

Tomorrow's Another Day

The gray daylight was just breaking when I awoke this morning. I pulled on my jeans and a tee-shirt before creeping quietly into the kitchen and turning on the coffee maker. As the aroma of coffee began to fill the air, I stood looking out the screen door towards the woods just listening to the whippoorwill's high-to-low calls and the occasional barn owl screeching far out near the hangar.

As I stood there listening, I thought to myself that in another few months, I would turn 80 years old, and I was thankful for another new day, eager to see the sunrise another time. I chortled quietly to myself when the thought struck me that there was a time that I would have bet good money that I would never see 40 years old. I'm always questioning my luck. And, lately, the question was more and more one of how many more sunrises would I see? The events of yesterday underscored that.

Once the coffee was ready, I filled a cup, threw in a few spoonfuls of sugar and headed out the door to my grass strip, a 2,600 foot slash cleared in the woods behind the house.

It's something I like to do very early in the morning at dawn before the bustle of the day sets in. It's a ritual I've cultivated over time, a needed part of my creative process as a writer. I walk out the door, careful not to spill my coffee, cross the small pasture and aim for an opening in the woodline, like a sort of door at the far corner of the field.

Why did I say "door?" Because, when I reach the corner of the field and enter the woods, I lower my head some, ducking under the low hanging branches like I'm entering a secret cave. As I begin to walk down the sandy lane through the woods towards my small airstrip, I feel as if I am entering another plane of existence, another dimension, a more enchanting place, a peaceful, welcoming place. The walk is a long traverse through a tunnel formed by the leafy canopy overhead, one formed by oaks and tulip poplars, and the path is carpeted by dappled light as it winds its way through the broken shade of morning.

Stepping from the wood line beyond and onto the mown grass of the airstrip, I look to my right and there sits my Skywagon, a green and white Cessna 180, with droplets of water still beaded on the trailing edges from last night's rain. I stop momentarily as I always do and I peer down at the far end of the strip to see if he is there. And yes, as always, he there. Sitting high in the branches of a single oak, the old eagle is hard to miss and has become a welcome sight. He's been roosting there for several years now. He is why my little airport in the woods is named "Eagle's Roost."

A daily ritual begins. I walk over to the fire pit and grab my poker to stir the gray ashes of yesterday's fire. Then I throw in some cattail tender that I keep in a wooden box near the stone fire pit. On top of that, I place a handful of dead twigs and pine straw that I collected yesterday, and I mound them all in the cold ash, and I strike a match and I get on my knees to light the tender. The cattail fluff is very dry, and as I blow on it, it immediately flares under the twigs; small yellow-orange twisting flames rise quickly; a dense white column of smoke works its way skyward along with small but earnest licks of fire. I set my coffee cup near the little fire to keep it warm and gather a few larger splits of dry oak and pine from the box and lay them close enough to the fire that I don't get a bonfire but just a nice, small warming fire.

As the fire begins to take the chill of off the morning, I sip some of my coffee and walk over to my 180, open the co-pilot's door, and grab my sump screwdriver from the glove box. Then I check her oil and drain her sumps, and I make sure the wheel chocks are solidly in place. Then I climb in and start her engine. After she warms up a bit, I set the engine to a low idle and lock the throttle in place. Then comes the magic part.

As the engine drones slowly at a steady idle, I get out, retrieve my coffee cup and sit on a log near the fire pit. After I sit down, I light a smoke and just sit there watching the sky turn all orange and pale yellow as the sun rises. My airplane nearby is idling, waking up with me, the dew sometimes swirling back off its prop tips in misty, concentric, silver trails. And as I sit there sipping coffee, smoking my cigarette, listening to the purr of the 180's engine, I fall in love all over again with my beautiful airplane, the sky above, the airstrip, the trees that surround it all and my little world far removed from any madness beyond. I revel in these times, and as Truman Capote's character, Buddy, said in his short story, *A Christmas Memory*, "As for me, I could leave the world with today in my eye."

