

120 seconds

It was a cool and sunny morning on November 20, 2022 at the home airport. I was looking forward to a very nice flight to Cumberland Gap Tennessee to pick up my stepdaughter and bring her back for the Thanksgiving holiday. Being proactive, I remotely turned on the heaters in the hanger about an hour before I arrived so the plane would be warm and of course myself. When I arrived, the hanger was warm, I preflighted before opening the hanger door.

As I opened the hanger door, the cool morning air hit my face and the sun was bright in my eyes. I grabbed the tow bar to pull my Cherokee out. During Covid, I installed a new interior, new partial glass panel and along with the rebuilt engine, I loved flying my Cherokee! Closing things up I hopped in and fired up the plane, listened to the AWOS and turned on the heat. I programmed the 530 and switched everything over to GPS, set the autopilot up and had it ready to turn on when I hit enough altitude in about 120 seconds.

Called ground to let them know I was ready to taxi, they gave me my instructions to the run-up area and I taxied out. After doing to run up, I triple checked everything and then I went ahead and taxied up to the runway. I would be airborne in a couple of minutes and was looking forward to the flight. Stopping for fuel on the other side of the state and then continuing to Tennessee, letting the stepdaughter buy my dinner and returning home the next day.

Pulling up to runway 17, I called tower to let them know I was ready to go. 2 minutes away from autopilot and watching the world flyby. Calling tower, they responded and told me I was cleared to take off, and my eastbound VFR departure was approved. It was at that moment my world changed...

Tower gave me their clearance. To this day I could swear I repeated my instructions and the next thing I recall is coming to some sort of consciousness, looking at my wife, hooked up to all sorts of machines with wires running everywhere and then realizing I was lying in the hospital. As the hours went by and then the days that followed, I could start piecing what had happened with still some dark spots and realized how blessed, fortunate or just plain lucky I was, depending on what you believe.

Waking up and seeing my wife, I knew that sometime had passed. We live just over an hour from the airport, and as I pieced things together, I came to realize there was about a 3-hour window that I did not have. The hospital had been running a series of tests on me and everything was coming back normal or as normal as it could be. Doctors and nurses were coming in and asking questions and I was doing everything I could to answer. It wasn't until the next morning that a neurologist came in asking all sorts of things and again, I was doing what I could to answer.

I am not sure what I said to him, but he looked at me and said “I will be right back” within minutes after he left a nurse came and got me, took me to the MRI room and put me on the table.

They took me back to my room and within no more than 20 minutes, the neurologists came back in, pulled my MRI up on the monitor and there it was, there something was that is. He explained to me that the white pecan size blob in my skull was a brain tumor.

My head was spinning, had a million questions, and yet I had none. He began explaining the details of the tumor and I still don’t know what he said. All I could think about is how healthy I have been my entire life and now at 49 I am looking at a foreign object that no one knew was there. About 2 months prior to the accident, I obtained a first-class medical. I have always for the most part, taken good care of myself.

I continued to ask questions. The first was when would the tumor be able to be removed followed by, when could I get back in the air. Oh wait, my Cherokee... My plane was destroyed, and my pride was bruised, so over the next couple days I went to the tower at the airport and also talked to the FBO. The guys in the tower gave me the details on the activities of that morning. I had called them, I knew that they had given me clearance and I was ready to go. That is when things changed.

Tower said that I sat there for several minutes. They tried to reach me several times on the radio and received nothing back. They then called the FBO, who in turn tried my cell phone and also got nothing. As tower was trying to get me to respond there was a jet on final. They were concerned as I couldn’t hear them or see the jet and that I would pull out in front of it.

At that time, I spun the plane around where I sat and then sat there for a couple more minutes, tower assumed I was having radio issues. They got out the spotlight and tried to get me to respond, they said it appeared I was going to taxi back and gave me instructions to call them on the phone when I got back to the hanger.

I of course didn’t respond and then for whatever reason I turned the airplane north and took off through the field. I hit a 10-foot-tall chain-link fence and according to Foreflight, I was doing 70 mph, take off speed... fast forward from there to me waking up in the emergency room. My wife was sitting there looking at me, I glanced around and I was even more than confused! I couldn’t figure out where I was, how I got there, why I was there, how or why my wife was there and how did she get there so fast, considering we live an hour away from the airport.

After I got out of the hospital I went and checked out the plane, throttle was still in full position with one wing lying on the hanger floor beside my plane. I hit the fence; one post was outside the pilot side fuel tank. The passenger side also had a post that hit right outside the fuel tank, taking that wing off. The only thing that kept the wing attached was the fuel line, never dripped a drop of fuel or oil on the impact.

Over the next several days, along with countless phone calls and questions, I learned a little more about the series of events. In short, I was 120 seconds from not writing this. I had enough fuel in the plane to get to my next stop for fuel, had GPS set up with auto pilot on 'pause'. If I had gotten off the ground, in 120 seconds I would have had the altitude to turn on auto pilot and watch the world fly by. But of course, in my Piper I have to manually switch tanks, with the fuel in the one tank, I had a little over an hour before I would have been out of gas. The amount of time that I lost and still do not have is roughly 3 hours.

The FAA and NTSB have been great to work with in my situation. All I want to do is get back in the air. I have been flying with an instructor a few times, trying to keep the rust knocked off, shooting approaches and working on holds. I was a couple weeks away from my IFR check ride with my commercial immediately following. In the months following the accident, I have been waiting to reapply for my medical, I have gotten a lot of studying in and written tests out of the way. I do not have any memories of the accident and no fear of flying again, it just can't get here soon enough. I do not take 'no' very easily and this is something I want to do. Fear isn't part of my vocabulary, and I do not want anyone else to be afraid of going after their dream, no matter what fence is in their way.

I had to wait a year to reapply for medical. I have to have clean MRI and EEG along with a neurological evaluation and a lot of paperwork to fill out. I have everything ready and tests are all clean, so I hope, pray and wait, but I will fly again!! My wife has been helping me shop for a plane and she says she is ready to fly again, I have learned many things going through all of this, but the most important thing that I have learned is that it will be a requirement to learn how to work the radios and how to switch tanks to fly with me. I have taken my family, my children, stepchildren, wife, mother, many friends, and Young Eagles. I will give up flying Young Eagles but anyone else that rides along will know how to at least call for help, I cannot imagine what would have happened if I had a passenger.

Thank you, fly safe!