

# *Flying Carpet*

*The SOUL of an Airplane*



*Greg Brown*

Foreword by Stephen Coonts

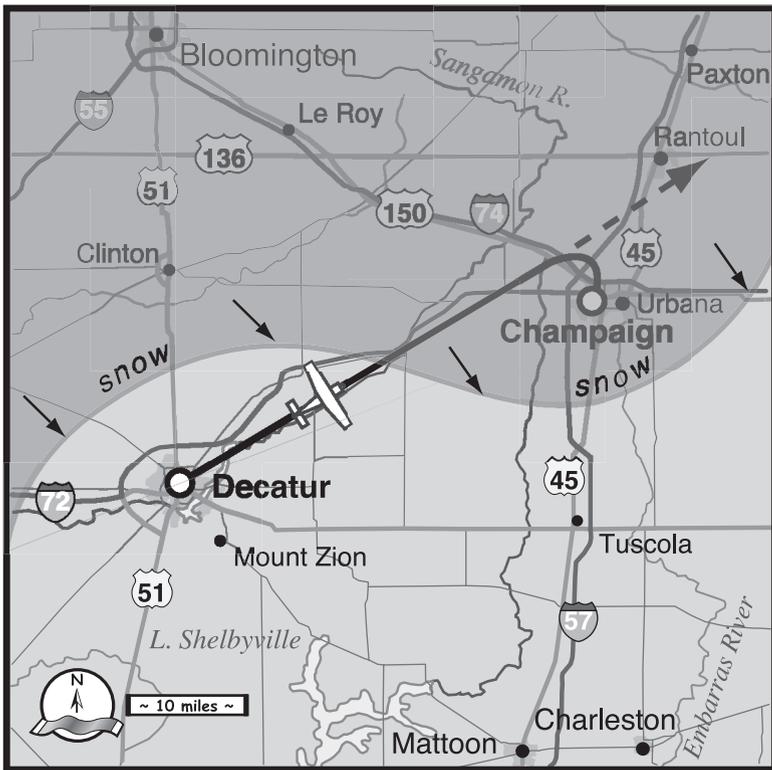
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# Some Lessons a Pilot Never Forgets



*So this must be vertigo*, I thought. Nausea circled my gut like the snowflakes orbiting my propeller. I peered out the windshield for landmarks, but snow obscured all but a tiny spot of ground beneath me, even at an altitude of only 1,000 feet. To make matters worse, the navigational radio had obviously failed—how could I possibly have drifted so far off course as it suggested, on a flight of only forty miles?

It was almost Christmas, and I was a young University of Illinois student transporting precious parts for my Suzuki X-6. One of the hottest small motorcycles of its day, the X-6 was also notorious for its temperamental transmission. Sure enough, after just a few rides to impress my new girlfriend, I'd been forced to disassemble it for overhaul. The nearest dealer was in Decatur, so each discovery of another worn-out component meant another eighty-mile round trip to replace it. Today was a big day, because after months of waiting, the major transmission parts had finally arrived. To celebrate I decided to make the pickup by airplane.

"There's a storm system approaching from the northwest," said the weather briefer that morning prior to my departure, "but we don't expect it here before suppertime."

"No problem," I said. "I'll be back by early afternoon." I flew to Decatur under clear skies, hitched a ride to the motorcycle dealership, and collected a bagful of gears and shafts. Then I headed for the Decatur airport restaurant to savor its infamous double-decker burger slathered with peanut butter and Bermuda onions. On the way, however, I noticed hazy clouds materializing. *Was that a snowflake?*

Forgetting food, I phoned flight service, only to learn that the weather system was advancing far more quickly than forecast.<sup>1</sup> "Get out right now and you'll be okay," said the briefer. "The weather's approaching from the northwest. Going east you should reach Champaign well ahead of it."

By the time I finished my preflight inspection of the plane, the cloud ceiling was slate gray, and light snow was falling. Quickly, I took to the air. As expected, the weather rapidly improved. To my surprise, however, it soon began

<sup>1</sup> Flight service stations provide weather and operational information to pilots, along with processing and monitoring flight plans.

deteriorating again. Not being trained for flight by cockpit instruments alone, I descended lower and lower to keep the ground in sight.

Now I was getting nervous. Turbulence increasingly unsettled me, and the nose of my airplane pointed at a crazy angle far different than the course I was tracking over the ground. This dramatic crab angle (named for the sidewise movement of the crustacean) indicated powerful winds trying to blow me off course. Worse yet, flight visibility was diminishing in snow, though for a short time better weather could be seen off my wing to the south.

Ominously, the words of my former flight instructor filled my head. "Never enter precipitation you can't see through to the other side," Bob had often warned me.

No pilot ever forgets that flight instructor who first delivers the secrets of flight. Usually primary instructors are remembered with reverence, and their faces reappear at appropriate times to chastise us about mistakes we are about to make. Unfortunately, those words are rarely heeded until afterward.

On recent flights, Bob's apparition had largely stopped admonishing me. I took that to mean that with four years of generally safe flying experience I had a pretty good handle on my limitations. But now here was that pesky Bob, whispering in my ear again. Brushing him off, I continued toward Champaign.

Knowing I couldn't be far from home, I tuned in the recorded weather. "Ceiling indefinite 1,500 feet," it said, "visibility four miles in snow." If the clouds descended below 1,000 feet above ground, or the visibility diminished below three miles, I would no longer be legal to land. How could this weather system be beating me to Champaign? *Ugh, that snow swirling around the propeller is making me dizzy.*

Looking at my single navigational instrument, I noticed the needle pegged to the right instead of centered where it



# Flying Carpet *The SOUL of an Airplane*

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