

UP AND OVER

(Easy as falling off a cliff)

January 15th was a bright, sunny day in the Mat-Su Valley, northeast of Anchorage, Alaska. The mid-winter days are short in this part of the world, and beautiful weather such as it was that day, rarely falls on a weekend.

My 1946 Taylorcraft was equipped with 2500 straight board skis which provided plenty of floatation on nearly any type of snow conditions. I parked my plane on Finger Lake where there was no tie down fee, but it did require a fair amount of time for preflight preparation. The skis might freeze down or a sheet of ice might form over the entire upper surface of the airplane. The engine would certainly require preheating and the plane may even be partially covered by drifted snow. On this particular day, none of the time consuming delays were present except, of course, the need to preheat the engine.

I was anxious to fly on such a beautiful day in what many people consider the most spectacular scenery in the world. After preheating my 85 hp engine and securely tying the tail wheel down, one manual spin of the prop was all that it took to make the engine purr. With my trusted flying partner beside me (1/2 Husky and 1/2 Terrier—looks like “Benji”), Bear and I took off to explore new places to land on skis. We did touch and go’s on Finger Lake, Wasilla Lake, and Lake Lucille before deciding to look for someplace a little more challenging. We didn’t have to look far, for just to the north lies Mt. Baldy. The rounded top, far above the tree line, looked very inviting; we climbed to about 4,000 feet and circled what looked like a good landing spot. I could tell the wind was calm as there were no wisps of snow blowing off the peaks that stood higher. I decided to do a high speed “drag” of the surface to determine the snow conditions. My suspicions were confirmed; the snow was dry and settled, making an excellent condition for landing. After circling again, we made an uneventful landing and got out to enjoy the panoramic view that was awesome. Cook Inlet lays on the southwest side, with the Chugach Range rising above 7000 feet to the southeast, the Talkeetna Range to the north and the Sleeping Lady (Mt. Susitna) off to the west provided a breathtaking view of God’s country in the far north.

We stretched our legs, took some pictures, and were again on our way. A lake was straight ahead and normal, but not very challenging so we looked higher. Directly to the east, the mountain was roughly a 1000 feet higher with a gentle slope on the south side rising to a ridge that runs in an east/west direction. On the west end of the ridge stands two small buildings with antennas on their roofs. The north side of the ridge has a sheer cliff that drops about 600 feet before becoming a gentler slope running toward Willow Creek.

We circled twice to get the lay of the land. The plan was to land uphill toward the ridge, taxi to the top and turn east for another take off. It looked simple enough for I’d landed uphill in the mountains before on wheels many times. I would simply determine where I wanted to touch down, pick the desired altitude, slow the plane to landing speed, and fly it right on to the mountain slope. The landing went as planned, and we taxied just above idle up toward the ridge. There was enough crown of the surface so I could not tell where the edge of the cliff was,

but the little buildings were fast approaching on my left. I decided to turn east for the take off. At the same moment that I began applying pressure to the right rudder, the cliff appeared directly beneath my nose. The snow disguised the cliff until I was on top of it!

It was too late to prevent the inevitable fall except hold my breath and wait for the plane to crash hundreds of feet below. As the plane went straight off the cliff, I heard a loud crash-banging noise that prompted me to look to see if the wings were still there. They were. I wondered about the tail. About a second later, another crash-banging sound pierced my ears. I still could see no damage as I held the yoke tight to my chest hoping for the plane to fly.

Suddenly flashing through my mind I remembered one of my first flying lessons when I made a very hard landing that bounced the airplane high in the air and as it was coming down fast, I held the yoke all the way back. The instructor forced the yoke forward, applied power and we settled to the runway no worse for wear. I now realized the need to push the yoke forward in order to gain sufficient air speed to fly. Not knowing what damage had occurred, I gently applied forward pressure on the yoke while advancing the throttle. To my surprise the engine barked to life as we began picking up speed still going almost straight down. As the speed increased, so did the control response and I eased back the yoke as we became airborne. I leveled off and felt no loss of controllability caused by any damage to the airplane. Everything felt normal except for my heart racing. We were flying again as I made a gentle climbing turn until we reached the top of the mountain. Looking back I could see two ski tracks that led straight off the cliff, and about 30 feet below, a huge rock jutted out from the face of the cliff. There was snow on the rock with two ski tracks on either side of the rock!

The first loud crash-bang noise I heard must have been as we went over the edge of the cliff with the underside of the fuselage banging into the snow covered ground. The second loud noise must have been when we went over the rock that helped thrust the plane away from the cliff down slope which allowed time to recover airspeed for a climb out. We were airborne again!

We returned to Finger Lake, and I examined the airplane, finding no evidence whatsoever of our close encounter. While tying the plane down, I realized that an experienced stunt pilot wouldn't deliberately do what I'd done by accident and decided right then and there that I would never tell anyone of this incident. However, as I entered the house, my wife took one look at my face and said "What's wrong?" I knew then that I wouldn't be able to hide it. Oh by the way, Bear continued to fly with me for many years.

Lesson learned: Even though I knew the cliff was there, once on the ground I couldn't see it until it was too late. A high speed "drag" while maintaining flying speed would have prevented the fall and allowed a closer look at the lay of the land.

Pure luck: Had I decided to turn east a moment sooner, my turn would have been halfway completed and resulted in a fall over the cliff sideways with almost certainly a fatal outcome.

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