MY FIRST TWO HUNDRED AND A HALF APPROACH

BY

ALAN MALONE

My wife and I were trying to get into Newport News for a visit with her sister and a house full of nieces and nephews. We had been cooling our heels in Raleigh for most of the afternoon. Every hour the weather briefer had said that our destination was still socked in with coastal fog, but that the forecasts all predicted that it would be picking up any time now, at least enough for us to sneak in before dark.

We were traveling in a borrowed Cessna 210. Imagine a Cessna 206 with retractable gear. It had wing struts and a 280 horsepower Continental up front. When you pulled up on the gear handle, an incredible series of events was triggered. First the gear doors came open, then the main gears dropped down and pivoted back. Then they and the nosewheel got sucked up into the fuselage. I don't remember which came first, the mains or the nose gear. Finally, with a triumphant clunk, the gear doors all slammed shut and the green "gear up" light came on. At least, that's what was supposed to happen.

After one last talk with the weather man, we decided to go have a look. I figured the worst that could happen was that we'd shoot an ILS, miss, and come back to Raleigh, where the weather was good and forecast to stay that way. Darkness was fast approaching, and our prospects for a clearing of the fog were not improving as the air started to cool down. A night in

Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina was not a bad prospect, but we were anxious to see the rugrats.

So we got a clearance and blasted off into the stratus. I don't remember how high we were planning to go, but there was a lot of leveling off at intermediate altitudes and vectoring around as we got out of the Raleigh airspace. While all this was going on, I was trying to get the gear to come up. Everything was going according to schedule until the time came for the clunk and the little green light to come on. That part wasn't happening.

Cussing to myself, I cycled the gear several times. After several unsuccessful attempts, I decided that we could very well make the short trip out to the coast with the gear hanging out in the breeze. I gave it one last try, and this time my efforts were at last rewarded with success.

As I felt and heard the joyous clunk, we popped out of the tops of the clouds. I had been so busy futzing around with the wheels that I hadn't realized that the whole operation was taking place in instrument meteorological conditions. It felt like a moment of Zen – like the time you've been sitting in a bus and idly following a conversation taking place in the seat behind you and realize, after a while, that the whole drama was being conducted in Spanish and that you had understood every word without having to strain your brain.

Maybe, I thought to myself, I have finally got this IFR stuff under control.

A short time later we reentered the clouds on vectors to the ILS approach to Newport. The sun was fast going AWOL, and I

resolved that we'd return immediately to Raleigh if we were unsuccessful in our search for a runway.

Presently I started to hear the beep beep beep of the outer marker and soon after that the ADF needle reversed. I started my stopwatch and noted with satisfaction that both the localizer and glide slope needles were centered. I extended the gear with no problems, ran down some flaps, and adjusted the power. The approach was proceeding normally as I concentrated on keeping the airspeed, heading and rate of descent under control.

Somewhere in the middle of all this somebody came on the radio and cleared us to land. My wife remembers how weird that seemed to her (*Cleared to land ... Where???)*, since we were now in the middle of a cloud bank that had obscured the end of the sunset, leaving us in a capsule full of reddish light with absolutely nothing showing in the windows except for some reflected glow from the panel.

I reduced power a little bit. The manifold pressure was trying to creep upward as we sank through increasingly dense air. I remember thinking that it was irritating, seeing our strobe lights flashing on the propeller. Why couldn't the clever engineers think of a way of installing the things so that they wouldn't do that?

Then I remembered that this airplane didn't have any strobe lights. The flashes were coming from outside the airplane. Then it looked like somebody threw a switch and turned on the lights of a big runway, right in front of us, about 200 feet below our wheels.

That approach took place over 40 years ago, and my wife is still talking about how spectacular it was to all of a sudden see the airport right there waiting for us, just a few seconds before touchdown.

A week or so later I was telling the airplane's owner that his airplane had carried me through my first two hundred and a half approach. A two hundred and a half approach, in case there are any non-gauge-gapers still reading this, is one that terminates at ILS minimums. The rules say that you can go down to about 200 feet above the ground before you see anything and that you must have at least ½ mile of visibility to land out of the approach. If you don't see anything by the time you get that low, you have to stoke up the boilers and make what they call a missed approach, pulling back up into the clag and starting to think about whether you have enough fuel to get to your alternate.

The owner asked me if I had made a stabilized approach. "Oh yeah," I replied. "Those needles were rock steady. Never got out of the center circle."

"And the glide slope needle," he said. "Was that centered through the whole approach?"

"Yep," I said. "Never wiggled, not one little bit."

"That doesn't surprise me," he said. "The indicator has two needles, the localizer to keep you lined up on the runway centerline and the glide slope needle to keep you right on the glide path. But we haven't had a chance to install a glide slope receiver in the radio, so there's nothing driving the needle. It's always centered."

I guess it’s true what poker players say. Sometimes it’s better to be lucky than to be good.