

*NEAR MISHAPS FLYING, WORLD WAR II*

By:

Lt. Col. Joseph C. Bergling Civil Air Patrol (Ret.)

During World War II, of over 400 flights I made while on active duty, there were a number of incidents that were hazardous.

Flying into MAD (Middletown, near Harrisburg, PA), the Tower reported wind gusts up to 35 miles per hour, at 160 degrees which was a 40 degree cross wind on the runway. I approached the runway, which was 120 degrees, made about a 45 degree left turn, flew along the Pennsylvania Railroad about as high as the electric poles. Half way along the field, turned right, about 90 degrees, into the wind. Starting the final approach, with power on, I headed for the X where the two runways meet, touching down with the two wheels. When I tried to bring the tail down the plane took off again, I gunned the engine, rose to about 15 feet and traveled further across the intersection of the runways. I throttled back just enough to maintain flying speed. With no forward motion, I gradually set the two wheels down near the edge of the runway. I throttled all the way back, but the tail of the plane was still in the air. This time I brought the tail down very slowly. As I turned to go toward the hangar the cross wind banked the plane until the left wing tip nearly touched the ground. I kicked the right rudder to head into the wind and stayed there until the tower sent a jeep and two airmen to help me taxi to the hangar. I think the wind was more than 35 miles per hour because the stalling speed of the plane was 40 and I was still flying when the forward motion of the plane had stopped when I was about 15 feet in the air.

On two occasions at Bolling, I was number one for take-off. While taxiing to get into the main runway the wind was so strong that the plane took off before I got on the runway. As the plane left the ground due to the strong wind, I gave it full throttle, and then turned to line up with the runway.

One day at Bolling a Consolidated B-24 "Liberator" had run off the edge of the runway and damaged its landing gear. I was standing near the plane when some dark clouds approached the field. It was a hot day and I noticed a breeze of very cool air. I didn't like what I felt, very hot and then very cold and the black clouds. I told some of the men I thought that a strong wind was going to hit us. With the help of others we untied the Taylorcraft that was on the ramp and pushed it and a couple of other planes into the hangar. Just as we closed the door the wind hit. Bolling recorded the wind above 100 miles per hour. With the rain and wind beating against the hangar one wondered if it would hold together. Planes bumping into each other, into the hangars or turning over damaged twenty-seven of them. A few civilian maintenance men jumped into planes that were running loose and were able to save them by holding them into the wind until the storm was over.

A Civil Air Patrol plane that was stationed on the field for "Tracking Mission" was one of the unlucky ones. Two of the C.A.P. pilots were untying their plane when the wind struck. When they saw it was too late they jumped into the plane, the wind blew the plane over on its back with the two men in it. They were not seriously hurt.

I had a great respect for thunder storms, knowing what they could do to light airplanes. I never flew through one, if I couldn't get around one I would turn back. During the thunderstorm season of July and August 1943, I flew every day and only had to turn back two or three times.

Taxiing behind large planes when their engines were revving-up was always a danger with our small planes. Once when I was taxiing on the ramp at Bolling a B-17 "Flying Fortress" was idling its engines. Thinking it was safe to cross behind the big plane I started to taxi. Just as I got behind the big plane the engines began to rev-up, blowing my plane over until the right wing nearly touched the ground. I kicked left rudder and headed into the wind until the four engines were idled. One other time I got behind the prop wash of a large plane; this time at Martin's Field in Baltimore. Landing east and over the long runway, flying lower than the top of the hangars, the plane banked into an almost vertical position. I gunned the throttle and landed further down the runway ok. Checking back at operations I found that a Martin B-26 "Marauder" was running its engine full-throttle with the prop wash crossing the runway.

All flights weren't for parts alone, some times it was to carry someone someplace or a combination of the two. The shortest trip was from Bolling to Washington National with Colonel Walter E. Nicol our Commanding Officer of the Maintenance Section at Bolling. We took off at Bolling heading toward National, crossed the Potomac River and landed straight ahead without making a turn. That flight must have been about two or three minutes at the most. The longest trip was to Elkins, West Virginia - 2 hours and 27 minutes.

Sometimes the flights would be to fly Captains, later Majors Springer or W.E. Dinsmore, test pilots at Maintenance to pick up planes at different fields to deliver to Bolling. Sometimes I would fly a mechanic to a field to work on a plane, or fly him back after he made repairs. Some flights were heads of departments to Middletown; while I checked on parts he would tend to his business.

On one trip flying back to our home base from Middletown with the Supervisor of the Instrument Shop, the clouds were very low, so low that they were covering the top of the hills. Visibility was unlimited. Approaching Bolling Field I couldn't get to the field because of the low clouds. Zig-zagging back and forth trying to find a spot through I decided it wasn't possible when I spotted the Pennsylvania Railroad. I followed the railroad that was on low ground to the Anacostia River, down the river to the Potomac. When we were over the Potomac between Bolling and National Airport, Bolling Tower called me by radio and asked if I wanted to land, "wiggle your wings". It reminded me of the old joke, "Tower do you hear me wiggle the tower". I made a 180 degree turn and landed. During the time that I was zig-zagging trying to find a way to the field the compass was spinning like mad. My passenger, who was an expert on instruments but not a pilot, could not understand how I knew where I was. I wasn't even looking at the compass but living here for 35 years I was familiar with the area. I was looking at the ground and low clouds trying to find a way into Bolling. The next morning I was surprised, to say the least, when I looked in the plane and saw a complete set of blind flying instruments installed in the Taylorcraft.



