

# Anatomy of a Plane Crash

Picture the scene – even, if you're feeling brave or curious, associate into it, and imagine how your NLP expertise could help

**M**y name's Neil, and I'll be your plane crash victim today". I wish I'd said that, but the line truly belonged to Nina, one of the two co-passengers on an ill-fated light aircraft transfer flight my partner Andy and I took from our island resort back to mainland Australia last April. Lying in our hospital beds, shocked, bruised but otherwise intact, the gallows humour was rampant. Two hours previously, our plane's single engine had failed mid-flight, and we'd crashed into the ocean. The skill of our 21-year old pilot, Kate, meant we had survived the impact and subsequent immersion in shark-infested waters before our rescue. Picture the scene – even, if you're feeling brave or curious, associate into it, and imagine how your NLP expertise could help.

You're airborne soaring at 500m altitude, admiring the ocean view. Suddenly the plane's single engine splutters and dies. You can hear the pilot's urgent Mayday call, see her frantically adjusting knobs and levers, and feel the plane plummet towards the ocean. There's barely time to panic – if you have any hope of surviving impact, you must act against instinct and open the plane's doors before you hit and the pressure of tons of water traps you.



Photograph: RACQ – CQ RESCUE

Your muscles tense as you brace for impact. Everything happens very quickly. You hit, submerge, then surface. Within seconds, the cabin's half full of water, with more rapidly pouring in. You have to evacuate immediately, checking that everyone's safe, and inflate your life jackets. Moments later all that's left of the plane is two meters of tail sticking vertically out of the ocean. Which rapidly disappears below the surface, taking with it all your bags, tickets, passports and possessions...

Six months on, the memories are sharp

and hazy. I remember... the strange sense of calm...the sight of Andy on the wing of the plane, frantically trying to inflate his lifejacket and yelling 'where's the f@\*king red toggle?'...my haste to get both of us away from the sinking plane... Nina's wonderful cry: "Oh s&\*t! My best lippy was in there! I can't get rescued looking like this!" On which surreal note, we began bobbing and waiting to be rescued...

In my other life, I'm an NLP Trainer. Andy's a coach. Almost immediately we began using our NLP to help us survive. The crash, and the way we've coped since, has given us a unique insight into how NLP can help deal with such traumas. These insights and learnings seem far too juicy not to share with my peers, so with your permission I'll be doing just that in the next few editions of Rapport. Watch this space. But for now, back to you: Having thought yourself through this adventure which NLP skills and distinctions would you apply to survive, stay well, deal with trauma and go on to fly again? We can compare notes next issue. ●

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# Anatomy of a Plane Crash Part 2

By Neil Almond



Photograph: RACQ – CQ RESCUE

In the last issue of Rapport the story left off with myself, my partner Andy and our pilot and co-passengers bobbing in shark-infested waters after our light aircraft crashed into the Australian Ocean. I invited you to associate into the experience and ask yourself which NLP techniques you'd use to survive – which is just what we did. Not in the spirit of some clever NLP exercise, nor an attempt to prove 'it works'. I'm also not saying that using a few NLP tricks can make a plane crash as fun as bungee-jumping – far from it! But as NLP practitioners we have access to an amazing range of resources, which we discovered were instinct, automatic, hard-wired into us to help us survive. Even in the midst of an emergency, what could we do immediately to minimise the immediate psychic shock and possibly make the difference between full-blown PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) and a speedy recovery? That became our urgent focus.

So now you're curious – which techniques did we use? The crash happened so fast that we were on automatic pilot, getting away from the plane, checking everyone was alive. Everything felt unreal as I watched the plane sink and realized how lucky we were – the first of many reframes. We focused on the facts of the situation – we were alive, only 2km from land, and knew our Mayday call had been

heard, so rescue was coming. We could swim to land if needed. This helped eliminate the 'catastrophising' mentality that emergencies can provoke. We reframed through future pacing – "What a fantastic training story this'll make! The participants think they've got problems?" – and through humour: "Kindly raise all bleeding limbs out of the water," we joked – mindful of the sharks. Laughter distracted and kept us going. Underneath we were reframing, looking for the positive – how could we use the experience? In what context would this experience be useful? Well, we had great insurance for a start – and a new wardrobe is always welcome! And after watching our travel documents sink to the seabed we knew we'd have the pleasure of extra time with Andy's Australian family.