After a time, I finish my coffee, crush my smoke out and shut the airplane down, and then I'll go back to the house to get my wife her coffee. She'll be just waking up and watching the news on television as she always does. I'll hand her the coffee, kiss her on the cheek, and I'll stand nearby, and I'll watch thirty seconds of the garbage the world makes for itself, garbage that I have given up trying to figure out, and I'll smile to myself and think that tomorrow morning I will wake up again, get my coffee and once more, I will sit on my log watching my airplane idle and be happy that I can find refuge and solitude for a few minutes in my world.

But yesterday, once the sun had risen all bright yellow over the young pines at the eastern end of the airstrip, I knew that it was a Fleet morning. I needed to get some open cockpit time. The remnants of a tropical depression had passed in the night and the air had a crisp, coolish snap to it. The last of

the low, gray, broken clouds were passing to the northeast and I could easily see the sun as its light crossed over the ground in large, broken patches.

After I gave the wife her coffee and took a shower, I grabbed my flight jacket, goggles and leather gloves, the ones with the long gauntlets, and told the wife I'd be back in a few hours. I wanted to watch the fish spotters out over the Chesapeake Bay.

So I grabbed a second cup of coffee and headed towards the strip and the hangar. Once out on the strip, as I always do, I had to admire the lines of my 180. It still glistened, wet with morning dew. Waiting in my small hangar off to the side was my Fleet, a Model One. The hangar is too small for both airplanes, so the Fleet, a linen covered 1928 antique nests within while the sheet metal Cessna stands guard outside on the grass.

When I last put the Fleet in the hangar, I had fueled it, greased the rockers and re-gapped the Kenner engine's spark plugs. I pride myself for doing the most complex of things by myself and starting the old girl was no different. I slid the hangar door wide open, made sure the Fleet's wheel chocks were in place and set at the right angle. Then I laid the pull ropes up in the cockpit. With the magnetos off, I primed her, pulled her propeller through five turns and after switching the magnetos on making sure the throttle was set to idle, I pulled the prop through twice very hard and the engine coughed once, then twice and it started. Running back around the wing tip and through a cloud of bluish exhaust smoke, I jumped into the cockpit and pulled the chock ropes hard and they slid to the side. Buckle up the seat belts and shoulder harness, place the toes of my boots on the rudder pedals and ease the throttle forward gently and the bi-wing Fleet rolls from within the cavern of the hangar. Time to go.

Kinner K-5 engines sound like old foot-treadled sewing machines. They've got a special ratchety, clackety-clack-popping sound about them that doesn't inspire confidence if you've spent a lot of time flying airplanes with bigger, more powerful multi-cylinder radial or horizontally opposed engines. But I'm highly confident in mine as I do all my own work. Fact is, just recently, I did a complete tear down and overhaul on the Kinner. Yeah, I know, I'm not a certified and licensed Airframe & Power Plant mechanic, but my old hangar is as sterile as any big time engine rebuild facility, and I've got a computer and the internet and I can pretty much get answers to any questions I might have when it comes to repairs or rebuilds. Besides, I rebuilt that old Ford inline six cylinder engine out there in the truck a few years ago, didn't I? What's the difference, really?

As far as I'm concerned, the old Kinner engine, in fact the entire airplane is as good as the day she left the factory all those years ago. I won't be out over the water that long anyway. I'm as good a mechanic as they come. Who needs a license?

As I lined up on the runway pointed east, and I figured that I should get near the Reedville, Virginia, airport about the time the commercial fish spotters were taking off and heading out over the bay. As I lifted off, the trees surrounding my place caught my attention. Fall has not set in completely here, but there is a tinge of bronze and gold in the leaves and the colors of fall lay across the forested landscape in blotchy splashes. Soon it will all be a dazzling fireworks display so showy that you will almost hear the swish and fizz of its brilliance. But soon after, the trees will stand ashen, naked and shivering, so I'd better get my open cockpit time in while I can.

Ahead, at Reedville, the long green slash of the fish spotter's runway that ends at the water's edge is just now coming into view. I see the first Cessna 210 lift away, retract its spindly landing gear (which reminds me of a heron's stick-like legs in flight) and head out over the sparkling blue-gray water of the Bay. As I watch the airplane's gangly landing gear disappear into its belly, I wonder briefly how many million tons of fish have been hauled into the sleepy little fishing port of Reedville in the 150 years of its existence?

