

Pilot's Log: April 16, 1983

For flying to remain consistently enjoyable, the pilot must possess sharp skills, common sense and a cool head. Likewise, in a scenario involving deteriorating weather and a careless pilot, many factors must all line up to get him back to earth safely—among them, three absolutely essential ingredients are needed: Providence, caring colleagues—and a dash of good luck.

By Dave Kent



If you're a competent pilot and you fly somewhat regularly, you usually just want to fly again and again...and again. The magic of flying becomes a thing you want to continue experiencing repeatedly and it's like a hunger: you have to satisfy it. So it is with me and flying. Some have that with sports, video games, computers and hobbies. Others have TV shows, social networking—name your poison.

Flying's an opiate for me. And in 1983, I was flying a whole bunch. I'd obtained my instrument rating 17 months earlier and had just come off the previous year having taken my written for the commercial pilot license. I'd also finished all of my IFR cross-country flights for that and was virtually ready to finish up on my air work, take my check ride and go for my Commercial ticket. So my logbook was full of recent flight time.

I was based at Chicago Midway Airport (MDW) and rented Cessna 172s from Chicago Skyline, a flight school and rental operation run by the Lawrence family out of the huge, former American Airlines hangar on 55th Street, where all the flight schools on the North ramp were located. In those days, it was referred to as Butler Hangar. My favorite aircraft was N7608F—the first Cessna 172 I ever checked out at Skyline. So I was very familiar with Zero-Eight Foxtrot and her nuances.

Today was a Saturday in mid-April and I had reserved Zero-Eight Foxtrot for the afternoon. Like all pilots should, I got a weather briefing, looked over as much as I could in the way of terminal and area forecasts and called both Midway and Aurora airports, my departure and arrival fields. Today would produce some weather, but it wasn't too significant: 2,200 thin broken, visibility 15, wind 330 degrees at 10 knots. It was a perfect early-spring day for flying in Chicago and I stayed with the local weather, since it looked this good everywhere.

The previous night my good friend, Tom Wartell, and I had been out flying in Zero-Eight Foxtrot for my Instrument Flight Rules (IFR) Competency Check. Every six months, to stay current as an instrument-rated pilot, the FAA requires that the pilot perform a series of designated instrument approaches, holds, and/or other maneuvers while flying in the IFR system to verify his or her competency in flying solely by reference to instruments. It's a federal regulation and it's important for maintaining a degree of competency. Tommy, a certificated flight instructor in both airplane and instruments, was putting me through the different exercises. Tommy and I have long been flying partners and he has always been generous with his instructor time. After our flight he had signed me off as

competent, and that was that. But because we fly a lot together, we were also scheduled to do some fun flying the next day: Little Tommy, as he was known in the tower, was working his day job as air traffic controller at Aurora Municipal Airport's (ARR) control tower, I would fly in that afternoon and we'd have big fun. Since the controllers took two-hour lunch breaks, Tommy and I would make it an afternoon of flying.

Not only was it a Saturday, it was also the 7-year anniversary of my first flying lesson. As I'd just honed my chops on the gauges the night before, Tommy and I were planning to get more instrument time in today, shooting the ILS, doing some holds, giving rides and generally having a blast in the air. What more could a weekend pilot ask for?

After obtaining the weather that day, though, I wasn't feeling so good about the broken layer of clouds at 2,200 feet. I'd seen all sorts of weather as a pilot in the Chicago area, and despite the forecast, this was nagging, mentally...as though it was almost signaling significant conditions to come. The clouds weren't usually this low and if they were, I would normally elect to stay on the ground, because it meant that the air was becoming unstable. Convective activity usually had a strong chance of following, whether or not the forecast mentioned it. But I shook off the uneasiness: this was just a broken layer and not a heavy one at that. No frontal activity, visibility was 10 miles, no "chance of, or "occasional" anything, and I wouldn't be flying a long distance today. No sweat.

I did my preflight, started up, taxied across the airport, did my cockpit checklist and run-up, then got permission to taxi into position at the hold short line of Runway 31 Right. I thought, "Hmm, Runway 31 Right. It's April and right now, it's kind of warm; I wonder what the northwest wind is all about?" But barometric pressure was holding. On takeoff from Midway I turned left to 270 degrees and once I cleared the airport traffic area, I could see for 15 miles or more around me. Then I seemed to recall something in the distant recesses of my mind about a forecast for some weather to possibly move in later that day, but I dismissed it. Nothing significant, or I would've hesitated to go up at all.

