

Would you hesitate to declare an emergency?

The fact that all three of my passengers were throwing up simultaneously left me three options: Tough it out and press on to our destination; join them in their nauseous state; or declare an emergency and get the hell on the ground.

My right seat passenger was a Horizon Air first officer. She thought she was used to bumpy rides. I was flying her to her domicile. She was supposed to report for work there within four hours of our scheduled arrival time.

To top it off, it was only the 11th month of her 12-month probation period. Missing her show time could be reason enough to fire her. I wanted to press on...believe me. I wanted to impress her with my weather flying skills in hard IMC. I wanted to be her hero. But mostly I wanted her to walk my resumé in to her chief pilot the next time a hiring window opened.

Everything in me said, "continue." Even my front seatmate pleaded for me to gut it out, so I hesitated.

But here's the thing: It's a strange reality to be at 8,000 feet and your soundtrack becomes the steady thrum of twin Comanche motors and propellers counterpointing the unsteady gasping and retching of your passengers. When my own stomach began to roil, I knew I had to throw all thoughts of heroism out. I reluctantly chose to declare an emergency and divert to the nearest airport.

"Center, twin Comanche three hundred romeo echo is declaring a medical emergency. I have multiple vomiters onboard and I need clearance down to 2,200 immediately and vectors to KCEC for the ILS 11 approach."

Without waiting, I initiated an emergency descent and made the turn myself. I'd already pressed the "nearest" button on the Garmin 430, so I knew which direction to head in. ATC didn't like that move. I could hear the audible distress signal of a near miss in the background when they exhorted me to stop my turn and descent.

After minutes that passed like seconds, we taxied up to the FBO. A crowd surged onto the rainy ramp. ATC, of course, had passed on the nature of our emergency. People had gathered, as intrigued by what might emerge from the plane as they were afraid. My passengers deplaned as best they could, each looking like a pile of clothes just out of the spin cycle.

The Horizon Air FO called in sick and missed her show time, but she wasn't fired. She and the other passengers did get their first ambulance rides. It was determined that their lunch, not the ride, had sickened all aboard. As for me, I stumbled onto the tarmac and finally succumbed as well.

It sucked to end the trip by declaring an emergency, but it was the smart play. Had I hesitated much longer, I might have become as incapacitated as my passengers. That would have been a disaster.

For many pilots, it's common practice not to declare an emergency, even though doing so would get them the priority attention they need. Why is that?

Perhaps, for some pilots, it's the misapprehension that the ramifications of declaring an emergency include extensive paperwork and a probable violation.

Legally, pilots MAY have to file a written report of an emergency in the event of a deviation from a federal regulation. However, according to the FAA, they will not face an FAA violation if their actions are in the interest of safety. Finally, the FAA supports the pilot's ability and judgment to act in this manner. Despite that, some pilots are loathe to draw undue attention to themselves.

Perhaps it's human nature to try to avoid embarrassing ourselves. You might think that declaring an emergency is akin to announcing that you have lost control of the situation.

The truth is it's exactly the opposite. You haven't lost control. You are taking control of the situation. You are delegating responsibility by commanding the full attention of everyone who can get you down safely. In the business world, that's called leadership.

In a recent [Aviation Safety Reporting System](#) report, also called a NASA report, the pilot noted the engine quit in flight. He managed to find a good landing spot — a closed airport sporting a big "X" on its runway. He told ATC of his engine trouble and then switched over to 121.5 to make a Mayday announcement before landing on the runway. Someone monitoring 121.5 suggested that he declare an emergency before he landed there. Only then did he.

In filing the NASA report, this pilot mentioned that it seemed more natural for him to make the Mayday call than it was for him to formally declare an emergency due to engine failure. Think about that.

Declaring an emergency allows ATC to give you first priority handling to expedite a safe landing attempt. Mayday is used to signal a life-threatening situation. Mayday is the call of last resort. Declaring an emergency is a step well before that.

As one crusty old CFI told me, “Announcing Mayday is telling everyone where to find your wreckage. Declaring an emergency is done to avoid becoming the wreckage.”

And yet, many pilots hesitate to utter those words.

Many of us might not dare to declare in a moment that didn't smack of peril. Subconsciously, we might think that each pilot is granted a finite number of emergency declarations. But that's the point of declaring an emergency — to extricate yourself from a situation before it smacks of peril. Doing so is a card to be played when necessary.

The only thing is, they aren't finite like a deck of cards. You can declare as many times in your flying career as you need to, as long as you can justify. I discovered two NASA reports for the same incident that address just this issue. Basically, a VFR traffic watch pilot encountered instrument meteorological conditions after being instructed to maintain VFR. The weather, higher terrain, minimum vectoring altitudes and a failure of air traffic control coordination all played a part in this event, resulting in an controller declaring an emergency instead of the pilot.

The controller understood that, given the situation unfolding, the best option was for someone to declare an emergency. He asked the pilot if he intended to do so, essentially inviting the pilot to make the call. Instead the pilot declined. That left the controller no other choice, so he did it for him.

Declaring an emergency allowed the controller to deviate from his own handbook in the name of safety and give the pilot an immediate IFR climb clearance despite being below MVA, thus avoiding a “controlled flight into terrain” crash. It also allowed the controller to eventually vector the pilot to an IFR approach and safe landing.

In his NASA statement, the pilot said it wasn't until he was on the ground and had talked to the controller's supervisor that he understood why the emergency had been declared.

Let's face it. He's not alone. Would you have had the presence of mind to declare an emergency in that situation? I don't think I would have. Until I read that report, I doubt it would have occurred to me.

In a different situation under similar circumstances, another pilot also failed to declare an emergency. Here again ATC did it for him after offering the pilot the opportunity to do so first. The NASA report filed by the Tower Controller described what he called an ATC-declared emergency. His account of the event: A VFR aircraft encountered IMC conditions, was unfamiliar with Special Visual Flight Rules procedures and required controller assistance to locate the airport.

Now I don't know if it's true, but I've been told all my aviation life about a friendly rivalry existing between ATC and pilots. It's been said that pilots think they're better than ATC because ATC are pilot wannabes who can't fly. It's also been said that ATC think they're better than pilots because pilots are so dumb they need ATC to tell them where to go.

Whether this rivalry is real or not, I cannot say. After all, some of my best friends are ATC.

But I can say this: As a pilot, I can't imagine a worse case of relinquishing my hard-earned cockpit control than having ATC declare an emergency for me because I was hesitant to make the right decision.

Given the opportunity to indicate absolute situational awareness, to showcase my full pilot-in-command authority, this is one instance where I wouldn't want some fed taking that away from me. I'm just sayin'...