All the fish spotters seem to fly the Cessna 210, a light, retractable-gear, single-engine airplane. Because I can be dim, I once asked one of the spotter pilots why they fly the 210s. His answer made me feel like an idiot, it was so obvious. He said, "Son, when you are 40 miles offshore and the engine quits, the last thing you want when you ditch is a set of landing gear hanging down there to flip you over when you hit the water."

I could not fish spot. I do not have the rear end or the bladder for it. Orbiting a fishing fleet guiding the catch boats towards the school of the tiny fish, the Menhaden, fish destined to become fish oil for health and food, means spending hours and hours airborne over the boats directing them to the schools of fish. Many of the older fish spotting pilots easily have as many as 40,000 hours of flight time.

Once out over the Bay, I see the first steamers, the catch boat tenders. I don't know why they are called, "steamers." Probably a throwback to the boiler-powered boats that fishermen used in these waters a century ago.

They are, in fact, large, diesel powered, modern trawlers, perhaps 100 feet long with every electronic gizmo known to man, their antennas rotating and protruding from their wheel houses used to chart their course, to talk to each other, and communicate with the airplanes overhead as well as the maritime authorities. Perched on their sterns are nestled two large "catch" boats that look a little like torpedo boats that launch when the fish are spotted. The catch boats and their crews then race out and encircle the silvery schools of tiny fish and gather them in their seine nets to be hauled to the steamer. Once at the steamer, the fish are sucked into the hold via a vacuum tube system that Hoover would envy.

I stay far out on the periphery of the operation just watching the boats and the airplanes circling overhead. I'm also listening to the clatter of the Kinner. A thin film of engine oil is starting build up on my goggle lenses, which is entirely normal. No cause for alarm. Radial engines are known for leaking oil. Meanwhile, I watch as flocks of gulls follow the boats, gulls which the boat captains are watching, too. The fishermen use every sign they can - gulls feeding, the odd pelican making a Kamikaze dive into the water, silver roils of water, frenzies of fish feeding en masse, and, of course, the fish spotters in their airplanes circling overhead to locate their catch. The Kinner's rockers seem to be a little noisier than usual. And the film of oil on my goggles seems a little darker than usual. That odd click I'm hearing just means that one of the valves is out of adjustment. I'll see to that when I land. No worries.

Something must have been spotted below as I see crew members donning yellow life vests and white hard hats and racing along the steamer's deck towards their catch boats. Clouds of blue exhaust smoke burble in a froth up from the water underneath the catch boats as they slide back into the water. In seconds, like waterborne grey hounds, the two boats are side-by-side in a tight formation racing towards their prey, bouncing hard over the higher waves. Then suddenly, I see what looks like a large cloud of hazy gauze under the water's surface, its edges are maybe 200 feet across and its shape is changing constantly as the catch boats approach it quickly.

In seconds, the catch boats reach the outer edge of the cloud and like practiced formation pilots, they sharply turn away from each other and their wakes begin drawing a wide 360 degree circle around the cloud. When they come together at the circle's apex and close the circle, the net is in the water and set like a large scoop underneath the entire school of fish, and they begin to draw it tighter and tighter. I am mesmerized. Soon, the net is closed and the water at the top of the net is a brilliant silver frothing, flipping, twisting mass of thousands of small fish. The fish spotters have seen me, and I am keeping my distance. But we are all circling at about 1'000 feet and the details are easy to see.

I can only imagine the chatter on the radios between the airplanes and the boats as I have no radio with which to monitor what is being said, but I am sure that it is jubilant. I think back to what the old spotter told me about why they use the 210s. I wonder if any one of them has ever actually experienced an engine out this far from shore? Just thinking about that makes me a little nervous.

But then, I laugh at myself, even considering that one of them might have an engine out is dubious. The company they work for must take every precaution and spend huge amounts of money to make sure those engines are the very best they can be.

I smile to myself as I think about the fact that I do all my own work. I am meticulous. I take pictures of everything. I make sure that I use only the most up-to-date information and manuals when I do an overhaul. And best of all, I save a lot of money doing things myself, even if it does make me an outlaw. I could care less. I know what I'm doing. Been doing it for years.

