

# In English, please



## GET-THERE-ITIS A DEADLY DISEASE

BY DOMINIQUE DÉFOSSÉZ

Air traffic controller, author of *L'anglais pour voler* • [www.anglais-pour-voler.com](http://www.anglais-pour-voler.com)



Ever thought "I should not be doing this" as you engage in a process whose outcome is unclear, or even dangerous? But since you have set your mind towards a certain goal and everything has been organized accordingly, reconsidering your options would be complicated or disappointing. So you go ahead as planned, even though somewhere in the back of your mind, an alarm bell is ringing.

In the aviation community, this psychological phenomenon is known under a variety of names such as "get-there-itis", "press-on-itis", or "get-home-itis" (the last two syllables to be pronounced as in meningitis). A more technical term is "plan continuation bias". It is the tendency to continue to follow an original plan even though it is obviously not working. This common enough syndrome is encountered in all kinds of domains, although the consequences can be **direst** in an aviation context where the wrong decision can quickly lead to the loss of lives. Continuing the medical analogy, it is said that no pilot is immune to the disease and that the best way to avoid getting sick is to recognize the symptoms whenever they appear.

Accident reports show that get-there-itis strikes all sorts of pilots indifferently: private or professional, inexperienced or highly trained. Here are a few cases.

On July 16, 1999, John F Kennedy Jr crashed his aircraft into the ocean, killing everyone on board, namely himself, his wife, and his sister-in-law. The Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association, an American organization representing

general aviation, analyzed the circumstances leading up to the accident. It ranked get-there-itis as the very first of ten mistakes JFK Jr made that evening<sup>(1)</sup>. Says the AOPA: "Kennedy did not want to disappoint anyone".

Closer to us, in time and space, is Renaud Ecalles' final flight on October 3, 2010. The aerobatics champion was heading home to the south of France with his wife and two children after an aerobatics display at an airfield in western France. The wreckage of his small aircraft was found several hours after Montpellier air traffic controllers had lost radio and radar contact with him. The BEA, the French Bureau of Investigation and Analysis, reported that considerations such as accommodation for the night and his next day's schedule had led the pilot to press on to destination. These issues had also influenced his choice of a diversion airfield when nightfall and deteriorating weather conditions made it clear that he could not continue with the limited equipment he had on board his aircraft<sup>(2)</sup>.

As for the TU-154 accident that claimed the lives of 96 people in Russia near Smolensk, among them the then Polish president, it was **alleged** that a high-ranking official was in the cockpit at the time and put the pilot under psychological pressure to continue his approach and attempt a landing in thick fog and reduced visibility.

JFK Jr was a rather inexperienced private pilot. Renaud Ecalles was a highly trained, world class aerobatics champion who had logged around 2500 flight hours. The Polish air force Tupolev was being flown by a military crew. These high-profile accidents received plenty of international media coverage, but pilot forums on the internet are also **crammed** with frightening stories of **close calls** following a **bout** of get-there-itis.

So, what are the **telltale** symptoms? It always

starts with some kind of pressure to fly. For instance if a holiday has been planned and everything is ready at destination for a great vacation, it is difficult for a pilot to cancel the trip, whatever the reason. Even more so if the passengers are not familiar with the operational limitations of a light aircraft. In this case, the pressure comes from the group, but it can also be self-induced. The urgent need to go to a professional meeting, a family gathering, or just get back home to be at work on time the next day can be a strong **incentive**. Pride is said to play a role sometimes. And so is stress: in a tense situation, when a choice has to be made, it is always easier to continue as planned rather than work on a change of strategy. Tiredness, task saturation, over-confidence, are other factors that can lead a pilot to make the wrong decision when facing complications such as deteriorating weather conditions, technical problems, or low endurance.

What can be done to reduce the risk of pilots succumbing to get-there-itis? Prevention, training and awareness are key words. They appear in many articles on the topic, such as the briefing note posted on Skybrary, the Eurocontrol internet site dedicated to aviation safety<sup>(3)</sup>. Recently, a safety review compiled by the DSAC, the French national supervisory authority, ended with the recommendation that each pilot should engage individually in a reflection on the subject, set his/her own limits and **abide by them** when the time comes<sup>(4)</sup>. It also emphasized that the ultimate barrier, never to be crossed, is the one set by rules and regulations. Many accident reports show the correlation between regulations being ignored and fatal accidents.

In any case, keep in mind the very accurate "better late than **dead on time**" that can be read on a witty awareness poster published by the Civil Aviation Authority of New-Zealand<sup>(5)</sup>, showing that this very serious matter is definitely an international concern.

## Vocabulary

To Abide by .....	respecter
To Allege .....	prétendre
A Bout .....	un accès
To have a Close call .....	l'échapper belle
To be Crammed with .....	regorger
Dead on time .....	pile à l'heure
Dire consequences .....	des conséquences désastreuses
Get-there-itis .....	objectif : destination, destinationite
An Incentive .....	une motivation
Telltale .....	révélateur

(1) [www.aopa.org/members/files/pilot/2010/july/feature\\_jfk.html](http://www.aopa.org/members/files/pilot/2010/july/feature_jfk.html)

(2) [www.bea.aero/docspa/2010/f-bz101003/pdf/f-bz101003.pdf](http://www.bea.aero/docspa/2010/f-bz101003/pdf/f-bz101003.pdf)

(3) [www.skybrary.aero/index.php/press-on-itis\\_\(OGHFA\\_BN\)](http://www.skybrary.aero/index.php/press-on-itis_(OGHFA_BN))

(4) [www.developpement-urable.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/bulletin\\_securite\\_DSAC\\_No13.pdf](http://www.developpement-urable.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/bulletin_securite_DSAC_No13.pdf) (in French)

(5) [www.caa.govt.nz/safety\\_info/Personal\\_Minimums.pdf](http://www.caa.govt.nz/safety_info/Personal_Minimums.pdf)