The following account is pure, unadulterated fiction. It comes from my novel, a book that tells the story of a guy named Max Logan who owns a little machine he calls a C.P.U. That stands for "couch potato unit," his family's name for the remote controller for a T.V. set. Only this C.P.U. runs the operator back or forward in time by fifteen or thirty minutes, depending on which button he pushes. If you don't like this story, you probably won't like the rest of the book; but I hope you will enjoy this little flight of fancy.

At the beginning of this piece, Max and his flight instructor, Wayne, are about to hijack a Beech 18 containing a consignment of very expensive drugs. Judy and Harvey are two ancillary characters who have little to do with this episode, but who must be present in the interest of advancing the novel's plot.

THE OLFACTORY ALPHA APPROACH

BY

ALAN MALONE

The night was overcast and a slight chill was coming in. A cold front had come through that morning and the wind had shifted around to the north. Some scud had been drawn around the north end of the low that was driving the front, producing an overcast layer starting around two hundred feet above the ground.

At that hour the control tower was closed. If things went right, nobody in authority should note our departure. Wade was planning to blast off and head north until we were well clear of the opposition. Then he planned to find a country airport that had a good instrument approach and sneak back down. With

any luck, we could scare up some transportation and spirit the goodies off with no one being the wiser. Later, his story was going to be that he had been kidnapped by parties unknown and forced to fly to wherever he and Mario's airplane ended up.

Wade looked like he could handle such an operation. And although I was still very light on experience, I did have one advantage over most copilots. If he got something wrong, I could always take us back and we could try it again.

Wade opened the pilot's door, an auxiliary portal next to the pilot's seat that had been installed for the use of the crew when cargo blocked the main entrance in the rear of the fuselage. He got out and stood on the wing, beckoning us to come on up.

I helped Judy climb up onto the wing and squeeze her way through the door and into the back, where she settled herself into one of the two seats that still occupied the first row behind the bulkhead separating the main passenger/cargo area from the cockpit. Harvey followed, wriggling into the other passenger seat. I slid my rear end across into the copilot's seat, followed by Wade, the pilot-in-command.

Wade flipped on the master switch and twisted a series of rheostats to bring up the cockpit lights. I noticed that he didn't bother himself with the navigation lights or the strobes. The fuel gauges indicated that we were about half-full, or half-empty, if you want to look at it like that. It was common practice to leave some fuel behind when heavy loads were being carried.

Wade primed both engines, wiggled the throttles, and engaged the left starter. The engine rattled to life, a white plume of smoke blowing out the exhaust stack as it settled down to a guttering idle. He repeated the process for the right engine, and we started moving as soon as we had thrust on both sides.

As we made our way down the taxiway toward the end of runway 31, I saw some lights coming down the access road. "I think an intersection departure might be in order," I said. I was thinking there was a reason why these folks had left two passenger seats in the cabin. There must have been some personnel scheduled to accompany the load to its destination.

Wade swung us onto the grass between the taxiway and the runway and fit us between two runway lights, then pivoted the machine to the right, lining up for takeoff. He fiddled with something on the floor, then reached up and advanced the throttles.

We roared down the runway, the sound of the big radial engines blocking out any other noise that might have been present. I looked out the side window and saw the exhaust of the right engine, a reddish-colored flame spewing from the exhaust stacks.

Then I saw two small holes open up just about where the flames were coming from. I looked beyond that and saw that the engine nacelle was now being peppered with what I suddenly realized were bullet holes.

"Somebody's shooting at us," I hollered at Wade, trying to make myself understood over the roar of the airplane.

Wade hauled back on the control wheel, raising the nose and horsing us up off the ground. I felt the airplane lurch to the right and flames started flowing back from the right engine nacelle.

"Engine's on fire," I hollered as loudly as I could. Wade did something with the levers in the middle of the control area, then reached up and pushed one of two red buttons mounted on top of the glare shield.

He pulled a T-handle and a white spray of foam blanketed the fire. About that time I saw the propeller stop, with the blades turned edge-on to the wind. We entered the clouds, Wade looking grimly at the instrument panel, fighting to keep the Beech under control.

Then the lights went out. We were sitting in a half-dead airplane, two hundred feet off the ground, in the middle of an overcast at night, and the pilot couldn't see his instruments. And did I happen to mention that we were loaded to the gunnels with cargo, gas and people?

I fumbled the door of the glove compartment open and groped inside. There was a flashlight in there. I hauled it out and turned it on. One miracle followed another. The batteries were good. I quickly focused the beam on the instruments in front of our pilot.

Wade wrestled the controls around and seemed satisfied with the result. It felt like we were achieving stable flight, but that didn't necessarily mean anything. When you can't see where you're going, the seat of your pants can fool you into thinking you're going straight when you're not, or vice versa. But Wade settled back in his seat, grasping a little crank up above us, which I took to be the trim control.

I was trying to decide whether it would better to go back to the levee or to continue on with this monkey-on-a-football operation. But going back would probably mean we would be repeating the whole operation, and maybe Harvey wouldn't get in a good lick, or maybe some of the bullets that had been striking several feet to my right might find their mark and kill me… Or maybe an asteroid would come down from space and

destroy civilization. Sometimes it's better to stick with what you've got… As the man said on the way down to the sidewalk after he had fallen from the top of a skyscraper, "so far, so good." I looked over at Wade.

He looked back at me and winked. "So far, so good…"

"I think we're leaking fuel," I said. Before you put out the fire, it looked like quite a river of gas was escaping from the right wing. And there are a bunch of holes over here where somebody got off some lucky shots."

I felt a presence at my left shoulder. Judy had leaned into the flight deck and was anxiously looking around. "What happened?"

