

# We had minutes to live: Pilot and passenger cheat death as gas fills plane and emergency land at Southend Airport



Passenger Marc Grimston

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A PILOT and his passenger were “minutes from death” when their plane broke down in mid-air filling the cabin with lethal carbon monoxide.

May Day calls were made to [Southend Airport](#) by children’s author Marc Grimston, 52, and his pilot Brendon Whitehead, 36, of Mansted Gardens, [Rochford](#), as they were forced to carry out an emergency landing.

Mr Grimston feared he would die and prepared to send a goodbye text message to his children as gas from a broken exhaust poured into the cockpit for 20 minutes, nearly poisoning the pair.

They were returning to Southend Airport from a day out flying up the Essex coast to the Wattisham Airfield in Mr Whitehead's private plane when disaster struck. As they powered up to clear the restricted flight area above Bradwell power station an unknown alarm started to ring.

Mr Whitehead said: “At 2,200 feet I noticed the cockpit had filled up with smoke. Marc turned to me and said ‘Are you feeling OK? There’s a funny smell and I am feeling light-headed’.

“Then it dawned on me, I realised the noise was the carbon monoxide alarm. The oil pressure had also gone into the red. I made the Pan Pan Pan call to Southend Airport which means there’s an emergency but you can still fly.

“They cleared all the airspace and at that point we were getting overcome by fumes. I was almost seeing double.

“The only thing I thought was I have a passenger, I have myself and I have a family and I need to land this plane. It was either land the plane conscious or crash it unconscious.”

In the 20 minutes it took to get back to the airport, Mr Whitehead’s brain began to slow and he was forgetting the basics of flying.

He added: “There was a bit of panic, I just kept thinking, what have I done wrong, why is it doing this? But you have to overcome it and just concentrate.”

Southend Airport staff cleared the runway for 30 minutes to allow the plane to land. They immediately parked and evacuated.

The fresh air hit them in the face and Mr Whitehead vomited. They were put in an ambulance straight away and given oxygen, before being taken to [Southend Hospital](#) and put on a drip.

Blood tests showed the pair had suffered from intense carbon monoxide poisoning.

Mr Grimston added: “We were genuinely close to not making it at all. We were up in the air for 20 minutes once the alarm went off. We were 20 minutes from death.

“It was genuinely scary. I woke up in the middle of the night on Saturday and just thought, that’s nuts, I was minutes away from death. If it was a lesser pilot that didn’t have the experience of Brendon we wouldn’t have had the same outcome.”

Fate was also on their side as their children were also considering joining them for the flight, which could have meant there wouldn’t be enough oxygen to survive.

Mr Grimston added: “It was a very surreal. A lot of people have said would you fly again – absolutely. I am not letting that beat me.

“Southend Airport was fantastic. Thankfully the airport did what it should have done and Brendon did the same but it could have been disastrous – it could have been fatal.

“A lot of people have asked whether it will go in a book – quite possibly!”