

A HAIRY NIGHT LANDING, REMEMBERED

BY PAUL A. CURRY

When we started out for Swan Island airport on our bicycles that October night the moon was full and the stars were bright in a frosty sky.

But when we began to descend the Going Street hill fog engulfed us and grew so thick we barely could pick out the yellow center line with our flashlights. That's the kind of fogs we get at times in the lowlands around Portland (Oregon).

Al (Albert) Linsen and I had made the trip so many times we knew every bump in the road. But fog has a way of causing disorientation, reflecting flashlight beams in a manner that distorts and makes familiar things appear strange. We had to proceed carefully.

Eventually we made our way to the administration building, where the accumulation of bright lights appeared to dispel the fog. Inside, the building was warm and apparently deserted. We knew a mail plane was due in about 7:30, so there would be someone about, even if the fog caused the plane to be diverted to another airport.

We made our way to the meteorologist's room. There was a kind of dutch door, the top part of which was swung open.

We found the room fascinating because of the sophisticated array of instruments and dials and gadgets which abounded in it. The two men lounging in their chairs, drinking coffee, were familiar to us, though we never learned their names. They were friendly and waved their cups to us in greeting.

"The mail plane?" one of us asked. They shook their heads.

"Not tonight. Zero-zero out there."

We liked that kind of talk. It was 1935, give or take a year. We were teenagers, fascinated by airplanes and flight and anybody or anything connected with it.

We talked with them and learned that the mail plane had checked in over The Dalles, but hadn't been heard from since. They had tried to raise it by radio, but it hadn't responded, so they were just waiting for the pilot to call in by phone from wherever he landed so they could send a truck out to pick up his cargo of mail sacks. He wasn't carrying any passengers.

The weather was clear at The Dalles. We told them how it had been clear when we left home and how we had encountered the fog at the top of Going Street.

At that moment we heard the sound of an aircraft engine. As the airplane came nearer and the sound increased in volume we all recognized it as the roar of the Pratt and Whitney engine of a Boeing model 40. There have been a host of engines with more horsepower than the 420 Wasp, but I doubt if any of them have been louder. The dish-rattling roar of that engine, once heard, was not forgotten easily. Modern environmentalists out to curb noise pollution would pass up the jets to get at that engine.

The windows vibrated as the Boeing biplane passed low overhead.

"That must be Shorty. What in the world is he doing here?" wondered the meteorologist.

He grabbed a microphone and flipped a switch on his desk.

"Hey, Shorty, is that you?" queried the meteorologist.

There was no answer, but a moment later the sound of the engine ceased, roared, and ceased and roared again, then droned off toward downtown Portland.

"He hears you, but his transmitter must be out," said the second man.

"Yeah," agreed the meteorologist.

While the two men talked to the pilot and listened to him blip his engine in response to their questions, they learned the area

was fogbound, that he was low on fuel, that he could orient himself over Portland by the glow of the city lights through the fog, which was about 200 feet thick.

The sound of the engine grew louder as Shorty made a turn over the city and headed back toward Swan Island. One of the men had opened a window so they could hear better.

"You can't get down here, Shorty," said the meteorologist. "Why not go over to the valley and bail out?" He was referring to the Tualatin Valley west of Portland.

The sound of the engine remained constant.

"No?" asked the meteorologist.

Shorty blipped the engine. No.

The two men looked at one another. We boys were too intent on watching them, and listening, to move an eyelash.

"You want to get in here?" There was disbelief in the meteorologist's voice.

The plane roared directly overhead. The engine blipped. Yes.

The meteorologist turned back to the microphone.

"Shorty, give us time to get outside. Maybe we can talk you down."

The engine blipped. Okay.

We all rushed outside. The meteorologist remained in the room just long enough to hand the microphone out the window, then he joined us.

"Set your altimeter to three-zero-zero-nine. Three-zero-zero-nine, Shorty. Got that?"

From far away the engine blipped. It was hard to tell from which direction the sound came. It appeared to come from up-river, toward town.

We waited. Speechless. Shivering, from excitement, not from the cold. The whole experience was unreal, and yet there we were, more than just spectators, involved in a real-life drama with death hovering nearby.

It seemed an eternity, but eventually the roar of the engine began to grow steadily louder.

"Okay, Shorty," the meteorologist said. "I won't say anything now, unless you are off course."

We bunched together, straining to hear, as though we could combine all our ears into a single listening device. Shorty throttled back as he began to slow for his glide. For a moment we thought we had lost him, but then our ears picked up the new tone frequency, and we strained all the harder to hear.

Something was wrong. We all realized it about the same time. We turned to stare at the meteorologist. He looked at us, his face suddenly ashen. He hesitated.

"He's too far west," someone said tensely in a voice barely above a whisper. "He's over the river!"

"Turn right, Shorty. Turn right!" yelled the meteorologist.

Silence. No sound at all. No crash. No engine noise. Nothing.

We stood rooted to the spot, uncomprehending. It seemed incredible that the sound could shut off like that.

As though it had just materialized from empty space, the big biplane loomed into the lights, rolling silently but swiftly toward us.

The next moment it yawed violently and tipped forward. As the slowly turning propeller struck the concrete of the ramp, sparks flew. It hung that way a second or two, tail high, then crunched back on its tailskid.

The pilot hunched himself up and out of the open cockpit. He was Mister Five-by-Five in his bulky winter flying suit. He waddled around the wingtip and up to the propeller, which he carefully and critically examined.

"It's okay, I guess. Didn't hit very hard," he said to the meteorologist, who had joined him there. "I told the mechanic that right brake was grabbing," he added testily in explanation of the nose-over, or in self-defense. Without another word he headed for the administration building.

The drama was over. Death would have to look elsewhere that night.

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