

Found in the "Air Facts" web site.

Emergency formation flying with a Viscount by Ron Macdonald

The flight originated at Montreal's Dorval airport on February 23, 1967. It was a miserable day: snow, rain, freezing rain - a real mixture. The aircraft was a DC 9-10, fin number 702. My first officer was Jean Guy Page (now deceased) and after the cockpit checks were done, we were towed to the de-icing area and I do remember the de-icing spray hitting the windshield quite heavily. We then started the engines, taxied to Runway 06 and took off with me as pilot in command, en route to Winnipeg.

We leveled off at 31,000 ft., passing over Sault St. Marie and, nearing Thunder Bay, I sensed that nothing was moving (i.e. altimeters or airspeed, where normally there are minor fluctuations). I tried a bit of power with no change in speed then made a small climb input. Still no movement on the altimeter.

We called ATC and advised that we were not sure of our altitude or speed and declared PAN PAN. We then read up the drills in the QRH and the DC-9 manual but they had no effect on the instruments so we realized we had a serious problem. How to get safely down when the weather was poor and even our alternate in North Dakota had solid overcast and Winnipeg had moderate snow and a ceiling of 300 to had moderate snow and a ceiling of 300 to 400ft. with poor visibility?

The problem was to get down through the heavy overcast with unreliable altimeters and airspeeds. Our fuel situation did not give us any open airport within our range. Knowing that Winnipeg was a Viscount training base, I asked the company if anyone was training, expecting a negative reply due the poor Winnipeg weather, but was advised a Viscount was up on a captain's final check out.

I asked Jean Guy to take control while I spoke with the Viscount and suggested we meet at the Vivian fix on top, which I believe was 9000 ft. We began a descent with the speed roughly based on the EPR and with fluctuating altimeters and met the Viscount, who advised he was level at 9000 ft. with my altimeter showing 19,000 ft. (and fluctuating) and our speeds locked on 320 knots.

I asked the Viscount if he would formate off my right wing, acting as my altimeter and airspeed and was advised "no problem," which helped reduced the pucker factor somewhat. I told the cabin crew that we had a problem and that the Viscount was going to assist us. Then I told the passengers that we were doing some photography with the Viscount.

We then discussed with ATC how the Viscount would act as my altimeter and airspeed and we decided to use a single frequency to avoid any loss of contact. We began the descent based on the artificial horizon and the VSI and the Viscount stating 6000 ft. and ATC giving us headings. Then the Viscount reported 5000, 4000, 3000 feet... and to start leveling off for 2000 ft. to start the approach. ATC vectored us onto the localizer for runway 36 and we completed the before-landing check.

ATC then cleared us for an ILS for Runway 36 and advised we had been cleared to land, so we asked the Viscount for 145 knots with Jean Guy handling the throttles while I flew the airplane to intercept the glideslope - ignoring the erratic airspeed and altimeter indications. The Viscount gave us a couple more altitude checks and then the radio altimeter registered our height above the ground, but I concentrated on the glideslope.

At about 300 feet, Jean Guy called "runway in sight" and I took the throttles and we landed safely on Runway 36 in moderate snow. The Viscount carried out an overshoot and went back to its training mission. I thanked the Viscount crew and ATC for their help and, after shutdown, called Captain Ralph Leek, the Montreal DC-9 chief pilot, who said "well done," but did laugh at my announcement to the passengers about the photography for Expo 67 in solid cloud.

At the time, I did not get the names of the Viscount crew and even at this late date do not have them. Without their help, this story may not have been written.

Note: This incident happened a long time ago and therefore this is what I remember at the ripe old age of 85.

Ron Macdonald