

The Miracle!

We were living in New City, New York, not to be confused with the much larger New York City where our mail always seemed to end up. We'd been transferred there from Northern California about a year and a half earlier. Although I'd been born in Binghamton, New York, I'd moved out to San Jose, California with my family when I was six years old and had been there ever since. My wife is a native born Californian and had spent her entire life there. And so both our children, Tom 11 and Mike 6 are native Californians too.

We enjoyed New York and while there we tried to see as much of it as possible. We'd done pretty well but there was one more tourist attraction we wanted to see that we hadn't yet visited. We'd heard quite a bit about it and really wanted to see it. It was the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum in Cooperstown, New York. What suddenly made it important was our time in New York was coming to an end in just a few days. Northern California had always been our first love. It was the place we really called home. So it came as no surprise to us how quickly we accepted an offer to transfer back to California. Unfortunately, the job was in Santa Monica. It wasn't northern California but it was California.

It was October, 1971. Our New City house wasn't sold yet but it was on the market. The New England fall colors were just coming out in earnest so it seemed the perfect time to make the visit. Since we were leaving for California in a few days we decided the only way to see the site before we left was to fly there. The drive would have taken us the better part of two full days.

I had been flying out of a small airport, Orange County, not far from home. At this time I had about 200 hours flying in both Cessna and Piper airplanes, although I had much more experience in Cessna type aircraft. The Cessna has an overhead wing while the Cherokee has a lower wing. I was partial to the Cessna because it has more ground visibility.

My 200 flying hours had carried us all around Northern California, into Nevada, Arizona and down into Mexico as far south as Puerto Vallarta. This Cooperstown flight of less than 200 miles offered no concern. Even with a little sightseeing we'd be there in less than two hours time.

Orange County Airport was a small airport with a friendly Fixed Based Operator. I'd rented planes and flown from there several times while in New York. So I called and reserved a Piper Cherokee for the next day. It was the more comfortable choice for the kids.

The next day we arrived at the airport early. The flight plan we chose was one of scenery and safety. We wanted to take advantage of the fall colors and to stay out of the Catskill Mountains. We decided to fly north along the Hudson River toward Albany. We would continue north and turn west at some point short of

Albany and after clearing the Catskills, on to Cooperstown. The weather was beautiful. It was a good clear day and we all enjoyed the view.

I checked the weather forecast when we arrived at the airport and all was well. A slow moving storm front was coming in later that evening with heavy rain during the night and early morning hours of the next day. Everyone at the airport agreed that since we'd be back before dark there would be little chance that any weather would bother us.

The flight was, as expected, gorgeous. We arrived at Cooperstown before 9:30 as planned. Taxied to the parking area, tied the plane down, made arrangements to have it serviced while we were gone, and caught a taxi into town.

The National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum was more than we expected. It was too large to really do it justice in the time we had allotted, but we did our best. The kids thought it was fun but certainly wasn't at the top of their list of things to do. We enjoyed the little town atmosphere of Cooperstown and had a late lunch at a small outside café as the weather was warm and sunny. As we ate we could see the weather was starting to change. The sun was slowly giving way to scattered clouds. As we gathered up our things to head back to the airport it began to lightly sprinkle. We hailed a cab and by the time we reached the airport it was partially overcast and dry. No rain had reached the airport yet but as we looked to the west we could see a dark threatening sky off in the distance. No worries though, we were a good distance ahead of the storm-front.

Some explanation may be needed here. In northern California, where I learned to fly and had almost all of my experience, storms and their fronts are fairly predictable. There is generally a well-defined storm-front - one that, for the most part, travels around thirty miles per hour depending upon wind conditions. My experience thus far gave me confidence that we were well ahead of this front and could reach Orange County Airport, as planned, well before dark and ahead of the storm front. Based upon this experience I only gave weather a second thought.

Heading east from town to the airport took us out of the rain almost immediately as we moved ahead of the front. The plane had been serviced, so we paid the bill, phoned in our flight plan, gave the plane its pre-flight inspection, loaded up, and taxied out to the run-up area. Things were good. We'd be back at Orange County in an hour plus and well before dark. Our plan was almost the reverse of our flight up. We would head east toward Albany and turn south down the Hudson River to Orange County airport.

This would be our last flight before returning to California. We taxied into the run-up area and I went through the checklist. I checked the left magneto and it was fine. I checked the right magneto and the RPM drop was huge. The engine

barely would run. I cursed to myself and tried the two checks again. The left magneto was fine. The right, however, was still a problem. Damn! Now one can run with one magneto, but it certainly isn't recommended. I cursed again to myself and announced that, "We had a fouled plug and needed to head back to the hanger." This was not the first time I'd had a problem like this – a fouled spark plug- it's just something you have to deal with. I called ground control on the radio and informed them of the problem, they in turn alerted the hanger and gave me permission to return directly to the hanger area.

