

## **Cold Front Fright**



On a Sunday morning in August 1966, our three Piper Super Cubs of the Luxembourg Aero Club had flown across to the little 600 metre grass landing strip close to the village of Wiltz some 25 miles north of the city of Luxembourg. It was a lovely day with unlimited visibility and a strong northerly wind that would demand sharp crosswind skills adding fun to our intended practice circuit landings.

None of the Cubs were fitted with artificial horizons or gyros of any kind and our sole means of communication consisted of an aged Bendix radio. Although somewhat lacking in reliability the Bendix was quite sufficient for the Cubs typical cross-country flights into nearby Belgium and France and always flown in good visual weather. I lived in Luxembourg in those days having a "proper job" and a company Cessna 182 I flew regularly on weekday business trips. Weekends were for taildragging Super Cubs.

I was last to head for home from Wiltz that afternoon. The others had departed some two hours earlier mumbling in French something about beating a 'weather front' home. I spoke no 'Luxembourgesse' and had paid scant attention. I recalled now, looking at the weather charts earlier that morning in the pilots briefing room and had noted the continued good weather, compliments of the high pressure system covering most of the continent. A cold front, which was hardly likely to effect our day, lay off the Belgium and Dutch coast to the far north.

Mind you, the weather was rapidly beginning to look a bit 'iffy' I thought, as I climbed away from the grass strip. I promptly had to lower the nose to prevent nudging the swirling 700 feet cloud base. I would have sworn the cloud base was much higher before takeoff only a couple of minutes before. Although, Luxembourg was only 25 miles away, I could now see from the Cubs lofty seat that my direction of flight across the valley would take me into a solid wall of rain and low cloud resting on the forest covered hilltop ahead.

Apprehensively, I reduced power and speed, flying more slowly across the valley as I tried to better judge the weather. Bloody hell..... I hesitated no longer and kicked the rudder bar hard over, wildly skidding the Cub into a reverse course turn back to Wiltz and the safety of the strip. Through the Cubs windscreen the now descending rain and mist obscured my forward vision. Wiltz was gone! The grass landing strip was gone and so had Jeanne who failed to answer my quick and urgent call on his equally aged two way ground radio station. Only static hissed in reply. I was alone.

Low cloud now totally obscured the line of electricity pylons which lay between me and the grass strip and I knew I was in trouble! Wiltz lay some 1500 above sea level and was now history as far as I was concerned.

Unlike my Cessna the Cub boasted no blind flying Instruments other than the tiny black ball of the slip indicator much beloved of carpenters in spirit levelling their woodwork. So, climbing the Cub to a safer altitude to avoid the hilltops was out of the question. I had to find an alternative landing field fast and wait out the weather.

Maintaining visual contact with the ground was becoming more difficult and I was forced to descend further into the valley. I followed the outline of a narrow road which I could make out through the now driving rain and mist below.

Earlier in the day a farm tractor had been working a harvest field where I knew I could land the Cub without damage if I could only find the location. I circled and circled without success eyes searching ahead into the few hundred metres of forward visibility. I rolled out of the turn and once again followed the narrow road becoming ever more enveloped by the cloud tendrils but able to keep a now intermittent ground contact. Minutes later, that seemed an eternity.

I began to realise that my controls were becoming more and more mushy with a lowering airspeed as I followed the winding road now climbing the side of the valley. Unconsciously, I was raising the Cub's nose in sympathy with the rising ground and heading for a stall. With realisation and a sixth sense I squeezed on full power easing the control stick back to soar over farm buildings, which suddenly emerged, from the rain sodden mist ahead. Tall grain storage bins flashed past below narrowly missing my undercarriage. The road had terminated with a farmyard cul-de-sac.

Somehow I reversed course downhill and the Cub responded with firmer control as the airspeed increased. I completed the steep turn and rolled level sweeping the port wing over the farm power lines as I anxiously concentrated on keeping clear of the swirling low cloud. My adrenaline was clearly in full flow as I attempted to maintain my position just below cloud and some 250 feet above the ground.

Flying tight orbiting turns, I took stock and plan of my situation. At least I was in the right type of plane for a slow speed crash if push came to shove and I had to put it down. The area was largely woods and steep slopes and so the plane was likely to get mighty damaged if not completely written off. This was unacceptable to me and no doubt, the Luxembourg Aero Club.

Plan A is best - no crashing. Fuel was good for at least two hours flying and glancing at my watch I couldn't believe I had been airborne for only 15 minutes! I decided to traverse the valley heading west, hoping to break out of the bad weather. The magnetic compass card splashing around in the liquid bowl like a demented fish as I tried to take and hold a westerly heading.

Further to the west and across my planned track, lightning flashed and crackled as I once again flew close to the ground, skimming bushes and trees with crop spraying care, eyes alert for strung wires across my track, buildings and a chance to force land.

The turbulence was becoming more severe forcing me to fly faster to maintain control. The Cub was shaking the control stick violently in my hand warning me to get the hell out of there. Okay, okay, I'm working on it. I sought all ground references in the absence of any horizon and fought to keep the wings level.

Heavy cold rain was now penetrating even the side windows of the cub and soaking my legs as I crested a ridge into the next valley and..... promptly lost complete sight of the ground as I entered thick dark cloud as though through a waiting doorway.

If I had thought I was in trouble before, I was seriously in trouble now, for I knew a crash was inevitable without the flight instruments I needed to fly the plane. I cursed my stupidity as I started a softly, softly, climb, easing back on the stick with the turbulence causing the needle of the altimeter to erratically stagger round the dial.