I'm getting low on fuel. As I turn towards my home strip and the shoreline, maybe 20 miles distant now, I think to myself that any worries I might have about something as reliable as a Kinner engine are silly. There is no way, not in a million years, ever, that an engine I rebuilt would ever qui....

Which it just did!!! Abruptly with no warning. Holy crap!

In the few seconds I had to figure the problem out, my thoughts returned to something I had thought about many times.

One to six hours. If I had to ditch, that's maybe how long I would live before hypothermia took me down. Maybe the Coast Guard would have saved me first. In reality, I probably would have flipped over and died in the water landing. Thinking about it now, back on the ground, sitting on my log outside my little tin-roofed hangar, with the Fleet, once again, snug in her nest, I admit it was just a tad - actually, a whole lot - stupid to get so caught up watching the fishing fleet at such a low altitude, so far from shore in an ancient airplane that has little chance of survivability in a choppy water landing. And, hell, I wasn't even wearing a flotation device. Maybe outlaws are blessed.

Whatever might have happened, in the seconds after the Kinner quit, I didn't have to time to think about it much. I was just too busy looking for a cause.

The Fleet Model One is a simple airplane. On the panel ahead of me there are only a few basic flight instruments: the altimeter, a turn-and-bank indicator, a tachometer, an airspeed indicator, an oil pressure gauge and the engine temperature gauge. Beyond that, there is a carburetor heat control, an engine primer and a magneto switch. In my left hand is a single throttle lever. Ah! But on my right side is a little, tear shaped, yellow fuel selector knob. It has only two positions: up for "on" and down for "off." It's not fancy or hard to figure out. It's shaped the way it is so that it's difficult to accidentally turn off the flow from fuel tank in the upper wing above me. I must have leaned on it during my absorbed fascination with watching the fishing operation below.

Saving my life then was as simple as diving to get some airspeed to get the prop turning, giving the engine one shot of prime and waiting on the prop to turn fast enough to fire the engine after ensuring the fuel selector was again turned to "on." With not much altitude to spare, the dive worked down around 400 feet above the Bay. With the familiar clickety-clatter-popping of the Kinner once again pulling me back into a now brilliant blue sky, I felt my behind un-

clinch and the thundering pulse in my neck veins began to subside. I turned directly towards my little grass strip far away inland, happy to see the shoreline come into view now and made a direct beeline home.

Once I hushed the Fleet over the trees and the runway threshold, we settled to the still damp grass with a comforting thump-thump of the wheels and I gently brought my left heel over onto the small brake pedal at the base of the rudder petal and brought the girl to a stop in front of the hangar. The wife was sitting on my log with narrowed eyes and a slightly worried crease across her forehead. She cradled a cup of coffee in her hands.

"I was getting worried."

"No worries, my dear. You know what they say in the movies, 'Piece 'o cake,' They were catching lots of fish."

My wife has a second sense about things. It is a finely tuned instrument, like a precision radar that sends out piercing rays of intuition that easily determine when I'm planning something stupid, something dangerous, or when I'm in the act of committing the same, and when I am lying about having done or not done something stupid or dangerous. It was ping-pong away like a submarine's sonar. I could feel it.

"Catching lots of fish, huh?" she said, with that certain tone and certain look that silently says, *"Why don't I believe a word of what you are saying? But I'm going to let you get away with it anyway because I love you and I don't want a fight."*

"Yeah! Lots! Wanna help me push her in?"

She nodded yes, and she went to one wing as I went to the other and we put the Fleet inside. Then, she kissed me on the cheek and whispered "Liar!" in my ear. "You'll tell me later, or you'll go to bed without supper or sex." At my age 'no sex' isn't so much of a problem, but 'no supper?' I stuck my lower lip out in mock disappointment and pretended to sniffle as a sad child.

Seeing the look on my face, she said, "I mean it." We both laughed and she turned and walked away back towards the path through the woods and the house stopping and stooping to pick a few yellow flowers as she went.

After watching her walk away, I retrieved my log books from the hangar and took a seat on my log there to enter the particulars of the morning's flight. In the logbook's column titled, "Comments," I paused to think before I wrote, then I simply entered, "NSTIWTIWD!" which is skydiver shorthand for "No shit, there I was, thought I was gonna die."

Tomorrow's another day.