In any situation I believe you have a choice. Are you 'At Effect' of what happened or do you position yourself 'At Cause' – taking responsibility? We chose to be 'At Cause'. Not that we were to blame for the crash. But we got on the plane. We chose the plane not the boat. If a single engine fails, these things can happen. We didn't feel anger or blame towards the pilot – she'd saved our lives. Being 'At Cause' and concentrating on the facts of the situation helped shrink it on our 'mental desktops' – situating it within the realms of a

reality in which we could be responsible for our results. A disaster situation often embeds at the Identity or Spiritual Neurological levels i.e "I AM a plane crash victim" or "The universe is punishing me." Instead we broke down the experience: on the Environmental level – we have life jackets, the land is over there; the Behavioural level – what are we going to do now to survive. On the Capability level, can we all swim well?. And on a Beliefs level we believed we had all the resources we needed to survive. Separating it out, we were ourselves not 'plane crash victims' – individuals currently experiencing an adventure rather than being totally consumed by the experience itself. These subtle distinctions of focus, I believe, helped massively in surviving the experience and the ensuing shock and trauma as smoothly as possible.

By this point it seemed like we'd been waiting for ages. We didn't know how long it'd be till we were rescued. Andy, asthmatic with a slight build, was now shivering and slipping deeper into shock. I focused on coaching him back into a resourceful survival mode. Coaching called me into being – I had to get rid of my doubts and use everything possible to help him access a more positive state. We changed the submodalities of the water to make it warmer. We called back a recent experience in which he'd helped me successfully deal with a potentially traumatic 8.7km pathway infested with dinner-plate sized spiders, by visualising them as small and friendly, waving at us with roller-skated feet. The game was the perfect resource anchor for dealing with a difficult experience well. "Remember the spiders waving at us?" I said. "What can we change right now to achieve the same effect in THIS experience?" As an NLP practitioner Andy immediately took up the game to get himself back into a more resourceful state. It became a crucial 'break state' and kept us going until we heard the sound of a distant helicopter arriving to airlift us to McKay hospital – where the next instalment begins. ●

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# Anatomy of a Plane Crash Part 3

By Neil Almond

**H**ave you ever watched someone being airlifted into a helicopter on telly? It looks fun doesn't it? Almost something you'd line up to try. Well maybe it's just a question of context, but after crashing into the ocean in a light aircraft (as reported in the last two editions of this fine magazine) and treading water for close to an hour praying for rescue, the experience was somewhat different. I never realised, for instance, how difficult it is to breathe under a chopper - it almost feels like the air is being sucked out of your lungs. Nor had I considered that the spray would be quite so painful - imagine being in a jet wash with someone squirting the pressure-hose directly at your face and you might come close. I also hadn't ever really imagined how physically debilitating shock and exposure could be. But all that said, we were being rescued and that felt amazing.

The emotions were so mixed up that when the chopper flew off having rescued the pilot and our two co-passengers, leaving Andy and I still bobbing in the water, we weren't sure whether to be grateful for the delicious peace and respite from the physical discomfort or panicked that we were being left behind. We decided to use the time to float out on our time lines to 15 minutes beyond our safe arrival back on dry land and look back on ourselves celebrating our rescue. We'd only known Nina and Henry a short time, but it's amazing how an intense experience such as a plane crash can give you a deep knowing about someone's true character. We knew they would sooner bite their own legs off than leave us behind. We knew the chopper would return.

It did. 15 minutes later it was our turn to be winched to safety, Andy first, then me. I won't describe the winching process but will say that once the initial flood of relief from being out of the water had passed we began to realise that the submodalities of flight had rearranged - an involuntary version of the NLP 'Like to Dislike' script. The last place we wanted to be was in the air - oh why couldn't they send a boat? I suppose this is only natural, we had of course just fallen from the sky. But we'd always loved flying and now I was experiencing something close to a phobic

reaction that was taking every bit of my NLP training to keep in check - I was petrified!

