AN EPISODE FROM
THE QUOTIDIAN TIME TRAVELER
BY
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The air was smooth and hazy as the small airplane droned along the Gulf coast, heading east. Wade Walters, the pilot, was slouched at the controls, oriented on the instruments since there was nothing but haze to look at out the window. Little detail was visible as Mobile Bay passed by, a mile and a half below. Walters used tiny pressures on the controls to herd the heading and altitude constantly toward the values he wanted.

In the back, two young girls slept. Their mother sat in the right front seat, idly watching the sky flowing past, waiting. The drone of the engine prevented easy conversation, so the occupants sat silently, waiting for Jack Edwards airport, their destination, to show up.

An hour earlier, they had departed from Lakefront Airport in New Orleans. Since then, they had been drifting through space in the tiny aluminum capsule, isolated by altitude and motion from all other human beings on the planet. A radio signal from a ground station in Pensacola provided bearing and distance information that were integrated into a readout on the panel in front of the pilot, directing him toward his destination.

Renee Roussel, an air traffic controller on the ground in New Orleans, had handled the departure, watching as the radar blip representing the aircraft had moved slowly toward the eastern edge of her radar screen. Meanwhile, she had handled several other flights that were departing in the same general direction, feeding them into the system that would monitor their paths through the sky to prevent traffic conflicts. Eventually

Walters' blip had reached the line of demarcation at the edge of her radar screen, and she had handed the flight off to the next controller, a journeyman who had just checked out on the western sector of Gulfport Approach Control.

"Contact Gulfport Approach control, 124.6." Renee's voice had reached Wade through his headphones without disturbing his passengers. He had switched the commo unit over to the Gulfport frequency and then had broken open the squelch for a moment to make sure the correct radio was feeding his phones and that the volume was where he wanted it.

"Gulfport Approach, Cessna triple one three november is with you at seven five," he had said.

"One three November, loud and clear, Gulfport altimeter niner niner eight. Report any altitude changes."

"Niner niner eight," Wade had replied, reading back the altimeter setting to verify the establishment of radio contact.

A similar handoff had been accomplished from the Gulfport controller to the Mobile man, whose frequency Walters now monitored.

The life of a charter pilot consists of long hours of boredom punctuated by moments of sheer terror, went the old saying. Walters was now bored and loving it. It beat working for a living all to hell.

The little navigation computer indicated that Edwards airport was about fifteen minutes ahead, and Wade called the controller to report leaving his cruising altitude: "Approach, one three November is leaving seven point five."

"Roger, one three November," replied the disembodied voice. "Descend at pilot's discretion."

Wade eased the nose of the plane down slightly, and the vertical speed indicator stabilized on a five hundred foot per minute rate

of descent. He moved the mixture control to a richer setting as the air around them became denser in the descent. The temperature inside the Cessna started to climb as the plane came down. What had felt like air conditioned air coming out of the vents at cruising altitude became warm, then hot as they descended into the lower atmosphere. Some mild bumps jostled the aircraft as they flew through some currents of rising air, which had been heated by contact with the ground below.

"Cessna one three November, Jack Edwards is twelve o'clock, ten miles. Report it in sight," said the Mobile controller.

"Roger. We'll get it here in just a sec," replied the pilot. He estimated that the visibility was about five miles.

"No weather reporting available at Edwards," said the controller. "Mobile wind is one eight zero at ten, altimeter two niner niner eight."

"One three November, got that, and the airport is in sight," Wade replied.

"Frequency change to advisory is approved, squawk twelve, have a nice day," said the controller.

"You too," said Wade, switching over to the Jack Edwards UNICOM frequency and setting his transponder to 1200, the standard code for airplanes not being worked by Air Traffic Control.

A female voice with an Alabama accent answered his call, giving the wind velocity, active runway, and traffic information.

Soon he was entering the traffic pattern, checking to make sure that all occupants had their seat belts on. Another plane was in the pattern ahead of him, but he hadn't spotted it yet. On base leg, he caught sight of the other aircraft about to touch down on the runway, and announced on the common traffic

advisory frequency that he was about to turn final. Nobody answered.

The plane ahead of him got down and turned off the runway as Walters made his final GUMPS check: gas (on), undercarriage (down), mixture (full rich), propeller (full increase), seatbelts (fastened, passengers checked). He lowered his flaps to the full down position and adjusted the pitch trim to relieve pressure on the elevator control.

Then they were there. He raised the nose and let the airplane float for a moment, bleeding off speed. As they settled down the last few inches, he eased the nose slightly higher to arrest his descent, and the wheels kissed the runway. Flaps up and light braking brought them down to taxi speed as the taxiway intersection came abeam. Wade opened the window on his side and reached across the lady in the right seat to pop open her window too, letting some air circulate through the cabin, providing a little bit of cooling as they taxied to the ramp.

No matter what a pilot did enroute; no matter how brilliantly he navigated, held course, avoided rough weather, managed his fuel, and handled the many small tasks of which safe and efficient flight consists, the passengers would always be happy if the touchdown were smooth, and invariably would judge the pilot to be a total dolt if he dropped it a couple of inches on landing. Wade had been flying passengers for two years, and had learned to work hard on his touchdowns.

"Nice landing," said the lady. It never failed.