

# ‘Can You Fly This Leg Tonight?’

## Adapting to Fatigue in Unforgiving Environments

By F/O Edward “Ned” H. Linch III (Delta)

“Can you fly this leg tonight?” the captain asked me as I boarded our airplane bound for Washington, D.C.—one of our most demanding airports due to security, unique and challenging approaches, and a short runway. Tonight there was another added threat—fatigue. The captain, a reserve pilot called in for this flight, had just gotten home that morning from an all-night flight from South America.

Now the controls were in my hands. Margin is the difference between our current performance and our limits. There was no margin tonight, but I knew that I could complete the flight safely despite the threats. I was confident I would not let down the 160 people sitting behind me.

How do you know when you are fatigued, and what can you do to mitigate the threat? I have studied the issue for years, and here are some things that I have learned.

### Fatigue warning signs

The first step in combating fatigue is recognizing and admitting it exists. One of the symptoms of fatigue is denial. It’s an insidious threat and can creep up on you without warning. The ability to understand your body and the discipline to listen to it will determine how you react to fatigue.

### Common symptoms

- You fixate, stare off into space, and can’t get or stay focused.
- You forget to execute basic tasks.
- You feel behind the aircraft, and your reactions are slow.
- Your judgment and decision-making capability are degraded.
- You disregard critical information.
- You make navigation, checklist, and/or fuel calculation errors.
- You miss or make improper radio calls.

- You are irritated and distracted by loud noises.

### Plan of action to adapt

Fatigue is the by-product of being an aviator, and we have to learn to adapt and mitigate the threat via countermeasures. I’ve learned that the only way to survive in this business is to have a proactive, focused, and disciplined action plan that applies my knowledge and my understanding of fatigue.

**Sleep**—The first step in my plan is to get quality sleep. Using sleep aids such as an eye mask, ear plugs, white noise, and/or a hot shower might be required. White noise provides a constant stimulation to the brain and keeps unwanted noises masked, including a noisy hotel guest or the traffic jam just outside your window. Get the sleep and naps that you can and then continue mitigating fatigue with other countermeasures.

**Food and drink**—What we eat and drink can pick us up or slow us down. I try to eat nutritious meals and snacks with little or no refined sugar plus remain hydrated with water or a sugar-free electrolyte drink. I stay away from all carbonated beverages. Strategic consumption of caffeine restores vigilance and alertness; however, avoid caffeine if you’re already alert. You might be able to pinpoint the best nutrition plan for your type of flying by avoiding foods that make you tired and sluggish. Remember, we determine how we look, feel, and perform by the way we treat our bodies. Don’t let a temporary satisfaction



Scan the QR code to read *The Airline Pilots’ Guide to Fighting Fatigue* to learn the hazards of fatigue, the physiological aspects, and fatigue mitigation dos and don’ts.

interfere with your long-term well-being.

**Exercise**—Get your body moving even if it’s a quick 20-minute stroll after dinner, a fast-paced walk through the airport, or stretching while taking a break in flight. A well-rounded workout program (a mix of cardio, strength training, and stretching) increases your strength, endurance, mobility, long-term health, deep sleep, and resistance to fatigue. The more oxygen that runs through your veins, brain, and muscles, the more energized you’ll feel and the more alert you’ll be.

**Lifestyle**—I avoid alcohol, nicotine, and sleeping pills. Alcohol can disrupt and hinder proper sleep. Nicotine is a stimulant and can inhibit sleep. Sleeping pills have side effects such as altered sleep, dependence, and decreased performance.

### Conclusion

Despite modern science, technology, and medicine, much is still unknown about fatigue, sleep, and circadian rhythms. Pilots must take responsibility for managing their lifestyle so that it doesn’t negatively affect their flight performance. By knowing the threat and recognizing your personal symptoms, you’ll be able to plan and take action so that fatigue doesn’t become a factor when performing your flight duties. 🌐

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ALPA members in good standing can obtain information on fatigue and other aeromedical issues by contacting the Aeromedical Office at 303-341-4435, Monday-Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. mountain time, or by accessing [www.AviationMedicine.com](http://www.AviationMedicine.com).