We arrived after the longest 20 minute flight of my life at MacKay hospital. And it was here that the magnitude of what we'd experienced really started to hit. As we jumped down from the helicopter we were greeted by an army of wheel chairs and gurneys. It was obvious they didn't know what state we'd be in - that we could walk was a great surprise. To be honest, that we were there was a surprise; we learned afterwards that in nine out of ten cases a plane like ours, with fixed undercarriage, would flip and roll when it hit the water, trapping the passengers inside or killing them on impact. We were



Photograph: RACQ - CQ RESCUE

lucky to be alive, and the richness of life had never tasted sweeter.

After several hours in hospital we retreated to a local motel which, thank goodness, had been arranged for us - our brains were incapable of such a simple act as booking a room (which when you consider that Andy was at the time Planning and Risk Manager on the £5.5b Channel Tunnel Rail Link project is saying something). In truth the next few hours are a bit of a blur. I do however remember that there were three things that I learnt that night which will enhance my knowledge as a coach - the therapeutic

power of debriefing after traumatic events, the importance of truly honouring and pacing significant emotional experiences and the true medicinal properties of red wine! The kinaesthetic of that night will stay with me forever; as I'm sure will the friendship of Nina and Henry.

I didn't sleep a great deal that night, and my numb and glazed feelings can't have been helped by the righteous hangover I was experiencing. Ahead of us we had an immediate test of a one and a half hour flight back to Brisbane to try to arrange new passports. As you can imagine the idea of setting foot back on an aircraft was terrifying. The imminent flight and the 24 hour ordeal of flying back to the UK were going to take every ounce of our NLP training, and with your permission I'd love to cover that more fully in the next edition of Rapport. I'll also save for now the incredible opportunity we had to explore the very best and very worst of customer service in a crisis and the subsequent learnings about how best a company can support and manage customers who've experienced trauma and how NLP can play a vital role in this.

It is incredible how much gold can come from even the darkest of events. Our experience has been that through some combination of taking responsibility for results and compassionate reframing it is possible to transform a potential turd on your time line into a beautiful rose. A version of that transformation could be the book I am in the process of writing which focuses on overcoming the fear of flying - let's face it, who better to pace and lead the experience than someone who has them-self fallen from the sky. I'm in the process of testing some of the models we've established and would love to hear from anyone who'd like an even better relationship with flying, or indeed anyone who has overcome the fear for themselves and is willing to be modelled. I can be contacted at [neil@neilalmond.com](mailto:neil@neilalmond.com). I look forward to hearing from you, or sharing the results in the next edition of Rapport. ●

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# Anatomy of a Plane Crash Part 4

By Neil Almond

This is the fourth column in the Anatomy of a Plane Crash series and the hardest to write. It's been an incredible year since the accident and, as you might imagine, the few hours I've described so far are frozen in my memory. Beyond this point it all gets a little fuzzier. Perhaps that's because I haven't reviewed it as many times, or maybe it's a natural symptom of the psychic-shock that normally follows a life event of this magnitude.

We envied Henry and Nina (our fellow survivors) as they only needed to get back to the Sunshine Coast in order to feel the safety and security of their own home, whereas we were more than 10,000 miles from our little flat in London.

The first step was to return to Brisbane. My instinct was to hire a car, but of course my licence was now buried at the bottom of the Ocean together with our passports, travel documents and (in fact) everything but the clothes on our backs. So our first test was the one hour flight back to the state capital. This was the first time we realised that our former love of flying had transformed into a near phobic reaction that took every ounce of our NLP training to control. But if this was hard, then the prospect of 24 hours in the air seemed unbearable.