Something else unusual I observed this day at these altitudes were two types of small cloud: some were white and some gray, a little like scud or those small puffs you have occasion to see on either the leeward or windward side of a major system. But there was no system here, so I just chalked it up to an unusual amount of moisture, and warmer temps aloft. Some of the clouds were nimbus and some looked very white in contrast, with tattered ends...very unusual that they were in the same sky at the same altitude, together, and no frontal activity taking place.

For some reason I was sensing that this air, as stable as it appeared, wanted to surprise me somehow. I'd seen the weather show instability before, then get as calm as you please almost out of nowhere. Could this be the reverse of that? I kept trying to dismiss what I saw, based on the forecast I'd obtained. I wasn't what's referred to in flying as a scud-runner. Sure, I'd done it once—but only once and never again. And this wasn't what you'd normally categorize as scud. On the one hand, I had been looking at today's optimistic forecast in a hopeful light—not all that recommended a methodology in April, but this forecast had all the trappings of good, VFR flying. I looked at my options: I was close-in enough to Midway to get back there in a pinch if weather did begin to move in. After all, the winds were out of the northwest, and I could get back home easily enough if the weather began going down near Aurora. I'd heard nothing adverse out of Aurora except some report about weather in Rockford. Okay. I still felt relatively safe but was kind of snapping to attention just a little bit about this. The boys at Aurora had their own

weather reporting as well as the nearby DuPage and O'Hare facilities, plus the farther-flung Greater Rockford Airport's reporting station. I'm safe, I thought. And if weather did move in from the northwest, Midway was many miles east of where I'm headed and I'll have time to outrun the weather.

Right?

"What could go wrong? Tommy and I just went up last night for my IFR Comp Check. I'm not only legal, but certified as safe to fly in the IFR System."

In light of my comp check and the optimistic forecast, I had opted to leave my instrument charts and approach plates at home. Now I was flying N7608 Foxtrot out to Aurora Municipal with visual charts only. I tried not to let this bother me as I turned right to 330 degrees and headed for I-88. IFR also means "I follow roads," and that was my main route to ARR.

Inbound to Aurora I began listening on my radio to the recorded Automatic Terminal Information Service (ATIS) message, and as the controller called out the wind, runway, altimeter and radio frequency information. It was either Ron Tumminello doing the message or Louey Alvarez—but you could also hear two crazy guys in the background humming the theme from "The High And The Mighty." That would be Tommy and Scott Zeal, his other zany tower companion, also known as *Drizz Man*. I'm not given to laughing out loud while flying solo at 120 mph over the busy suburbs of Chicago, but I was then. You had to be there and hear it to appreciate the spontaneity of their humor.

Flying westbound over Interstate 88 and abeam the accelerator ring at Fermilab in Batavia, IL, I called Aurora Tower, reporting (that I was located) 9 (miles) west, landing with *Information Delta*. Of course my true location was 9 miles *east* but I screwed up—and all the guys in the tower were looking for a Cessna west of the airport inbound. I understand that this is a common mistake that a lot of knuckleheaded pilots make, and I was glad that the controllers were on their toes. They spotted me at my true location and asked, "Cessna Seven Six Zero Eight Foxtrot, we have a Cessna inbound nine east...is that you, over?"

"Uhhh. Affirmative. Correction; Seven Six Zero Eight Foxtrot is nine *east*, Over."

"Roger, Cessna Zero-Eight Foxtrot, Runway Two-Seven, plan on a straight-in approach." I'm glad these guys are so forgiving, I thought.

Then, as I looked out in the distance to the northwest, I saw it: a solid layer of cloud hovering malevolently all over the place—no doubt a cold front. By the sound of the ATIS, that wind out of the northwest meant one thing—that stuff I had just seen was moving toward us. I landed.

They were ready for me, since Tom had told them I was flying in so we could give them rides, "Cessna Zero-Eight Foxtrot, just park at the base of the tower."



"Affirmative, Zero-Eight Fox." And on this humor-filled afternoon, Drizz Man, on Ground frequency, mumbled, "Sears Roebuck dollar forty-nine." These guys were hilarious.

I walked up to the tower building and called the tower cab. Tommy answered, "Tower crab," and cleared me to enter the building and walk upstairs. Soon I was greeted by the friendly voices and familiar faces of ARR controllers, with one new face added. Everybody was either busy with traffic in the pattern or on the ground, and Little Tommy pointed out a couple of the controllers who were readying a weather balloon for its ascent. I commented about the great serenade during the ATIS message, and the serenaders, Tommy and Drizz Man, proudly confessed that it had been their greatest work. Then I heard that the crew were about to change the ATIS message to Information Echo: weather presently over Rockford was also moving toward Aurora...rain and snow showers. All they had to do now was send up a balloon, measure the ceiling and update the wind and altimeter settings. The barometric pressure was dropping as well. In a few short minutes, clouds began moving in and a noticeable drop in pressure was noted. Tommy, ever the calm friend and pilot, glanced over at me briefly, to read my facial expression as I began to understand that the weather was starting to change significantly.