We taxied back. The mechanic waved me to a spot right to the hanger and we all piled out. We pulled off the cowling and checked the plugs. Sure enough one plug was a mess. The mechanic blew it out, cleaned it up, re-gapped it, and we put everything back together. All this took less than an hour to complete. Although it had only been an hour it was now an hour later. Meanwhile the storm hadn't taken a break. It was still coming.

As I paid the mechanic it began to lightly sprinkle. I thought to myself that the storm wasn't moving very fast. It had taken some time for the rain to reach the airport. Non-the-less I told the FBO and the mechanic that I would like to leave the plane overnight and that we would spend the night in town and fly out after the storm in the morning. They asked me, "Why would you do that?" I explained that my flight plan would be east to the Hudson River and south to Orange County Airport and I didn't want to get caught by the storm in the mountains. They thought my plan was silly and that if I flew directly to Orange County over the mountains I'd be there in less than 45 minutes - easily before dark and well ahead of the storm. The discussion involved five or six guys standing in front of the plane in the entrance of the hanger. The consensus of the group, all pilots I might add, was to take the direct route over the mountains to Orange County and save the overnight parking charge, the taxi rides, and the motel costs. None of them showed the least bit of concern.

Here is where I made the worst decision of my life!

I let them (FBO operator, his mechanic and several other pilots hanging around) convince me that I could easily get back to Orange County in less than forty-five minutes if I took a heading directly toward the airport over the mountains. They said, "No sweat, I'd be well ahead of the storm. There is no reason to stay the night." We reviewed the map. It certainly was doable – no problem. And I couldn't look like a wimp in front of so many people.

My experience told me they were probably right. It was a well-defined, slow-moving front and the hop over the mountain was short. I'd flown ahead of storm fronts many times at home in California and, after all, it was important to get the plane back and I did have to be at work in the morning and there was the house and the moving and all. So, along with the pressure I put on myself and the airport guys persuasive advice I decided to go for it. Diane expressed her desire

to stay the night but I brushed off her comment with a, "Not to worry, we'll be back at Orange County in 45 minutes.

Knowing this was against my better judgment we loaded up again and taxied out to the run-up area. I quickly went through the run-up checklist. This time both magnetos were fine. When I was cleared for takeoff I rolled out onto the runway and within minutes we were airborne.

No sooner than we were off the ground the rain was pelting the windshield. It wasn't heavy enough for the wiper as we climbed toward altitude and set the direction for Orange County. A few minutes later the rain turned into a heavy downpour and the sky darkened. At that moment I had this sickening feeling in my stomach and that we'd better turn around. As I turned back I looked at where the airport should have been - there was nothing but darkness. The airport was already engulfed in a storm. The airport was already completely socked-in. It was funny, but at that moment I wondered if those guys back at the airport wished they'd listened to me. But then again they weren't the ones in the air.

The sickening feeling really hit me as I realized that we couldn't return to the airport and that we had to press on. I couldn't believe that the airport could sock-in so quickly. I looked for the lights of Cooperstown but none were to be seen. I asked myself, "How could this be? It was like nothing I'd ever experienced. Only minutes before the airport had been clear and now it was invisible." The storm had jumped over and ahead of us. Where had that familiar well-defined front gone? I forced my attention back to flying the plane and picked up the heading again for Orange County airport.

The rain got heavier as real darkness was closing in fast. Lightening could be seen behind us and off in the distance to our left. Being a VFR pilot and not instrument rated, meant that I had to maintain Visual Flight Rules – as in don't lose sight of the ground. At this point VFR had real meaning for me. I would not lose sight of the ground. I now had the wipers going full blast but still had little visibility through the windshield. I could barely see between the horizon where the mountains and the low cloud base met. In the distance we could see more lightening. It was bright enough that I could clearly see the silhouette of the mountains all round us during the flashes.

Not more than ten minutes into the flight it became obvious that the storm had now jumped ahead of us and our only option was to change course some to try and skirt the storm to the south. This direction seemed to offer the most light. It turns out that we had to continually turn more right to stay out of the thick of the storm. As it got darker, and in order to see the horizon, we had to continually drop our altitude to stay VFR.

