

Evening Flight

by

Stephen M. Schaub

I cannot tell you how indescribably beautiful the city is at night from the cockpit of an airplane. Below me is a wondrous display of lights and homes and buildings, structures of all different sizes and shapes, large and small, a kaleidoscope of electric, vibrant colors, a network of lighted streets in geometric patterns with a multitude of cars and trucks with their headlights on, tracing through these streets, one after another after another. A patchwork quilt of lights and streets and homes, and vehicles passing up and down the arteries of roads. It is a sight to behold. And farther off in the distance, nearer the horizon, in the suburbs of the city, a scattering of an infinite number of glittering, gleaming diamonds on a black velvet tablecloth. And you are soaring above it all, flying like an angel, gazing down upon the Earth and all of its busy, bustling life below.

I was 20 years old and hungry for adventure, and here I am at 1,000 feet above the city, in a Cessna 172, a private airplane, its 36-foot wingspan and 160-horsepower engine holding me up in the sky. I'm sitting on the left-hand side of the airplane, in the pilot's seat. I am flying the airplane. The flight instructor, sitting next to me on the right-hand side of the cockpit, watches my every move. A short, stocky, sandy-haired man, he looked like he'd rather be home with his family, safe and warm, than up here in the cold, nighttime sky with an amateur like me. But I could also sense by his demeanor that he was a man of much flying experience, an experience gathered over many years and many hours of piloting airplanes in the sky.

I had already taken the Private Pilot Ground School, and passed. I cherished my certificate, that certificate attesting to the fact that I knew the basics of flight. This was cause enough for the instructor to put me to the test, to see how much I had actually learned about flying. He knew there is a huge difference between Ground School and actually flying an airplane.

In the cool evening air, following my instructor's directions, I had taxied the plane out to the end of the long, lighted runway for the preflight check. The plane wants to fly. On the runway, with the brakes applied, with me running up the engine rpm to check the magnetos, the plane wants to fly, wants to surge forward, wants to climb into the sky. I release the brakes and

the plane starts to move, slowly at first, then faster. Surging down the long runway, gathering speed, faster and faster as I push the throttle forward, it doesn't take much to lift 2,000 pounds of airplane off the ground. The plane wants to fly, wants to soar into the sky, wants to get away from all the pettiness of life on the ground. I pull back on the yoke just a little and we are airborne, the wheels imperceptibly losing contact with the hard concrete of the runway.

At full throttle, the plane roared into the evening sky, the lights and buildings of the city falling away, growing smaller in my perspective, the darkness of the night enveloping us. It was a wonderful evening for a flight, with no wind, no turbulence to shake the plane. The air was calm and quiet and the plane flew smoothly.

"Level off at 1,000 feet exactly. Let's see how close you can get."

The instructor next to me expected me to do everything, as if I am in charge and he was just going along for the ride. He wanted me to make certain maneuvers to test my proficiency, such as climbing to a certain altitude and leveling off at exactly that altitude. It is a test of a pilot's skill to be able to make textbook maneuvers. A skilled pilot should be able to fly at that desired altitude exactly, not over, not under.

Higher and higher the airplane flew, until we reached 1,000 feet of altitude and I leveled the plane off by pushing the yoke forward and reducing the throttle. I was determined to get it right, to be as accurate as I possibly could, going over the designated altitude by only about 50 or 100 feet before coming back down. I handled the flight controls with a determined intensity, wanting to do the best I could, eager to prove myself, to show my level of skill to the instructor. He watches me very carefully, watching every move I make.

"Not bad."

We sailed over the city, first downtown, then north, then west, then east, exploring the nighttime landscape and all the activity below.

"OK, now do a 30-degree turn to the left, with no loss of altitude, and level off at compass course 180-degrees . . . due south."

I apply rudder and aileron, and push the throttle forward just a little, enough to compensate for the airspeed lost by banking the plane as it sails through the night air. I watch the glittering city below me, seemingly so near, so close to me just outside my window, I could almost reach out and touch it. I watch the flight attitude indicator on the instrument panel as the airplane's wing tilts in a 30-degree angle. With what grace and beauty did this private plane, this Cessna 172, turn in the night sky toward the left. With what mysterious force, with what magic, held aloft by nothing more than invisible molecules of air, the wing of the airplane sweeps through the evening sky. With what power, with what solid strength did the roaring engine turn the propeller, the propeller blades slicing through the night air, pulling the plane forward at 130 miles per hour. The instrument panel in front of me glows with a dozen lighted dials giving me information about the plane, its altitude, airspeed, direction, engine temperature. I watch the compass as it turns nearer and nearer to south, and as it approaches the large S on the dial, I level

off the plane. My hands on the yoke, I feel a sense of power and control. To me, this airplane is a wild beast, challenging me to control it, to subdue it, to make it obey my commands – and it does.