Replacing passports with no proof of identity in today's security conscious times is not an easy feat, but we managed it. Likewise we survived panic attacks whilst shopping to replace our wardrobe and managed to avoid the eager press. Amongst all this I experienced my first flashback. For the uninitiated, a flashback is an involuntary reliving of a traumatic event in a highly associated state. Think of a really vivid nightmare and magnify it to a level where you can't separate dream from reality. In my case it was reliving the split second we hit the water as if it was happening live, seeing through my own eyes the torrent of water that forced me back in my seat and experiencing, in not-so-glorious Technicolor, the full range of emotions my unconscious mind had associated with the experience.

Of course these flashbacks were yet another mirror in which we could explore the power

of NLP. The first step was to massively dissociate, catapulting myself out of my body so that I could see the crash site below me, where necessary moving way out into space until it became just a spot in the Ocean. The next step was always to see both Andy and myself escaping from the fuselage along with the other passengers and being rescued. When sufficiently calm I would also replay the episode from a dissociated position being careful to pace and honour the experience, and all the emotions present, adding as I went the narrative "and I survived!" I'm pleased to say it worked, and other than those first few turbulent days neither of us has experienced



further flashbacks; flight phobia on the other hand was another matter.

Much as we never wanted to set foot on another airplane, we had to get home. One thing had become clear however, there was no way we could fly economy. This wasn't a dramatic 'do you know what we've been through' gesture, but rather we were terrified of being enclosed. The very idea of being stuck in tightly packed rows of tiny seats was enough to induce a cold sweat. We decided whether from savings or insurance we needed to upgrade to business class.

Now I don't know whether you're one of the lucky people to turn left rather than right on boarding a plane, but if you are I'm sure you'll agree with me that the submodalities of business class flying are very different from those of economy. Not least, if you are lucky enough to fly first class as we did

for one of the home legs – Dom Perignon really does help take your mind off the fact that you're in a tube flying at 30,000 feet, and eases that part of your mind that is screaming out that at any moment you could, and almost certainly will, plummet from the sky.

Now I'm not recommending using alcohol as a crutch during traumatic experiences, but our particular fear of flying was caused by an event only days earlier – much too hot an issue to attempt any deep change work. We needed quick fixes, sticking plasters if you like, that would enable us to reach our destination safely and with the minimum amount of anxiety. Luckily NLP offered us some great

tools. One of my favourites was to actively imagine a small affectionate and playful kitten on my lap (puppies also work just as well) and to focus all my attention onto what they were doing. Playing with kittens and puppies for many of us is such an incredibly powerful anchored state that it has the power to overwhelm significant negative emotions. Likewise talking to my inner child (that part of me that was deeply fearful) proved extremely powerful, pacing its experience, holding its hand and sharing with it other times it had been frightened and everything

worked out just fine. I also remember in a particularly unwelcome bout of turbulence realising that the physical sensations we were experiencing were no different than an average train journey from London to Norwich!

As you can I'm sure imagine, no amount of future pacing could compete with the delicious experience of setting foot back on UK soil to the waiting hugs of friends and family. The quest to return to normality is where we will pick up the story in the next issue of Rapport. Until then I would love to hear from anyone who'd like an even better relationship with flying, or indeed anyone who has overcome the fear for themselves and is willing to be modelled. ●

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# Anatomy of a Plane Crash Part 5

By Neil Almond

Isn't it amazing how a few short moments can shape your life? You possibly know my story by now. One minute Andy (my partner) and I were sipping beer on the white sands of the Great Barrier Reef reflecting on our relaxing holiday, and just a few short moments later our plane transfer back to the mainland was ditching into the ocean leaving us treading water and praying for rescue.

As you might imagine this experience has shaped our last 18 months together. We have learnt so much. We've laughed. We've cried. We faced our share of demons and have broken through old barriers. There is definite gold in our experience. And I'm pleased to say that the new learnings and distinctions are now enriching my practice as an NLP trainer and coach.

Something that surprised me on returning to the UK was that most clinical psychologists won't work with a client until at least six months have elapsed following a traumatic event. The logic is simple, it takes the body and mind at least six months to begin to settle after the physical and psychic trauma that these events cause. They also consider that it's not possible to diagnose Post Traumatic Stress Disorder for at least this period, as most individuals experience some level of PTSD-like symptoms over these first few months.

