CHARLENE

Delta Skydivers had a problem. Getting *up* was the problem. Nobody was worried about getting *down*. Back in the late 1960s, most of us had several surplus parachute rigs that we'd pack during the week and bring with us to the drop zone. We had been jumping from an old straight-tail 172 for quite a few years. We had had that airplane so long that we'd even paid for the thing. Unfortunately, somebody decided to lend it to our insurance agent to take on a fishing trip, and he lost control while trying to take off from a beach. The bird ended up in salt-water surf, a total wipeout. This left Delta with about four thousand dollars in cash but no airplane.

The good news was that Harry Shannon, a college student who had his A&P license, had joined the club. Harry's dad had a seaplane maintenance base in Houma, Louisiana, and they thought they could keep a Cessna 180 running if we could scrape up enough legal tender to buy one.

That was why I found myself one day on an airliner with a one-way ticket to Florida and a cashier's check for five thousand dollars, to pick up this supposedly flyable 180 that somebody had heard was for sale, and fly it back to New Orleans. I was supposed to thoroughly check it out before I gave the guy the check. Of course, the only way I had of getting home was in the plane. I didn't think the seller was about to run me back to New Orleans if I didn't buy the bird, and in those days I didn't carry around enough spare cash for a Greyhound ticket.

I arrived late in the afternoon and found the Cessna. It looked like it had seen better days. The thing was, the guy only

wanted five grand for it. I didn't know much about used airplanes, but I would have guessed that a five thousand-dollar Cessna 180 would look about like this one: kind of like a horse that had been rode hard and put away wet.

I spent that night on the seller's couch, and the next morning I hitched a ride out to the airport. Somebody had piled a lot of spare parts in the back of the airplane where the rear seats had once been.

I checked the fluids and got the bird running. I taxied out and ran her up. I have no recollection of that first pre-takeoff check, so it must have been pretty much okay. I was in my middle twenties at this time and my concept of what constituted an airworthy flying machine was not as picky as it is now.

I remember that she accelerated nicely and got right up off the ground. I flew a couple of patterns and shot some touch-and-goes. Then I taxied back in and shut her down. A guy in a pickup truck drove up and handed me a handbill that explained that this airport had just acquired a control tower. I had been ignorant of this fact, and had therefore made no attempt to make contact with the controllers during this test drive. These were the good old days when you didn't have to lawyer up when you did something like that.

The handbill gave the frequencies and procedures for the newly-controlled field, and that was that. Nobody even asked me to phone the tower.

I gave the money to the owner and he endorsed the title over to Delta Skydivers. I topped the tanks, got a green light from the tower, and the Cessna and I headed out toward the airplane's new home.

In those days, navigation was very primitive, compared to what we do now. Even the coffee-grinder VOR in this plane was inop, so I was using the classic map, compass, and clock method to get me from central Florida to New Orleans. As I headed toward the Gulf Coast, I realized that I had no idea how accurate the compass in this aircraft was. I noted that it was about half-full of fluid, but that the card rotated as expected when I turned the airplane, and that it held more or less on a constant number when I kept her aimed at a point on the horizon. I found a highway whose magnetic bearing could be easily determined on my sectional chart

Lining up carefully on the highway, I checked the compass and found it to be 15 degrees off. I checked the compass correction card and, sure enough, it said the compass should be off by precisely 15 degrees when I was on this heading. I ran the plane perpendicular to the highway and found that those bearings also corresponded precisely to the error given on the card. Somebody had swung this compass, but had not compensated it for the magnetic influences of its surroundings.

That was fine with me. What difference did it make whether the compass said “zero degrees” or “fifteen degrees” when I was headed north? As long as I applied the correction factor given on the card, I figured I’d end up where I wanted to go.

Years later, I met a pilot who always set his gyrocompass to “zero.” He claimed that, once he had found the direction he wanted to go, it was easier to steer with reference to this number than it was to try to remember what heading the airplane was

actually supposed to be on. The number on the heading indicator, he claimed, was a totally arbitrary aiming point for the machine, so who cared what the actual number was?

Some years after that, I was sitting in the left back seat of this plane, being flown from a drop zone in central Mississippi back to our home base in Houma. The pilot was employed by a scheduled airline and made his living making international flights in big iron birds. We had been enroute for about half an hour when I saw the back of his head start to translate back and forth very slightly. A few minutes later, he held up the sectional chart he had in his lap, and turned it this way and that.

"Oh, oh," I thought to myself. "Nobody ever compensated that compass, and he never thought of looking at the compass correction card."

I won't go into all of the details of what happened in the next ten minutes, but let's leave it at this. Out of four people in the airplane, one (the international airline pilot) was lost; another (your humble narrator) was sitting behind him, trying not to throw up from laughing so hard, and the other two passengers didn't have a clue what was going on, which was probably just as well.

But I digress. During that initial trip home from Florida, I started accumulating grease and oil on the windshield, carried there by the slipstream from a leaking crankcase seal. During my two stops for gas, I had to climb up and try to clean this mess off so that I'd be able to see to take off again.