The instruments help a lot in flying the plane, especially in hazy weather or night flying. There was one time, that I have never forgotten, stranded at Middletown for two days because of bad weather. The next morning I went to operation, as a matter of fact I was already there, because I had spent my last dollar for food the night before and didn't have enough money for a bed at the Visitor Officer Quarters. That morning the sky was clear and there was a calm. But there was a heavy fog over the river. The field next to the river was covered with fog and you could only see about two-thirds of the way down the field. The people at Operations were upset because a brand new 2nd Lieutenant and new Weather Officer was calling the weather "contact". I hurriedly made out a clearance, Operations cleared it and I got out as quickly as I could before they closed the field. Having picked up a sailor who was hitch-hiking to Washington, we took off in the direction that would take us down the River. When we were about two-thirds down the field the tower asked to give them my position, I reported "just crossing the end of the runway". With about 30 hours of blind flying practice in a Link Trainer and with the Taylorcraft now equipped with blind flying instruments, I was convinced that it would be no problem, with no wind, to keep on a straight course that would make it possible to stay away from the high church steeple near the field since flying down the river there would be no mountains. Flying a straight course for about 5 minutes we were still in the fog over the river. I decided then to make a 90 degree turn to get away from the river. A couple of minutes later we broke out into a perfect clear day. The passenger had his eyes "glued to the windshield" trying to see something through the fog. A few minutes after we were in the clear sky he fell asleep and didn't wake up until we were a few miles from Bolling. He said in all seriousness, "that was a long ride". By that remark I could only guess that the five minutes in the fog must have been misery for him.

In February 1943 the Army wouldn't supply the C.A.P. planes with fuel. On one trip I took off about 10 miles from Middletown and landed at Wilson Field to refuel. I decided to visit my brother-in-law, Paul Long, and his family who lived in Mechanicsburg. He later became a Lieutenant in the Navy and served in the Pacific. After coming out of the Navy he became an architect and built over 100 schools, numerous churches, convents and other buildings around Harrisburg including the City Hall. In semi-retirement he did a lot of painting and gave classes in art. After spending the night with his family he drove me to the airport. Checking the weather the reports were clear at Baltimore and Washington. It had snowed during the night at Wilson but the weather was good when I took off. Flying toward York, Pennsylvania I encountered lowering clouds. Following a road that lead between two high hills I had to stay below the tops of the hills to keep out of the clouds. Near York I remember looking down and could see the face of a boy looking up at the plane. Flying south over the York Road towards Baltimore the ground was getting higher and the clouds lower and it was snowing. Snow began to pile up on the leading edge of the wing. I knew then I was getting into trouble. At Shrewsburg, Pennsylvania I spotted a field that looked like a good place to land. Making a 360 degree turn I headed for the field. Knowing that ice on the wing could effect the stalling speed,



I had to decide at what speed to land. If I came in too slow I would drop in, if too fast I would run off the edge of the field. Gliding in about 60 miles per hour, and only a few feet high as I crossed the beginning of the field at about 55 MPH. At 50 MPH the plane stalled making a good landing. I had guessed right. The snow on the wings did make a difference in the stalling speed. The normal stalling speed for the plane is 40 MPH. A young airman home on leave helped with the plane. I phoned Lt. Dinsmore and told him where I was. He asked if I could get off all right. I told him I could and would as soon as the weather cleared. This was about 9:30 in the morning. About 3:00 in the afternoon I called Bolling, they said the weather was ok. I took off and headed for Bolling. Before I got to Baltimore I could see that I would fly into the same condition I had flown into in the morning. This time I could see the long line of clouds ahead in a N.E. to S.W. direction. I flew S.W. along the clouds staying a safe distance from them. Nearing Rockville, Maryland I could hear, over the radio, Bolling closing the field. I landed at Congressional Airport, now Congressional Plaza, and phoned Lt. Dinsmore. Col. Nicols sent his chauffeur and car to pick up the parts. It was three days before I flew the plane to Bolling because of the high wind. "Flying" magazine has a column "I Learned About Flying From That". Well I learned from that cold front, never try to push through one. Even if the weather reports are good.

Another time I "Learned-From-That" while climbing after taking off from M.A.D., up the river, to get about 1,100 feet so I could turn south to go to Bolling I noticed a buzzard flying over the river near the top of the mountain. Near the top of the climb the big bird soared right in front of the plane. I made a steep turn and dove the plane towards the river to miss the bird and mountain. As I dove the bird did too staying in front of the plane for a short while and then bared off to one side. When I pulled out of the dive we had lost over 500 feet. From that day on I kept my distance from buzzards. My passenger didn't say a word all the way home.