So what does this mean for NLP? Well I personally believe that it was our NLP skills and mindset that helped us to escape full blown PTSD. The ability to be able to reframe the experience to see opportunity gave us back choice and enabled us to regain an element of control from amongst the chaos. Likewise my instincts tell me that being able to elegantly re-imprint, change submodalities and collapse negative anchors have made a significant difference to our recovery process. And of course NLP certainly offers some great tools for transforming flight phobia. I'm therefore convinced that NLP Practitioners can play a key role in supporting people through the early stages of trauma as long as we remember that trauma, like bereavement, has a process and can't always be rushed.

I was certainly surprised by the level of psychic shock that we experienced and the impact it had on our lives. Looking back I realise I wasn't really fit for work in those first six months - although I didn't necessarily realise it at the time. My normally clear head was foggy and my emotions were erratic; I



## NLP certainly offers some great tools for transforming flight phobia

remember with embarrassment a time in Knightsbridge where I angrily challenged the behaviour of a traffic warden, when at the time I didn't even own a car! We both closed down quite significantly during this period, preferring to rush home and lick our wounds rather than socialise. We lived more for the moment, happily using alcohol and, in my case, food as a means of changing the way we felt, losing much of our normal resourcefulness and ability to consistently manage state. And all this despite our own NLP fluency and the generous support of some of the amazing NLP minds we're proud to call friends.

This experience has redoubled the humility and compassion I bring to my coaching. I have always believed that pacing experience is a vital part of NLP and now have a full kinaesthetic association to the subtle interplay between honouring the experience and championing a rich 'desired state'. Think for a moment about a Meta Model challenge to a nominalisation such as 'I have depression'. Many might consider getting curious about 'how are you doing depression?' is appropriate. In principle this can be valuable, if done with empathy and rapport (and maybe more elegantly worded) as it helps to begin the vital journey from effect to cause. But in the case of traumatic event, where quite often the locus of control feels even further outside of the individual,

is a direct challenge such as 'how are you being a plane crash victim?' useful? Well other than the fact that I might have slapped you had you asked me such a blunt question in the first six months, (remember the poor traffic warden) the principle of starting the journey from effect

to cause is perhaps key. I think my point here is that compassion is essential together with a recognition that for many people the psychic shock that they are experiencing may be temporarily outside of their ability to 'pull themselves together'.

In a similar vein it is interesting to note that Kate (our amazing 21 year old pilot) was back flying only days after the ditching. She had the same physical trauma as us, but the key difference I see is that the locus of control was within her. She was trained and drilled and able to unconsciously carry out the emergency procedure that saved our lives. We think there were under two minutes between the engine failing and our plane crashing into the ocean. She didn't have time to think about consequences, only act! Two minutes for us on the other hand enabled us to do a lot of conscious and unconscious processing. I don't remember being scared at all or even contemplating that we might die, but my flashbacks and experiences since suggest that my unconscious mind thought otherwise. Nina, one of our fellow passengers, reports deliberately zipping up her handbag so that when they pulled up our bodies they would be able to identify her and Henry and notify next of kin. That image leaves me cold.

The adventure continues. We're still unpicking the learnings and opportunities from this experience. Any thoughts or ideas that have come to you while reading these articles would be more than welcome, the email address is below. In the next issue I'd love to share a Practitioners Guide to Fear of Flying based on my experiences. I look forward to seeing you then. ●

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# Anatomy of a Plane Crash Part 6

By Neil Almond

There is a great passage in Dawn French's book *Dear Fatty* in which she describes her relationship with flying: "Flying, to me, is utterly exhausting, for the simple reason that it is my duty (on behalf of all the passengers, I hasten to add) to keep the plane in the air by sheer force of my mind... if I lose concentration for even a minute, the massive metal crate will surely plummet earthwards and hundreds of tragic deaths would be on my conscience." A couple of years ago I would have just read this, and her subsequent comments about what would most likely happen to her conscience on impact, as yet more evidence of Dawn's undeniable comedy genius, but after falling out of the sky myself and ditching into the ocean (as described in previous editions of *Rapport*) I can now identify fully with the sentiment as well.

