



## Well -- Maybe Again!

by

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I'd sold my comfortable and sedate range-extended 1977 Cessna 172 and had to rely on a low-wing Piper rental (PA 28161), a plane I subsequently learned was easier to land and slightly faster -- but would never be as nice as my very first, the stoic and dignified Cessna.

At 340 flight hours, I'd no intention of completing my IFR (Instrument Flight Rules) proficiency test, although by now I'd successfully passed written and hourly requirements for IFR Certification. Getting proficient in the clouds with those peculiar turns and timings, pitted against ultra-sensitive needles, was simply more cost than I could handle -- and if I could've afforded the extra flight time, I wouldn't have had to sell my imperturbable Cessna. Staying proficient with IFR flight rules meant costly, consistent, periodic flights.

I earned my private pilot's license late in life, age 59, and I was most safety conscious. To my great surprise -- and the same surprise will come to everyone sooner or later -- I was no longer able to run faster than a speeding bullet, or leap tall buildings, or even tall thought processes. The experience of flight training at age 59 reminded me of the time several years earlier when ice-skating with a young lady after an absence from the rink of 35 years or so. Having skated regularly with a champion ice-skater during my youth, I knew all the proper motions. Skating is sort of like riding a bicycle, isn't it? Once you learn, your body remembers. Right?

Wrong! Although I knew exactly what moves my body should make, it simply wouldn't obey my mental commands, and I repeatedly fell on my butt. That ice was much harder than I'd remembered it to be!

A very strange sensation, that -- knowing what to do, but not being able to perform.

So learning to fly at 59 was sort of like that. I knew just what to do, but my body didn't always follow the command. I therefore practiced frequently at least for satisfactory (to me) proficiency; and I also learned to think ahead in terms of what would be safe and what wouldn't. It would have been quite easy to take the plane up to about 10,000 feet, put it into a dive, and terminate life. That wasn't what I was spending large chunks of flight-training money to do!

My tale begins on October 27, 1988. I don't want to embarrass a very fine usually safety-minded flight instructor and mechanic, so I'll call him George. I'd had occasion to rent the Piper from this gentlemen many times, and from time to time I'd pay him to instruct me in IFR (Instrument Flight Rules) methods, usually by taking him on a long, cross-country trip that I was going to have to make any way. I didn't want the IFR license, but I did want to practice in the event I had an emergency under VFR (Visual Flight Rules) trips made by myself, or myself and friends.

This trip with one of my employees to Manassas, Virginia from Centerville, TN (just below Nashville) was quite uneventful, taking 4.7 flight hours. George stayed with the plane, and saw to the fueling while we went on to my business meeting.

We started back to Centerville sometime between 6:00 and 7:00 p.m. The sun was just descending below the western horizon. I was at the left yoke, by CFI (Certified Flight Instructor) at the right and my employee in the back seat.

I'm a conservative bloke regarding gas, having read that the greatest cause of accidents is foolishly running out of precious fuel. I'd determined that this was never to happen to me, which was the reason I purchased a Cessna 172 with an extended gas range which was alleged to have a seven hour flight capacity. I always went but five hours.

In this Piper, with an alleged five hours of flight fuel, I was again taught never to believe the fuel gages, as



visual inspection of the gas tank levels, and manual computation of rpms and flight hours would surely be more accurate. Going east, of course, the wind was with us, but going west, the wind against us. If you keep track of rpm and flying time, though, gas consumption will be the same for the same rpm and hours in flight.

I was flying and George was keeping track of hours in flight. I noted that both gauges were bouncing into empty, and so I began to suggest that we stop for gas. But, I was the student, and was told "No! There's still plenty of gas."

About 30 minutes later I started to actually plead that we stop for gas, but again was vetoed by the CFI, who, apparently, suffered from "Hurry-home-itis," a nasty inflammation that has killed more pilots than any other single factor. After all, it might take as long as an hour to drop down to an airport, refuel, and to climb back to altitude.

To placate me, George began calling small airports enroute, but finding none who returned his call.

Roughly 50 miles short of Nashville, which was still another 30 minutes from our home base, just west of Lebanon, TN, a small town east of Nashville, TN, George decided to stop at the Lebanon Airport. I'd passed my pilot's license there, and so knew the area rather well. However, before we could begin our descent, 5.5 hours into flight time (4.5 hours according to George's written record), the engine began sputtering.

The moon was totally hidden by high-flying clouds, otherwise visibility was crystal-clear at 6,000 feet when we started to descend. "Here," I said, handing George the controls. "You're a better pilot and you know the plane better than I do."

George grabbed control momentarily, but then passed them back to me, saying, "Keep it up as long as possible." He began pumping the primer, and also called the Nashville Air Controller, a short distance from Lebanon, declaring an emergency.