The serious mistake of leaving my instrument charts at home today began to weigh on me. The weather question was answering itself right in front of me. But I knew that pilots have to deal with this kind of stuff, and began to feel better that I'd just had an IFR comp check...and that I was among knowledgeable friends with weather sensing equipment.

As Little Tommy's 2-hour break time approached, I was introduced to Doreen, their newest controller. Tommy offered rides, and Ron and Doreen said they'd go. We were planning some flying in the area and after a few circuits with just Tom and me aboard, we'd take Doreen up, then Ron. From what we were hearing from Rockford, we were in for some rain and snow showers, and I began wondering if there was going to be a chance of icing in the clouds and precipitation. So far I hadn't heard any in the forecast, but this was a day full of surprises, and instrument pilots wonder about icing all the time. It was mid-April and that time of year, you can't be sure of exactly what you're going to get, weather-wise. I briefly recalled my first flying lesson out of Midway seven years earlier, and how cold and clear it had been. We had taken off and landed on Runway 4 Left, which is aligned with the northeast. The winds were frigid and biting that morning, but not so this day...not yet, at least.

I watched Ron and Louey fill a weather balloon with helium, climb out onto the catwalk surrounding the tower cab, and release the balloon. Checking a stopwatch and noting the wind direction and velocity, Louey timed the release from launch until the balloon disappeared into the base of the clouds. By their calculations, measured ceiling was 1900 overcast. That means one thousand nine hundred feet above Mean sea level, or exactly 1194 feet above Aurora Municipal Airport. We would not be flying far or high this afternoon. It was also anticipated that the cloud bases would remain at that level, give or take a thousand feet, for awhile.

"Let's stay in the pattern today," Tommy suggested. And that's what we did. We took off, did some air work and shot a couple of ILS approaches, did touch-and-goes, stayed in the pattern and used Runway 27. It was awesome, as usual. There's just nothing comparable with flying. Doreen was a great passenger, very familiar with flying—it was a great experience for her to see from a pilot's vantage point in the air, what one normally sees only from the ground, day after day.

It was always a special thing flying into ARR, and we'd go for rides to anyplace on the sectional or Terminal area chart. When you have at least a dozen, very nice general aviation airfields within a 40-mile radius of Aurora Airport and you're just flying for flying's sake, there's really a ton of open area and fun stuff that you can do in the air to maintain proficiency as a pilot, and enjoy the ride.

Next up was Ron, who would get to see some interesting weather aloft on this ride with Tommy and me. Another thing that had been drawing my attention more and more as we stayed in the pattern was the weather being reported at Greater Rockford Airport (RFD). It was getting pounded with rain and snow showers, winds at 10-12 mph and a measured ceiling 1700 with occasional 1/2 mile in rain and light snow. Altimeter was also lower at RFD than ARR, so we were in for it as well—IFR weather and lower ceilings coming our way.

No one minded the clouds; we knew how to have fun in weather. We practiced short field and soft field takeoffs and landings and all told, my landings at ARR that day came to 6. Tommy did some as well; that's what we do when we share the flying. We became very focused in our flying, even with weather close to minimums, trying to maximize our time in the air without being careless.

Staying in the pattern is a great way to brush up on your landings, especially if you don't fly for a living or for hours upon hours each week. The ritual of observing airspeeds, pulling certain degrees of flap settings in the approach, compensating for the wind, staying mindful and vigilant of other air traffic—coupled with maintaining clear radio communications while learning and practicing how much altitude to lose as you descend for landing—all contribute to a better approach and landing. I don't know a single pilot who doesn't want to make consistently great landings.

After a little over an hour's worth of touch-and-goes for the day, the weather moving in from Rockford reached Aurora. On our last launch with Ron, it was raining on the upwind end of Runway 27, and on final approach to the same runway at the end of that pattern, it was snowing. The ceiling was lowering as well, so I knew what I was facing on my way back to Midway. It was interesting watching the weather change from rain to snow, depending on where we were in the pattern, and pretty soon we knew we were done for the day.