Now there was lightening all along the left side and directly ahead in our path. It was doing a good job of lighting the area to help maintain visibility but it was

scary as hell. It still seemed that I should continue to alter our direction to the right and maybe we could fly around the storm. As the weather worsened ahead and to the left I turned more and more to the right. The rain was heavy and the wiper was not doing very much to improve visibility. The lightening was getting closer and the turbulence was getting stronger. We were now heading almost west. We should have been going southeast. We were going in the wrong direction and now we were lost with no idea what to do.

I did my best to present a calm face to Diane and the kids. Needless to say, Diane looked panicked and the kids weren't making a sound (extremely unusual). The only thing I could hear was the roar of the engine, the rain pelting the windshield, the sound of thunder, and my pounding heart.

It was now very apparent that we weren't going to fly around the storm and the terrifying lightening. We'd been flying, I don't know, maybe thirty minutes now and were completely lost. We were engulfed in the storm and lightening was now all around us. I could barely make out the horizon and the mountains looked ominous in the lightening strikes. I'd known for a while that we were going down somewhere. I just had to find a spot. It was completely dark below us so it wasn't going to be here unless the ceiling forced us to the ground. I was concentrating hard to keep the little horizon there was in sight and using the light from the lightening to keep from running into some low mountain peak. This was important as we were continually reducing the space between us and the ground.

The rain had not let up a bit but as I looked out the side window I suddenly could see several car lights on a road winding through the mountains below us. I figured at this point I'd just follow the cars and the road. In the back of my mind I was thinking that if that road straightens out we'll be landing on it. At least there would be people around who might see the crash and help us. As we were following the winding road the ceiling was getting lower and I was telling myself under no circumstances was I going to lose sight of the ground and that road. The road was leading us down into a small valley of sorts.

We continued following the road. Several minutes later I could see a little town that the road lead into. The horizon had all but disappeared. I couldn't see where the road went after it left the little town, but it appeared to go back into the mountains and into the utter darkness. I couldn't really tell because the horizon was now completely gone. We couldn't have been more than a thousand feet above the ground at this point.

It was definitely a small town with streetlights lining the road for what looked like a mile or so and there didn't seem to be any straight stretches. We were now trapped in this small valley because of the low ceiling and were definitely in big trouble. It was clear that we were not going to get out of this valley. I picked up the mic and got on the radio and tried to reach someone, anyone. I declared a Mayday. The only response was from the Binghamton airport. God, I thought,

could I possibly be near Binghamton? I was born in Binghamton and now I might die in Binghamton too. How fitting. I explained my situation to the tower operator. I told him, "I am circling in a valley surrounded by mountains with a ceiling so low that I can't get out VFR. There is a small, well lit, town with a windy road running through the middle of it." I told him the direction the valley ran, but I've long since forgotten what it was. I knew the description wouldn't really help him and it didn't, but it felt good to talk to someone. Binghamton came back with, "We have no idea where you could be and that it wouldn't help anyway because Binghamton airport is shut down due to the severity of the storm." The net from Binghamton was that they couldn't help us. We were on our own and good luck. I've never felt so alone.

At this point there was only one option and it was a poor one at that. We were going to land somewhere in this little town. As I was circling the town I had been looking for somewhere to land. The good news was there was a well-lit road below us. The very bad news was the road was windy, had no straight stretches, was lined with light poles on one side and telephone poles on the other with large trees on both sides. The situation looked extremely bleak.

I told Diane, "Our only alternative is to land on the road down below us. We're lost. The weather has not improved. In fact, it has worsened. The rain is pouring, we're stuck in this valley, we're bouncing all over the place, the lightening is lighting up the valley which appears to be less than two miles long. I'll continue to look for a straight stretch but it doesn't look very promising. We'll have to take the best we can find." What I didn't tell her is we had two almost full tanks of gas.

We continued to circle the town from one end of the valley to the other looking for the best place to try a landing but I was having no luck. I found myself asking God to help me find a clear landing area.

Just when we thought the worst had arrived -- the miracle happened!

Over the radio came a man's voice...., "Piper Cherokee who just called and spoke to Binghamton tower please come in." I responded "This is Cherokee XYZ. The voice came back with, "From your description of the valley that you just gave to Binghamton tower it sounds like you have described my valley. If it is my valley we have a small private landing strip. It belongs to Bendix Electronics Company and I am expecting a plane to land in the next few minutes." The voice continued, "The landing strip is at the north end of the valley. Look in that direction. I will turn the landing lights on and off." The voice said, "Ready..... on." At the north end of the valley there was a bright flash of light that went on and off. I remember yelling, "I see it. I see it. Do it again." As we all looked to the north again there was another flash of light. I told him in my most calm voice, "I see your lights."

