

Flying the Mail

~*Adverse Yaw*

The sun was sinking toward the western horizon, less than an hour of light, a few minutes of twilight and darkness would prevail. Night may linger later in the year, but now it comes so suddenly that you often wonder what happened to the light. Dick had just completed his preflight inspection of the worn old Piper Aztec. Its rounded body, faded paint and fat little wings, just sat there like an ugly duckling on the cold tarmac of Yelland Field. A few years back while attending LSU, Dick would never have imagined himself to be a resident of Ely, Nevada, much less exposing life and limb to the hazards of flying such a badly worn, old bird over such desolate terrain in such unpredictable conditions. The desire to fly is stronger than the libido of an eighteen-year-old. Several previous mishaps that had caused the extended and overuse of his adrenal glands didn't suppress his appetite for the adventure. Five nights a week, he would find himself waiting for the mail truck, chomping at the bit and always eager to get going. The two remaining nights of the week seem like a waste of time.

He stood on the cold and windblown ramp wondering about the prospects of what the night would bring. The old bird sat as if waiting to test his mettle, as if she had a mind, heart and soul of her own. He sometimes had the uncomfortable feeling that she was staring at him. He always treated her with respect and never spoke badly of her. He religiously watched the oil quantity, and kept tabs on the consumption. Although both engines were using a little oil and leaking enough to keep the underbelly of the engine cowlings covered with grime, they were solid. Every panel and inspection plate was secure—a loose rivet here or there, but what the heck—she was a pretty sound old bird, and Dick was ready to get going.

There was no written code or covenant, no oaths taken or perceived to be taken, no rite of passage or ritual decided by anyone how pilots flying mail planes were to perform. But, there was an unwritten understanding that this job, hauling the United States Mail, was one of responsibility. "It's a simple and easy job," Dick was told months ago. He was to load the mail, fly it to its destination, with consistency, dependably, and of course, safely. Then he would off load some mail—on load more mail at various scheduled stops, and so on until he returned to Ely to off load the final load in the early hours of the morning. Somehow, safety didn't seem to be the most important item on his list of duties, and thoughts like this sometimes left him with an uneasy, sick feeling. No one ever said, "The mail must get through, no matter what," but, being consistently on time through "rain, sleet, snow and thunderstorms" was mentioned much more often than, "Don't take any chances—better late than never," every was. There were those who seldom failed at their mission and others who occasionally did. Those who showed the slightest bit of fear disappeared. Of course, the ones that were constantly there "no matter what," were the ones who received the most respect especially from the Post Office and the company.

“I intend to do my job correctly, with respect for my equipment and by the book as best I can. I don’t expect to please everybody, but if I can please myself in this regard, I’ll be more than satisfied. One must be true to himself,” Dick thought.

It was more than a slight irritation that the company he worked for had little respect for the rules and had almost expected him to willingly violate them if necessary. The company used everything available to them for pressuring the pilots to perform. It certainly wasn’t the pay that motivated these young aviators to spend five nights a week over the vastness of the Nevada desert in an aircraft that was almost completely used up.

The company and the Postal Service had learned that it didn’t take much to pressure these young guys into doing things that they wouldn’t ordinarily do, and most of the time do it with little regard for their own safety. The company and Postal Service had the uncanny ability to use the love of flight and the ego of the pilot against the pilot’s better judgment. Although seldom if ever spoken, the prevailing attitude of the bosses was, “Are you a real pilot or not? If you are a real pilot, then shut up and go fly the airplane.”

On the other hand, The Federal Aviation Agency (FAA) had their ideas about what was most important. They had the tendency to go overboard when it came to the rules. They had rules for everything. They would often ground an aircraft for a missing decal while ignoring the strong smell of fuel inside the cabin.

The constant feeling that you were damned-if-you-do and damned-if-you-don’t concerning following the rules and on the other hand getting the job done was simply baggage that came with the job. It seemed to be a “no win” situation. Your primary objective became—how to do the job and not get caught in some error or violation and trying not to get killed in the process. Your rank and duty in life consisted in your nightly mission of carrying the US Mail in the middle of nowhere, in a place where no one cared about much of anything except the post office, and of course, they wanted their mail to arrive on time. The FAA didn’t like to work much after dark, so they were seldom seen after the sun went down. Dick was beginning to understand how a pilot could be pushed, pulled and harassed into doing things that he and everyone else knew were never exactly right and sometimes even dangerous. It was by the Grace of God that many of them were not killed.