As we did a full-stop landing, taxied, parked at the base of the tower and climbed back up into the tower cab, Tommy said, "Hang on, I have something to give you." I followed him up and asked for a final weather check and FT (Terminal Forecast) for both O'Hare and Midway Airports. And just for good measure, they obtained the weather for DuPage Airport as well. Tommy handed me a current set of NOS approach plates for the region that included Midway Airport—and, because he's a caring friend, nonchalantly said, "Here, Davey, take these – you may need 'em."

Greatly relieved, I thanked him, said good-bye to all my friends and in minutes was doing my takeoff roll on Runway 27. I made the 180° turn out after takeoff to 090° and on the ARR tower frequency (120.6 MHz), heard Tommy's voice, "Cessna Zero-Eight Foxtrot, you can stay on this frequency or frequency change approved, your choice." What he'd meant was that I had the choice of going over to O'Hare Approach Control or dialing up Midway Tower when I was able, whichever I wanted.

I had flown every other flight back to MDW from ARR at 2800 feet MSL. Every one. But this was going to be different...cloud base was now 1800 feet and lowering. If I wanted to fly back to MDW, it was going to be an IFR flight.



I let Tommy know I'd be changing frequencies, and I'll never forget his reply, "Cessna Zero-Eight Foxtrot, frequency change approved...good luck." I listened to Midway's ATIS.

How beautiful the words *ILS Runway Three-One Left Approach is in use* were to hear! I would have a precision approach into the airport. I'd better be darned precise in my flying, too. I was in deep stuff now—I could see that the ceiling was lowering and within moments, I had zero forward vision.

Things began getting busy from that point on. The last landmark I recall seeing on the ground was the Westmont water tower on 55th Street, a couple of blocks east of Cass Avenue. My mind was racing as I ascertained that I was about 12 miles west of Midway Airport, so I knew I'd have to call Midway immediately and request an instrument approach.

In spite of my sloppy flight pre-planning and the deteriorating weather, timing for everything couldn't have been better. It was only yesterday that the runway I'd be landing on followed a non-precision approach. Today, things were crucially different.

Another critical aspect of this day's flying is that the only reason I was in a position to use the IFR system at all is that both Midway and Aurora Airports have control towers. This was the post-PATCO-strike era, nearly two years after President Ronald Reagan's mass firing on August 3, 1981 of every striking PATCO air traffic controller. That had had the effect of crippling the nation's air traffic control (and IFR) system until interim operations could be established. It was a dicey affair, to say the least, and the interim solution was often unacceptably barren of options for the instrument-rated pilot. Pre-strike air traffic control procedures would eventually be ushered back in for all civil pilots and all allowed to use the en route IFR system, as before. But in the meantime, little guys like me, non-commercial flights, were subject to different rules. En route approach controllers were only handling airliner and Part 135 traffic, plus charters. Small, general aviation aircraft like mine had to request Tower Enroute Control, also known as TEC or Tower-to-Tower. Under TEC, we would only be able to fly IFR between airports with operating control towers. Otherwise, no matter what the weather, I would've been grounded in Instrument Meteorological Conditions (IMC) when either departure or destination airport "went IFR."

As it was, I was very fortunate: ARR to MDW would be tower-to-tower and I could get an IFR clearance into Midway—and it was now my Hour of Decision. I called in, “Midway Tower, Cessna Seven Six Zero Eight Foxtrot, over.”

“Cessna Seven Six Zero Eight Foxtrot, Midway Tower.”

“Cessna Zero Eight Foxtrot is one-two west at one thousand eight hundred, inbound with the numbers, squawking 1200 on instruments. Request Tower Enroute to the airport, over.”

“Cessna Zero Eight Foxtrot, are you instrument rated and equipped?”

“Affirmative, Zero-Eight Fox.”

“Cessna Zero-Eight Foxtrot, squawk five-three-five six & ident.” I turned the individual numeral knobs on my transponder to that code and pushed the *Ident* button.

“Cessna Zero-Eight Foxtrot, radar contact eleven west at one eight hundred. Turn right heading one-three-zero, climb and maintain two point three, expect ILS Runway 31 Left Approach.”

“Roger, right to one three zero, out of one point eight for two point three ILS Three One Left, Zero-Eight Fox.”