The voice came right back with, "Stay to the side of the valley and out of the way as a big twin engine plane is on final to land." The runway lights again came on at the north end of the valley. He went on to say, "After the plane lands follow it in." Moments later through the heavy clouds came this huge twin engine, silver plane. We watched through the heavy rain drop out of the overcast sky into the valley just in front of us in the center of the valley and down toward the ground to the north. I thanked God and impatiently waited a few minute before following the twin. As I got closer to the north end of the valley I still couldn't see the runway, but I saw the twin touched down and a dimly lit field. I proceed further and the runway, such as it was, became visible. I could see the twin taxiing toward a huge hanger.

The strip was just that, a grass strip. It was dimly lit, short, grassy, and it crossed the winding road. Flashing, crossing arms had stopped traffic in both directions. I could see cars waiting on both sides. I lined up with the runway and proceeded to land. It was still pouring hard and I landed long just past the road edge on the grass and rolled to a stop. I whispered another, "Thank you God!" and turned the plane toward the hanger. The crossing arms went up, the flashing stopped the cars continued on their way and the runway lights went out. A man (the voice) came out with a flashlight after the twin had taxied right into the hanger. He waved us toward a tie down area.

I pulled in and parked. The man, to my shame, I don't remember his name, but I can still see his face had umbrellas under his arms. He stayed out in the rain until we got the plane moored, unpacked and helped us into the hanger. In spite of having the umbrellas we were all pretty wet. He took us to his office and we warmed up in front of his electric heater. The folks flying the twin were already gone. We never saw them.

As we dried off he explained that the Bendix Corporation used this strip from time to time and that he had just arrived at the hanger minutes earlier so that he could turn on the landing lights and put down the crossing guards for the returning twin. He said, "I just happened, for no reason, to turn on and listen to the radio tonight and I heard your Binghamton story. My whole stay this evening would have been no more than thirty minutes tops."

I have always said and I believe more than ever that 'timing in life is everything'. It wins lotteries and saves lives – this time it was ours. I'm also sure that God played a major role in saving us.

This gentleman was so gracious. He casually said, "This isn't the first time I saved someone. It's happened before." He offered to get us a motel and drive us or we could just take one of the cars. I told him how nice I thought he was but if it wasn't too much trouble just the motel and a ride would be great. He called and got us a room, gave us a ride, pointed out where we could get something to eat, dropped us off at the motel and offered to pick us up in the morning. I told

him, "I'll call you." After thanking him profusely, I kissed the ground and thanked God again for giving us this man.

He dropped us off at the only motel in town and gave me his telephone number. The rain let up a little so I got some fast food to go, a short block away and we ate it in the motel room. I'm not sure any of us had much of an appetite. I'm sure the kids, though, didn't grasp the enormity of the situation. I think Diane did but she never said too much about it. I didn't sleep a wink all night. I just kept reliving the circumstances that led us to this place and how stupid I'd been.

We got up to a sunny, partly cloudy sky. Big, white, towering cumulus clouds were spread out across the sky. The storm was long gone and today the clouds were most beautiful. Everything was beautiful today. I called Orange County Airport and told them not to worry I'd have their plane back in a couple of hours. They said they weren't worried because they figured I wouldn't have left Cooperstown with the storm coming in. I didn't have the courage to tell them the real story – how I'd almost lost their plane not to mention our lives.

I didn't want to bother the man so we just got a cab to take us out to the strip. The man was there in his office. He had gassed (topped off the tanks) the plane and wouldn't take any money. I couldn't believe it. He just said that he felt so good that everything turned out so well that that was payment enough. We said good-by, he put the crossing guard down, and we were off again for Orange County. The flight to Orange was short and I believe I was at work by ten A.M. When I arrival home from work that night Diane told me she'd sold our house and two days later we were driving to California and very happy to be alive.

To this day, I still have one regret; that I never had the opportunity to do something for the man with the strategic airport that no doubt saved us from a horrific crash landing. Since then I've tried to find the man that saved us. We've long since forgotten the man's name as well as the name of the town. I've contacted Bendix and they have no knowledge of the operation. I described the valley and the town to them but they had no idea where it might have been located. I've sent letters to the FAA and they never heard of such an airport or landing strip.

I still think back about how stupid I was to take such a risk when I knew better. I didn't just risk my life but that of my family. This was a risk that should never have been taken. Everything including my gut told me not to fly that evening but I let my better judgment be compromised by others. I let braveness win out over common sense just to look good among my flying peers. It was a lesson I have never forgotten.

The biggest cause of private flying accidents is "Pilot Error."