“My desire to fly for my livelihood is strong, and flying jobs are not easy to come by. I’m lucky to have this one, I just hope I can do it, do it well and be safe at the same time. Flying is what I want to do. It’s best not to dwell on or complain about the problems involved, but to continue on with the job at hand.” These thoughts were constantly bouncing around in Dick’s mind.

The leg from Ely to Elko was uneventful, and upon arrival, the evening twilight had vanished into blackness. The weather is described best as Visual Flight Rules (VFR), and not a cloud in sight. If the weather forecasters were correct it should be VFR all the way around. As he landed in Elko, a full moon was starting to peak above the rocky ridges to the east.

As he progressed west-southwestward about a hundred miles east of Reno, Nevada, (RNO) clouds began to appear below and were moving eastward. Normally,

the lights of Fallon could be seen at his twelve o'clock, and a few miles to his right the lights of Winnemucca—but, not tonight. Nothing but moonlit clouds below. This is not supposed to happen, Dick thought, he had been promised a clear night. The weather forecasters had missed their prediction again. Upon arrival over RNO, the airport was IFR (instrument flight rules) due to low ceilings. So, what was a guy supposed to do? “Here I am over RNO with VFR fuel reserves (45 minutes at normal airspeed) surrounded by mountains. I have been engulfed by thick clouds full of ice and snow, and I’m on the instruments—solid IFR. Okay, I’ll shoot the ILS (Instrument Landing System) to the south, land and take on fuel for the trip back, and possibly a little extra for the unforeseen mistakes of the forecasters.”

“Okay, here we go, clearance to shoot the ILS, procedure turn, let down to the initial approach altitude, final fix inbound, down to minimums which is about 1000 ft above the runway. Ice is already collecting on the leading edges, props and windscreen. At minimums there are no visual cues, I cheat and continue my decent another couple hundred feet. Still nothing—can’t see a thing but clouds and snow flying past my windscreen. Now what, Mr. Professional Pilot?” he thought to himself. “Not many choices now, I declare the missed approach. Fly the procedure, and fly it right—there is lots of tall ground around here,” he thought as his mind raced.

After flying the missed approach procedure, the controller then asked, “What do you want to do now?”

“Well, I guess I need to head west to California where the weather is VFR. Maybe I can make it to SMF (Sacramento, CA).”

“Okay, turn left to a heading of 270 degrees and climb to and maintain 14,000 feet,” came the reply through his headset.

“Roger, Heading 270, climbing to 14,000 ft.”

“I can do that, I just hope the fuel holds out until I can get on the ground!” he had begun think out loud. The discomfort brought on by low fuel had set in the instant he realized that RNO was IFR, and it grew progressively worse during the missed approach. The fuel indicators were already bumping the “E” (empty) side of the gages. “I would try again if I had the fuel, but try again and fail, I’d be up a creek for sure. Come to think of it, it’s times like this that this job is a crummy one. Crummy because I could die trying to haul a few bags of mail from point A to point B. Heck, it is down right scary. This could be the last night of my life. At night over the Sierra Nevada Mountains, all I have to do is run out of fuel, and I’m a goner. This could be a real problem. Okay, I have cleared the immediate terrain and am heading west. All indications are that I am somewhere just west of the RNO airport. What else can happen? The old saying, “What can go wrong will go wrong” is making more sense every second. Why did I ask? Suddenly, the turbo charger on the left engine failed probably due to icing, and I can get only normal aspiration. What in the world can happen next?”

Dick’s concern for survival was now paramount; there was nothing else in his mind. The height of the terrain that he was over couldn’t be more than a couple hundred feet below him. He had managed to climb and barely maintain 11,500 feet

MSL and still solid IFR with more ice collecting on the leading edges. The MEA (Minimum En-route Altitude) was 14,000 MSL. For all he knew, he was headed for a mountain top this very instant and he could crash and be dead in seconds. The failed turbocharger turned out to be only one of his problems because the left engine was producing little power if any at all. Movement of the associated throttle lever did nothing. It was just a useless lever that he had placed as far forward as possible. He attempted to feather the prop, but, for whatever reason was unable to do so. He made a couple of three hundred and sixty degree left turns trying to climb and sort out the engine failure. The cabin heater failed, and would not re-light. He was in the middle of a snow storm with a wind-milling propeller that was trying to drag him into the terrain. There was a collection of ice on the leading edge of the wings, and all radio contact was lost. His breath was now freezing to the inside of the windows. What now? One thing for sure, now is not a time to quit—he would never give up. He kept flying west and hanging on to the few thousand feet of altitude that he had gained. The airspeed had dropped slightly below best single engine climb speed. He had managed to keep a tiny little circle of the windscreen clear by rubbing it with his gloved hand. He turned on the landing light in hopes that he could see any terrain that might be ahead. He thought that if he were on a direct collision course for a mountain ridge he would pull back hard and hopefully mush into the trees and possibly survive the impact.

