability to fly with an instructor outside the six-month window, especially when something you've seen online or in the news raises questions, is one of the most valuable tools we offer. Emergencies don't wait for due dates, and neither should your training.

The MGAV Culture of Readiness

If I had to share one takeaway, it's this: don't assume "unlikely" means "never." Make it a habit to keep the nearest airport loaded, especially in IMC. If something doesn't feel right, don't wait, act. Declare early. Ask questions before you're ever in a position to need the answers. If there's a system or situation you've wondered about, schedule time to fly it with someone who knows it well. And always, always make time to brief and debrief, even on routine flights, because often that's where the best learning happens. Reflecting on this

flight, I’m more grateful than ever to be part of a training culture that makes professionalism a baseline. At Mike Goulian Aviation, we don’t just train for maneuvers, we train for judgment, workload management, and the “what-ifs.” The structure and discipline of our programs made me ready, but so did the attitude: staying sharp, being curious, and taking every flight seriously. In that moment, I wasn’t relying on instinct alone, I was drawing from layers of preparation that had been built over time. That’s what real readiness looks like.