Although the Taylorcraft in over 600 hours flying never had a hard landing and the Continental engine, 75 horse power, never quit, it was almost shot down twice. Captain J.B. Jones, C.A.P., my Commander at Langley Field borrowed the plane when his wouldn't start. He flew over the area that he was assigned to, but since he had cancelled the flight and had failed to report that he was going to keep the assignment he was shot at by a ground crew member. Seven 20mm cannon shells burst over his head so close that the bullets shook the plane. We had a little joke about it after things cooled down. We said it was all right because the Captain in charge "apologized", he stopped the trigger happy gunner when he saw what was going on.

May 28, 1943 I flew a mechanic, Albert Manganello from Bolling to Quantico, Marine Air Base about 30 miles down the Potomac River to work on an Army plane. Flying back up the river we crossed over the Potomac close to the east bank at less than 500 feet altitude. As we passed the Navy station we looked down and saw an explosion, in a second or so an enormous boom hit the plane. It shook the plane violently. When the plane stopped shaking I tried the controls and told Al Manganello that everything was working ok. Checking with the foreman of the Armor Section at Bolling he said the fire from the

explosion was probably because we were looking down the mouth of the barrel of a large gun as it went off. I wondered if Al would ever fly with me again. He did several times.

Flying at about 1,000 feet a few miles from Quantico a Marine plane appeared overhead about twenty feet away going in the same direction. I thought, "what is he trying to do, scare me", well he did. He was number one to land and I followed behind. As I was on final approach I noticed he was still traveling fast on the ground. He ground looped just before he got to the edge of the field but not in time to keep the tail from bouncing on rocks damaging the plane. Then I thought maybe he wasn't buzzing me, but was a "near miss" that scared him enough to cause him to make a bad landing.

Another time flying over Porter Street into Bolling "I Learned About Flying From That". There had been an article about the danger of slipping plane while landing. I was using that method often to bring the plane down where I wanted it to land. This day I was high coming over the fence, I slipped to lose altitude when all at once the plane stalls and began to drop like a rock. I gunned the throttle, leveled the plane and got flying speed just as the wheels touched the ground. I was careful about slipping after that.

While making an approach west into Bolling, over Porter Street, that led to the main gate, I was first to land when I saw a Navy C-45 on my left approaching the Navy field north and next to Bolling. We were on a collision course. I asked Bolling about the plane on my left, the tower remarked that they had no control over Navy planes. I pushed the throttle full forward gaining altitude and went around again.

There were some other scary moments. Flying from Bolling to Washington National with Col. Nickel, a Navy C-45 buzzed us when we were about 20 feet in the air. Col. Nickel said "make your landing". I had cut off this Navy plane. The plane had to go around again. Explaining to the supervisor of the tower I was sure I heard that my number 090 was first to land, he took a minute to check then told me to be careful after this. Later on I heard a plane being called by radio Navy 090.

Checking my log book there were flights I don't remember, and I remember some that are not recorded. The one year and four months that I, or should I say "We" were on active duty, there was about 600 hours flying time which included carrying about 110 passengers and hundreds of parts, over 400 flights, averaging about 1 hour and 10 minutes per trip. The shortest about 2 or 3 minutes, the longest 2 hours and 27 minutes. Capacity of plane 12 gallons, used 4 gallons to hour. Range 3 hours at 2,100 RPM and 97 miles per hour. Only one trip that didn't accomplish anything.

With the end of active duty April 1944, I flew to Hyde Field to report to the Commander of the 22nd Tow Target Unit of which I was attached. Flying the pattern, the turns, the final glide, the touch down, the run down the runway, turning at the taxi strip at the proper speed and taxi to the ramp was the most perfect I ever did, it was flawless. I never felt more than ever as if I was a part of the plane and the plane was part of me, we were one, this our final day together we had to be perfect, and we were. A Civil Air Patrol pilot came over and remarked, "That is the most perfect landing I ever saw". After "checking it out" with the commander, I flew the plane

to Congressional Airport and turned it over to the owner, Major Arthur Hyde, the Maryland Wing Commander. I cried when I left my reliable companion, this beautiful red and black Taylorcraft, NC 34090 that had served our country so flawlessly.

There was one mission in April 1944 I will never forget. Not a danger to me but to a six year old girl who was dying of meningitis, in Childrens Hospital, Washington, D.C.. With no penicillin she would not live long.

Colonel Jarman, Medical Officer at Bolling Field, Issued orders to release to me penicillin that saved the little girls life. The little girl was my daughter, Frances Marie Bergling.

Later in 1944 I returned to Bolling as a Civil Service Employee and worked in the office of Maintenance Control, staying a year and eight months. My total time at Bolling was three years. When the active duty flying was over, I put part time in the Civil Air Patrol. I organized and commanded the College Park Flight, was promoted to a Group Commander of Maryland Wing. 10 May 1948 the National Capitol Wing was created, I was chosen the Wing Commander.

The Taylorcraft 34090 and I were accident free, others were not so lucky. 64 members of Civil Air Patrol died and about 100 airplanes were badly damaged or destroyed.