Researchers estimate that up to 40% of the UK population suffer from some form of fear of flying. If that figure is anywhere near accurate then that would mean that there are up to 24 million people out there who find flying less than pleasurable. As an NLP practitioner that figure saddens me (or at least the non-commercial part of me) as my experiences since the crash have shown that NLP can play a significant role in collapsing fear of flying.

Fear of flying obviously takes many different forms. Some, like mine, are formed as a direct result of a traumatic flight experience. Of course this doesn't need to be a crash, a particularly uncomfortable bout of turbulence, an aborted landing, sudden drops in altitude or any other in-flight drama will do just fine. Other fears come about as a result of anchoring negative emotions to a flight situation; so for example someone who had just had a fight with a loved one or received some bad news might then board a plane and unconsciously link the negative emotions he or she was feeling to flying. In so doing an anchor is formed that fires each time they board the plane.

Fears can also be inherited from a loved one or adopted unconsciously following media coverage of air crashes or airplane disaster movies. Still others are part of a wider system such as in those clients who also suffer from anxiety, claustrophobia or



## “Conventional wisdom states that flying is one of the safest forms of transport”

emetophobia (fear of vomiting).

Conventional wisdom states that flying is one of the safest forms of transport. However even in the face of strong evidence, most fearful flyers will mismatch with this statement – at least on an unconscious level. It is the ability to communicate with this unconscious part that I believe gives NLP Practitioners the edge in working around fear of flying. I found it very useful to imagine that the fearful part was a small child, a younger version of me, and to communicate directly to that part beaming to them the resources and knowledge that could help to make them feel safe.

One of the exercises that many of the people I've worked with have found valuable is a game to separate large Boeing and Airbus planes from the rest of the pack, reinforcing just how strong and resilient commercial airliners are, and emphasising the duplicate and triplicate systems that they have in place for all critical functions. Did you know for instance that at cruising altitude, even if they lost all engine power (which would never happen) that one of those huge metal birds could glide for approximately 30 minutes – more than enough time in most parts of the world to find an airport and land safely.

I have also found it useful to talk both the adult and child through all the bumps,

beeps, cracks, changes in pressure, smells and sights that can, in so many people, fire anchors or begin a process of catastrophization. Mental Rehearsal works perfectly for this. A couple of the common trips for people include the moment the plane switches from land to onboard power just before taxiing; the point shortly after takeoff when

the captain eases back on the throttle (because more power is needed for takeoff than cruising) leaving the plane seemingly hanging in the air and the bings and bongs the crew use to communicate which for fearful flyers often signal impending doom.

Adding positive anchors can of course be useful – 'as you notice the stewardesses leaving their seats to commence their preparations for service, allow yourself to feel even more confident and secure, knowing that everything is in perfect order and that this is going to be a wonderful flight...' I also throw in a few techniques for handling turbulence or any moments where fear does rise – submodality shifts (I used to imagine a playful kitten on my lap and purring in my ear), mapping across (close your eyes and imagine you're on a train – see someone trying to navigate their way back from the buffet car without spilling their drink etc), or anything else in the arsenal.

It is normally only at this point that I start to bring in some of the big gun techniques of NLP – parts integration, timeline, reprogramming, anchoring, phobia cures etc. My experience shows that these have more impact once sufficient heat has been taken out of the fear and enough leverage has been created.

As we said before, every fear is different but with behavioural flexibility, sensory acuity and, of course, a good dollop of compassion I believe NLP can play a key role in transforming a fear of flying into a feeling of freedom, relaxation and choice. Or in my case from terror back to a love of flying. ■

I hope the Anatomy of a Plane Crash has proved useful or at least interesting. This sixth part brings us to the end of the series and I do thank you for your company over the past 18 months. If I can be of any support to you, or through you to your clients, then please don't hesitate to get in touch at [neil@neilalmond.com](mailto:neil@neilalmond.com)