I had to climb more before I hit the next unseen ridge and the turbulent updraught seemed easier to ride than to fight. Christ! Suddenly the airspeed indicator was showing a rapid increase in speed whilst the needles of the altimeter raced round the dial passing 5000, 6000, 7000, 8000 feet and still climbing..... I pushed forward on the control stick but the Cub still climbed and climbed.....impossible!

The sick gut taste of bile rose in my throat as apparitions of white hailstones began peppering and drumming on the yellow canvas covered wings and fuselage. The noise was thunderous above the sound of the engine and a reducing rpm.

I pulled quickly on the Cub's carburettor heat, ignored the airspeed indicator totally and glued my eyes to the altimeter chanting to myself....bloody wings level, altimeter ... bloody wings level, altimeter .... bloody wings level, altimeter. Rudder steady... Rudder steady. The tiny ball in the slip indicator shot back and forth horizontally across the glass tube seeking escape and contributing nothing to my predicament.

What an idiot!

I daren't fight the controls as the Cub soared effortlessly to some 11,000 feet before the wild ride stopped. My concentration was intense with the effort of simply keeping the wings level. My hands were trembling as I attempted to hold a gentle pressure on the stick, first left and then right and back again to neutral. A Cub knows how to fly level if you don't interfere too heavily on the controls I said to myself again and again. But, I was not in total control of this aeroplane, merely giving it the same lead that you might give rein to a horse. I'm not sure I was even in total control of me! Here I was in thick dark scary cloud, no gyros, no chance. "You might last four minutes without gyros" they say, "before losing total control and spinning down into the ground!" I shivered at the thought and the hairs on the back of my neck tingled and stood erect.

I thought I was heading south now and remained so, since I reckoned any old heading would do since the outcome was clear. It remained only to await running out of fuel to determine the crash site. That would be another hour yet according to the little red balls bouncing up and down within the confines of their plastic fuel sight tubes attached to either wing sections above my head. It would more likely be within the very next few minutes if I failed to keep the wings level.

Meanwhile, I was wet and freezing cold and only glad I had no passenger to share my stupidity and fear with. My real fear would reveal itself soon enough with the inevitable crash that must soon follow. Only a fool would attempt continued flight in thick cloud equipped with only a magnetic compass, particularly one that appeared to have toppled. I studied it closely. It seemed stuck! Indicating a southerly heading... damn I thought and knocked it sharply with the back of the hand microphone from the Cubs useless radio. The compass card then levelled off and began swimming round the bowl in a lazy circle. I couldn't believe it, surely disorientation was now about to happen with my mortality ending in a spin or spiral dive.

I nudged the stick gently to the left keeping the rudder as consciously centred with my feet as I could. The black ball of the slip indicator centred and came to rest. The compass card rotation ceased and I realised, that I must have been turning slow right hand circles in the black wet cloud for over half an hour!

I crept round slowly in a kind of flat turn onto a fairly southerly heading, more anxious to maintain wings level and a steady altimeter needle than a fussy heading. Confident now that if I held altitude and the wings level I was safe from immediate collision. Heavy dark cloud persisted but the turbulence had eased off making control easier. I

balanced the Cub with a little squeeze on the right rudder. The black slip ball obediently centred.....Whew!

I glanced up at the fuel sight tubes. Less than 30 minutes flying time left and I decided to start down whilst I still had engine power available rather than wait to practice my gliding skills with the Cub in the turbulent conditions below.

The decision to start my descent was not easy. But I had no choice and a chilly fear was now my companion. Streaming rain across the windshield and side windows was beginning to freeze. I had to descend to warmer air below and fast. I checked that the engine carburettor heat knob was still selected to the hot position and with great trepidation reached over and closed the throttle.

I began descending, tugging my shoulder harness even tighter and waited to get hurt in the inevitable forthcoming crash. I supposed the newspapers would later afford me little sympathy, my friends no doubt surprised at the abuse of my awesome 230 hours flight time experience.

The descent seemed forever as I snatched the control stick back at irregular intervals to raise the nose against imaginary rock formations that loomed at me from near ahead, only to dissipate with my passage, into the evermore darkening and swirling cloud.

I flew more skillfully than I had ever flown before in my life and awaited my reward. It would not be long in coming.

I was passing 4000 feet and expected to collide with the cloud covered hills in the next four or five minutes. I slowed my descent rate as much as I dared to lessen the impact, several times finding the Cub climbing again in the vertical air currents. I was certain of being hurt or worse and yet I was more emotionally alive than at any time before in my life. The adrenaline surged, my left hand gripped the throttle, my right the stick, I awaited the first ground sighting when I would snap the Cub's nose up from the expected split second view of the last few feet of separation and impact.

Hailstones again rattled a last contemptuous racket against the skin of the Cub. A gesture to what fate awaited me below. I cursed and swore in reply, my blasphemy lost above the noise of the storm.

Suddenly, I couldn't believe it! I gazed in wonder. Like the parting of a theatre curtain the Cub had descended free from cloud to leave me staring wide-eyed at a country panorama extending over ten miles every which way.

I retrieved my earlier blasphemous contributions, blessed all Piper Cub manufacturers and returned the power to cruise, adjusting the nose attitude for level flight. Only the forest some 500 feet below would ever bear testimony to the loud and wild nervous laughter emanating from the little yellow Super Cub.

Thoroughly and literally shaken from my experience and with my hands trembling from the cold and fright, I needed another fifteen minutes map reading to locate my position. I set off promptly south west for the little landing field at St. Hubert.

One fuel tank ran dry and I feared to judge the other's contents as I swiftly moved the fuel selector ..... I made it!

Upon landing I telephoned my friends at the Luxembourg Aero Club. They thanked me for taking good care of their Cub with my 'timely diversion to St. Hubert'. "You have never seen weather like this cold front that has gone through in the last couple of hours," they said. "Really!" I replied.

By Captain Glen Stewart

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