“Watch your altitude. Good. Now climb to 2,000 feet and level off at exactly 2,000 feet.”

I advance the throttle and pull back on the yoke. The plane surges upward into the stars, the G-force of acceleration pushing us back into our seats. I gaze intently at the altimeter as it goes past 1,500, then 1,600, then 1,800 feet. I slowly start to level off the plane. I missed the 2,000 foot level, going over by only 100 feet or so, but brought the plane back down to 2,000 feet and eased the throttle back to cruising speed.

“Not bad.”

We made more turns over the city, going east, then west, then north. He sat there looking at me for a moment, and I could sense something more challenging was coming up.

“Now this time, do a 360-degree turn to the left, banking 15 degrees. Go all the way around the compass, and level off at the exact same compass heading you started at – 340 degrees, or north-northwest. Don’t forget to maintain your altitude.”

I bank the plane 15 degrees to the left and apply a touch more throttle to stay at that altitude. I watch the instruments on the panel in front of me, but the sparkling city below lures away my attention. I couldn’t help being awestruck by the visual beauty of it all. What a wonderful thing it is to do a 360-degree turn at night over the city. Watching the city laid out below, the scene changes, rotates around, like riding on a gigantic carousel, gradually bringing you back to the same familiar place. If you look at the stars above, they wheel around, like a great pinwheel of tiny lights, but then come back to the same formation. It is a wondrous sight to behold. I kept glancing at the compass, watching it as it made its slow but sure and steady movement – to the west, to the south, to the east, to the north, and then I level off the plane, heading north-northwest by the compass.

And then, suddenly and surprisingly, out of nowhere, in a calm, clear, tranquil evening sky with no turbulence, the plane hit a bump, a barrier, an unseen obstruction, a sensation of having collided with something. A strong bump – not a mild bump, not a violent, severe bump – but a shock nonetheless, one that rocked us in our seats even with our seatbelts on. The Cessna lurches, shakes for just a moment, and then keeps flying on, straight and level, just as if nothing happened.

Startled, sensing danger, the instructor, his face gone pale, looks around at the instruments, the propeller, the wings. “What was that?” he asked, his voice showing concern, as if our 360-degree maneuver had broken something on the plane. He strained in his seatbelt to look around at the airplane, front and back and side to side, to look for damage. I was more curious than afraid. What *did* just happen? I looked at the instruments, the wing, the propeller,

the darkened sky around me. Everything seemed normal, and the plane flew on, normally, just as though nothing was wrong.

The instructor, the pilot of much flight experience, sat there silently, gravely, pondering what could have possibly gone wrong on such a smooth, serene flight. What was damaged? Were we about to fall out of the sky, a broken wing or a failed engine or a raging fire to claim the lives of two people, as the once-graceful but now-crippled plane came crashing down into the bustling, glittering city below? In the darkness of night, over a crowded city, with less than half a mile to the ground, an emergency landing would almost certainly have been fatal. But then, nothing happened. The instructor's face lightened and I could see the relief in his eyes as he settled back into his seat.

“Oh! Propwash. We hit our own propwash.”

Just as the propeller on a boat leaves behind a wake in the water, the propeller on an airplane leaves a wake in the air. The difference is that the wake in the water can be seen, but the wake in the air is invisible. The fact that it's not seen doesn't mean it's not there. With our one-ton, 160-horsepower Cessna 172 coursing straight ahead into the night, this is not a problem – the propwash would stream behind us in a straight line. But flying in a circle, in a calm sky with no wind to disperse it, we came around and flew into our plane's own turbulence, its own propwash. Unplanned, unexpected – what was intended to be just a simple flight became a truly unique experience. For some of us, flying is and always will be miraculous.

The plane flew on, and the event passed just as quickly as it occurred, and so did our thoughts about it, and our attention went back to flying patterns above the nighttime city. The incident became something that a pilot files away in his memory, in case it's ever needed again for another fateful moment in the gloriously beautiful but ruthlessly deadly sky.

I have flown other airplanes at other times, both before and after this flight. I have learned to take off and land, to do maneuvers, to stall an airplane and recover from a stall, and to trim an airplane for a perfectly balanced flight. But out of all this, out of all these adventures in the bright daylight morning hours, the one flight that I remember the most, the one flight that stays in my memory the most, is that one single evening flight over the city.