Following my first stop, I found that the battery charging system left something to be desired. The seller must have had

the battery on an external charger for a few hours before I showed up. At that first stop, we had to jump the airplane off a pickup truck to get it started. The second time, a good ole boy in Slidell, Louisiana hand-propped it to get me going on my final leg. Yep, we sure enough had us a five thousand dollar Cessna 180.

When I got back to Louisiana, I found a bunch of jumpers anxious to get a lift in the new bird. They had filed a waiver to make a jump into a densely populated area in New Orleans east, and we made a deal with the tower at New Orleans Lakefront to use light signals for a few lifts. Everybody was excited about how well our new plane climbed, following all of those years in the 172. We flew her down to Houma the next day, where Harry got the electrical system working.

The following weekend, I flew her over to our drop zone, a nearby cow pasture that a kind farmer had allowed us to use, in exchange for our help with his hay harvest twice a year. We made a bunch of jumps in the weeks that followed, and were pleased at how well the plane performed off the uneven sod. The only thing we really didn't like was hitting cow pies on takeoff, splattering bovine droppings all over the side of the Cessna, occasionally including the jumpers sitting on the floor next to where the right door used to be.

As the happy jumping weekends accumulated, we found that our mechanic and his father became key members of our operation. One time I remember turning from downwind to base when the front crankcase seal popped out, covering the windshield with oil. I was pretty much on short final by that time, so I just went ahead and landed, rolling clear of the runway

and shutting down the engine before any serious damage was done.

Harry had to drive up from Houma to make that repair. I remember helping him remove the propeller that evening to get the new seal installed.

On another occasion, I was returning to the drop zone after topping off the tanks at the nearby airport. I decided I should buzz the field to get rid of some of the cows, who were a little weak in the area of right-of-way rules. I put the prop forward to make it buzz. One neat thing about having a seaplane mechanic working on our bird was that he would strip useful components off seaplane engines that were about to be sent in for core credit, and replace them with busted or worn-out parts from our 180. We had installed a seaplane propeller on our plane for better takeoff and climb performance. That's where the cool buzz came from.

Anyway, I headed down the pasture toward my audience that was sitting at the downwind end of the field. I laid a pretty good buzz on them, if I do say so, and pulled up, putting a few "Gs" on the bird. About that time, the jump gods decided that my flying hubris needed a response, so they knocked loose the hose coupling that was supposed to fasten the left side intake manifold to the left 3 cylinders. I guess the right ones were still firing, but you couldn't prove it by me. I completed my zoom and established a sort of downwind leg at about 300 feet.

The mill was not producing enough horsepower to keep us in the air. I looked out front and saw a series of chain-link fences around a series of front yards of neighboring houses. I

was paralleling a power line off to my left, between me and where I would land, assuming that I could drum up enough energy to hang a 180 and get lined up with the pasture before we got down to ground level.

What followed was the most exciting forced landing of my career. I lucked out and made it in, getting down and stopped before I had a chance to get too nervous. But I'm here to tell you that a 180 flies a lot better on 6 cylinders than it does on 3.

A few years later, we had gotten ahead of most of the problems caused by years of neglected maintenance. We now had a heavy-duty oil cooler salvaged from a 180 floatplane and several other improvements. We put a paint job on the old girl and decided it was time to give her a name.

Hunt Dufour, one of our members, was dating a well-endowed lady named Charlene. We were all a little bit in love with her, as I remember it, sort of like we were in love with our airplane. The "N" number ended in "Charlie," but we all agreed that "Charlene" fit her personality better, and in time, through common usage, our favorite jump ship came to be known as Charlene, the darling of Delta Skydivers.

An unexpected benefit of upgrading to the 180 was that pilots became easier to come by. Most pilots thought it was kind of boring, making marginally safe takeoffs in the overloaded 172, and then sitting there for half an hour plus, just to get up to 7200 feet for a 30-second delay lift. But there were a bunch of guys who thought it would be cool to get some 180 time. I caught the job of checking these guys out, and discovered that I enjoyed teaching pilots to fly the 180. Some of them had never handled a plane with a constant-speed propeller, and almost

nobody had ever flown a tailwheel plane. A 180 is a very forgiving bird, particularly flying off a grass surface. It has great big control surfaces, providing easy handling in all sorts of upwind, downwind, and crosswind takeoffs and landings. And it was quite a kick for some of these pilots to advance from flying behind 100 horsepower to 225 horses, and not even have to pay for it.

We operated Charlene for many years and she served us well for thousands of jumps. Some of our members had volunteered to keep a manifest showing who had jumped, and from what altitude. These folks made sure that we collected the fees that everyone had agreed to, before the end of jumping every weekend.

Then, in a series of catastrophic coincidences, all of the grownups in the club resigned, over a short period of time, and the club was left with some jumpers and pilots, but with nobody who knew anything about keeping books. There was nobody to run the manifest or collect money.

To make a long, painful, story short, there were many exuberant jump weekends, with skydivers coming in from out of town for lots of cheap and free jumping, and inside of a year, Charlene was lost to a mechanic's lien.

She was a fine old bird, and I don't know what ever happened to her. Like many others, I reached a place where I thought I had made enough jumps for one lifetime. I got busy with other pursuits and never looked back. But I'll always remember my time with Charlene with great fondness.