"We've had a little damage from somebody shooting holes in us," I said. "Nothing an ace like Wade can't handle, though."

"Ace Wade is trying to figure how we're going to get down," he said. "In case nobody's noticed, we're bleeding fuel, we're missing one engine and our entire electrical system is shot to shit. And that's the *good* news.

"The bad news is that we're probably someplace over Lake Ponchartrain in the middle of the night in the middle of a cloud deck that probably goes clear down to the surface, and we have no means of navigation."

I smelled something pungent. "I guess the paper mill up in Bogalusa is in operation," I said, a propos of nothing. Presently the smell disappeared. Wade was just sitting there, keeping the airplane more or less under control, although it looked to me like we were turning a little bit.

"Which way are we heading?" I asked.

“Doesn’t seem as though it makes much difference,” he said. “We’re gonna be out of gas pretty soon, and then we’ll be coming down, wherever we are.”

“Did you smell that smell a minute ago?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “Must have been the paper mill up in Bogalusa.”

“I had a thought,” I said. “Doesn’t the wind blow pretty much out of the north just after a front?”

“The world’s about to lose a truly great ground school student,” he said. “I’m really glad you’ve been studying your weather. Too bad you didn’t learn how to land blind at night with no navigational gear.”

“Don’t be too sure we can’t navigate,” I said. “Can you turn around, reverse your course?”

“Sure, why not,” he said. “We won’t be any deader after we crash going east than going west.”

“Yeah,” I said, “but isn’t the whole point of navigating knowing where you are, or where you’re going? If the wind is out of the north and that paper mill is running, stands to reason that we must be pretty much due south of Bogalusa.”

He raised his eyebrows and then started a turn to the left. “You’re not supposed to turn into a dead engine,” he said.

“I think we’re going to get down okay,” I said to Judy. “Just get back there in your seat and fasten your safety belt good and tight. Get Harvey all secured too. And you might want to make sure the cargo net is secure over those crates. We don’t want them coming up and crunching us, if we happen to make a sudden stop.”

Wade had found his reciprocal heading. He glanced up at the magnetic compass and reset his gyrocompass. Pretty soon, we started smelling the paper mill again.

"Turn north," I said. He was already doing it. "Now all we have to do is stay in the corridor of stink produced by that paper mill, and pretty soon we should be over beautiful downtown Bogalusa," I said.

"And the better news," he said, "is that the airport at Bogalusa is just to the north of the mill. So if I can start letting down about the time we quit smelling the stink, we'll at least have a fighting chance of finding the airfield. We might not make the runway, but there's a pretty big open area up there, and we might get this mother down without busting our butts.

"If we started out more or less over the lake," said Wade, "It should take us about twenty minutes, something like that, to get up to Bogalusa. I have no idea how much gas we have left. All the gauges are out, and we have an unknown seepage from our ruptured tanks. So I guess we'll just fly north until we either quit smelling the paper mill or run out of gas. Then we'll either try to find the airport or just go down in the woods. At least we probably won't kill anyone on the ground when we go in, unless we lose it right over downtown Bogalusa."

So that's what we did. We had to make several heading corrections to keep us in the path of the paper mill smell, but after almost half an hour, the smell suddenly abated, and Wade started down.

I had the tiny time machine in my right hand, down by my knee. My finger was on the fifteen-minute go-back button. I watched the altimeter unwind with one eye and tried to keep the other eye watching in our direction of flight.

Wade held the bird pretty steady. We were coming down at about five hundred feet per minute. As the altimeter wound down from two hundred feet, I shifted all of my attention out front.

A water tower loomed out of the cloud just off to our right. It had a big green light on top of it. I had pushed the button before I was sure whether or not we were going to miss it. No use taking a chance.

"Steer just a gnat's ass more to the left," I said.

"Why do you want me to do that?" he said.

"Why not," I said.

Wade turned three degrees left and soon the smell went away and he started his let-down. This time I didn't see the water tower, and I thought we were closer to being lined up with the airport. "In case we don't break out, are we going to be able to climb on one engine?" I said.

"I doubt it," he said. "This left engine has been putting out about all it can, and we've just been holding our own. Besides, we've gotta be just about out of fuel. Worst case, we'll go into the pine trees. At least we won't burn if we're out of gas."

"How about the landing gear?" I said.

"We've got no juice. It's an electric motor that drives the gear mechanism in this bird. The backup is mechanical, but I sure don't have the time or the spare light to look up the emergency procedure. You don't happen to know how it works, do you?"

"Not a clue," I said. "So I guess we'll go in on the belly."

"If we have to do that, this is a good plane to do it in," he said. "The wheels stick out just a little bit from the bottoms of

the engine nacelles. I've heard you can even put on the brakes after a wheels-up landing in one of these things."

This time we got down to a hundred feet before we saw anything. And what we saw was the runway lights, just a little off to the right. Wade eased off on the left throttle, and we settled toward the twin row of lights that represented *terra firma*.

Suddenly we were there, and Wade was pulling the nose up. I poised my finger on the go-back button, but it turned out not to be necessary. We crunched pretty hard on the belly and slid down the runway, relatively straight. When the speed had dissipated to a safe number, Wade tromped the right brake pedal, and the fuselage slewed around toward my side. Bit by bit, we moved over to the side of the runway and then into the grass, right beyond the edge of the concrete. We came to a stop about five feet into the weeds, having demolished a couple of runway lights, but not incurring any serious damage to the fuselage, as far as I could see.

A voice came from the passenger compartment: "Can I breathe now?"

"Ladies and gentlemen, a nice round of applause for our captain," I said, leading by example.

As I have said, this is a work of fiction. Don't try this in your Twin Beech, ladies and gentlemen!