After what seemed like hours, suddenly the lights of Sacramento appeared in the distance with a great void of darkness between him and those lights. He called Sacramento Approach Control to advise them that he had made it over the mountains.

“We’ve been looking for you,” was the first thing that came over the tiny speakers in his headset. What a beautiful sound. There for a while he didn’t think he would ever hear another human voice again, but he had made it and was overwhelmed with the excitement of living another day.

The controllers feel a horrible anxiety when a plane is in danger, and when the communication was re-established, it was a joyful occasion from all involved.

Finally, he noticed a runway about five miles at his eleven to twelve o’clock. He mentioned the runway to Approach Control, and they said that there was a runway there, but that it had no runway lights.

“It has lights now!” Dick said into his microphone. Just five miles ahead was a beautiful, well-lighted runway. *(As it turned out the lights for this runway had just been installed and had been operational for only a few days. SMF approach hadn’t been informed.)* He didn’t have a clue of the name of the airport or the town it was near, but it was a lovely sight. Hopefully, he was going to put it to good use if the fuel lasted.

The thought of running out of fuel was now his most worrisome thought. The fuel gages had been indicating zero fuel for what seemed like forever. He tried to stay high enough so that if he did lose the other engine he could glide safely to the runway.

Dick deliberately approached the runway high and fast. He managed to get the gear down with some flaps. At about two hundred feet AGL (above ground level)

the wind-milling, left engine started up with a vengeance. With the throttle still full forward and the turbocharger control on the sick engine at full blow, only luck prevented the engine from blowing the cylinder heads off. But, the engine held together and gave him a major jolt of thrust to the right. It took a few seconds to comprehend what was happening, and now, he was going even faster than before. The touchdown was long and the speed was fast so now his immediate problem was getting stopped before going off the end of the runway. Lack of visibility due to the early morning darkness prevented Dick from seeing the drop off at the end of the runway. This particular runway was on the top of a hill with sheer drop offs on both ends. If he had gone off the end of the runway, it probably would have been fatal.

As soon as the airplane came to a stop at the very end of the runway, both engines died from fuel starvation.

Safely on the ground he had lost all radio contact. He switched off the batteries and sat there for a few seconds—the only sound was gyros winding down and the beating of his heart. He was unable to control the shivering, partly from being cold, and partly from fear. Needless to say, this had been an extremely stressful event—it was now over, and he was still among the living.

He climbed out of the cabin and enjoyed the pleasure of urination, right there on top of the wing. It felt better than normal. He was glad to be alive and in one piece, totally safe, totally healthy and totally alive.

Moments later he could hear a vehicle approaching.

A deputy sheriff from the county sheriffs department appeared. He had been notified by ATC (Air Traffic Control) to check on the mail plane. The Deputy asked if he was okay and helped Dick push his airplane off the runway.

“You look like you could use a place to unwind and maybe catch a nap. Do you know anyone around here where you could go?” The Deputy asked.

Still shaken from his ordeal Dick replied, “No, I don’t.”

“You can stay in the jail if you want, and we can get you going in the morning.” The Deputy was compassionate and wanted to help.

It sounded good to Dick, and sleep he did, in the jail with a couple of drunks in a nearby cell.

The Post Office came and got the mail. They had no concern for the pilot or what he had just been through, they just wanted their mail.

Dick slept the next three or four hours of the morning. It felt good not to shiver and to relax knowing that the chances were good that he would awaken later to fly again. Things might have been horribly different, this very minute he could have been in the mountains with broken limbs and only a crumpled aircraft around him or worse, he could be lying dead with his body exposed to the falling snow—a future meal for wolves, crows and buzzards.

So, what if he didn’t get the mail through and was spending a night in jail, he did the best he could, and the company couldn’t ask for anything more. If they were to terminate his employment tomorrow, he just didn’t care. He was glad to be alive on a jail-house bunk under an old, wool, army blanket accompanied by the irritating sound of a snoring drunk sleeping it off a couple of cells over.

It would be silly to ask Dick if he had learned anything that cold night. It was just another chapter in a book that could be entitled **“Things I Hope To NEVER Do Again.”**

This is a true story as told to me by my friend, Dick Hegeman, of Colorado Springs, CO. He was forced to retire as a Captain for Southwest Airlines with more than twenty-five thousand hours of accident-free flying. Forced to quit, fired, but called retirement by the FAA, simply, because he had reached the age of 60. The arrogance of politics strikes again. ~ ~ ~ = = = =