The Nashville controller suggested that we try to make an interstate highway just south of Lebanon, where we could see car lights moving east and west. "We can't make it!" George said, and then he began relaying our names and telephone numbers just as the engine made its last sputter.

Eerie silence ensued in the dark sky, and far, far below we could see two cars on what had to be a country lane, one car behind the other. Even the controller was silent.

George went through all the emergency check out procedures. Landing lights were turned on, the exit door cracked, and so on.

George and I both knew we were dead. We didn't ask our passenger what was his view. Nothing but scrub oaks, live-oaks, poplar, and other trees and large bushes would be below us, and we could not see a single one. Only absolute luck stood between us and certain death.

I returned the flight controls to George, who continued us downward as slowly as possible, with only a whisper of passing air. Then he made what was to be an excellent decision, one that I probably would not have made had I continued with the controls. Now he pushed the yoke ahead, and we moved faster downward, aimed at the two car lights below.

I knew there was nothing but curved, narrow country roads below, and the chances of coming out of a forced landing without a serious accident was remote. I probably would have taken a chance on seeing trees just before hitting, and either aiming between them, or at least trying to flatten the aircraft on branches which could not be avoided. I'd heard the tale from my first flight instructor, about one of his recent students who'd had engine trouble over Old Hickory Lake outside of Smyrna, TN. He'd set his trim tabs, closed his eyes, and froze at the yoke. His plane had gently bobbed up and down until, just after passing over the lake and heading toward a housing development, it gently landed in a small yard, only the nose prop being damaged. There is such a thing as luck, ya' know!

It was weird. Our dark sky, cold and silent, and the ground below black, except for the lights extended from two automobiles, a windmilling propeller softly hissing, and we three quiet and thoughtful.



As we approached closer to the first car's headlights I thought, "So, this is how it all ends. That's interesting!" And then, in the plane's headlight, a wire crossed the road directly in our path. "Wire ahead," I calmly warned. I'm sure George saw it, as he pulled the plane upward. Of course, without power, it wanted to dive again as we passed safely over the wire. Above us then I saw another wire that must have been inches above as he leveled the plane.

His flight path was angled somewhat in front of the two approaching headlights, and I could see telephone poles, tree branches and rural mail boxes whizzing within a foot or so of the craft's wingtips, so I quickly reminded, "Telephone poles," and George straightened the plane to follow the road's midline.

Pole after pole whizzed by, tree after tree swished at us with amazing speed, or at least it seemed so in the dark, such was the nightly illusion. No one could or would take the time to look at the airspeed indicator, as all eyes were glued at what was to be our final fate.

Now the two cars were directly ahead, and again, unnecessarily, I said, "Cars ahead," and so the flight instructor pulled up again, just missing the tops of the two cars, and then regaining level flight just as the plane made a perfect and light three point landing behind the cars.

Now the telephone poles, tree limbs and mail boxes gave a greater illusion of speed. George slammed on brakes, burning them through and through, but we stopped-- wings just inches from the high portion of a country bridge.

We were safe!

Later we learned that this road section was the only straight piece for miles on either side.

There is an amusing corollary to this tale. One of the car's stopped, and its owner helped us to push the plane up a small entrance into the front yard of a country house-trailer. After parking, locking, and chocking the wheels we knocked repeatedly at the trailer door, unable to get attention for some great time, until, at last, an elderly lady peaked out the window. She'd been so hassled in her isolated home that she would not believe us that there was an airplane in her dinky front yard.

By now Lebanon Airport personnel, county sheriff cars, Lebanon City policemen and firemen, state troopers, newspaper reporters, and general airport hangers-oners had arrived at about 12:30 a.m. Apparently a potential aircraft accident brings out the best and the worst.

My employee, who had said nothing until now, bragged to a reporter, "I wasn't a bit afraid! We had the best pilot in the world, and he did a wonderful job."

Certainly George did a wonderful job. But we both knew we were doomed.

George slept on the lady's couch all night, but he had a hard time convincing her that we hadn't actually landed in her tiny yard.

One in the crowd, a good Samaritan, drove me home, some 70 miles distant.

The next morning George and an FAA inspector managed to get gas to the plane, and found a farmer willing to let him cut the fence, and use his tractor to get the plane to an open field, where George took off for home port of Centerville.

I arrived at Centerville Airport by car just as George was landing, and although he didn't want to charge me for the trip, I insisted on paying half.

My employee, did not show up to work the next day, but he wasn't afraid, he had bragged. George decided to fly for missionaries in Africa, where he is now. I returned to my work as executive director of a non-profit charity, where I am now.

My ten children (5 boys, 5 girls) learned about this experience several days later, by reading the newspaper. One girl said, "Dad, why must we read about such things in newspapers? Why didn't you tell us about it?"

I shrugged, nonchalantly saying, "Well, we just ran out of gas."