I had been furtively glancing at the brand-new ILS Runway Three One Left Approach plate from the NOS chart book Tommy had loaned me, to orientate myself and get familiarized with it in minimal time, while controlling this hurtling aircraft in IMC. Unbelievable – here I was, IFR inbound to my home airport, with a set of charts I hadn't had sense enough to bring in the first place—courtesy of a friend who has looked out for my best interests for many years, then and since. Another comforting aspect about all this, a timely miracle—was that today, April 16, 1983, was the first full day of the newly-commissioned ILS 31L Approach. Yesterday, it had still been *Localizer* Runway 31 Left Approach, a non-precision instrument approach. This was a brand-new Instrument Landing System (ILS), and I was going to give it and my flying skills a run for their money. Not that I was relishing this, but it was a great adventure all the same—and this is what I had been training for. I was just very busy right now, very focused, and trying to draw out my visualization skills. I was in cloud and rain showers, getting some buffeting, trying to stay on course and keep my heading, dialing in the localizer frequency on my Number One omni-bearing selector (OBS). I understood that from my southeast heading, I would need to perfectly intercept the localizer needle on that omni. I'd have to do that at just the right altitude, at just the right airspeed, and fit into the traffic pattern like a proficient instrument pilot and not mess up the flow of traffic. Or me.

This airport was much busier now than in many years previous. Midway Airlines, with quite a few scheduled flights in and out per day, was a major player here, along with Delta, Northwest, Sears and Amoco (later BP) Corporate, plus a smattering of some other, newly-minted regional carriers. It was really busier by a whole new order of magnitude—and this was a Saturday to boot. So I expected Midway to be busy, albeit IFR, and the tower certainly was jumping that afternoon, vectoring a steady stream of

traffic into and out of the area. The weather was down, but that wasn't going to stop the inbound and outbound traffic on instrument flight plans.

I had dialed in 109.9 MHz on my #1 OBS for the localizer needle. And that was it – fly the airplane, get the mental picture, obey instructions, be on task and stay alert. And above all, be a good pilot—don't get behind the airplane. There was no worry; I was in the weather and I was the pilot. I prayed all the same. I don't recall having any doubts about my competency, and I was too busy with flying to think about anything else.

As I continued visualizing my anticipated path to the south of the airport and eventual interception of the localizer's precise radio beam, I was also hearing the transmissions on the tower frequency from other inbound and outbound aircraft. One of the inbounds, another Cessna 172, was upset and apparently having difficulty. This fellow was calling in from about 10 miles northeast, which is out over Lake Michigan, and his aircraft was collecting ice. One thing you didn't want to be doing in a Cessna 172 while flying it was collecting ice, especially inbound for landing, when you had to change speeds and flap settings to become low and slow.

Where I was, it was still rain, but that pilot was in our general vicinity and he was in ice – shades of our situation at Aurora, except that it had been rain and snow there. And I was *here*. Rain and snow don't collect on your leading edges and weigh you down, or increase your stall speed in cruise flight—as ice can and very often does.

You could tell that the pilot of the other aircraft wanted to get down onto the ground *right now*. His voice began rising and becoming more anxious—but all the controllers in the tower at Midway could do is to set him up for radar vectors to the approach course and hope for the best. I felt compelled at that moment to ask them for weather at the airport, but the tower frequency and all of us were busy enough so that we weren't going to get that opportunity. I just flew the airplane and continued monitoring my Outside Air Temperature (OAT) gauge; good, I thought. So far, we were above freezing.

The tower continued issuing me new headings and altitudes and I continued flying the airplane. That is the mantra in any situation for a pilot: Fly the airplane first.

Things really began getting busy and going faster. The guy in the inbound Cessna single out over the Lake was frantic, and wanted down. I was trying to focus on the fact that I was now totally on instruments and needed to flawlessly execute a precision approach and get safely on the ground. With what I now had at my disposal, I wasn't afraid and I had no doubts—but I sure didn't like the fact that someone in the area was picking up ice in the same type of aircraft as mine.

I had had a ritual over the preceding two years: These were the days before widespread personal computer use, and I would get hard-copy Jeppesen instrument chart updates every couple of weeks. Every third Friday while my wife and I were sitting in the living room watching our favorite TV shows, I would pull the old charts out of their loose-leaf binders and put in all the updates. I recalled receiving those brand-new ILS Runway 31L Approach plates for Midway in my April updates—and how proud I was that my home airport would commission this badly-needed precision approach. The irony was that the one time I would need the new approach plates would be the one time I would leave them at home.

And later on, in unanticipated IMC, I was now flying in the soup while doing a crash course in re-familiarization of the NOS format. *Stupid Pilot Tricks*. But I learned the chart successfully in the air that day. Once I knew the critical altitudes, it was relatively simple...follow the glideslope all the way down. And because the winds weren't quartering or shifting significantly, there wouldn't be any chance of a circle-to-land approach. But I did have to be ready for a missed approach if the weather began to go down below the Decision Height (DH) for this one, or if air traffic conditions dictated that I'd have to break off the approach for any other reason. I decided that I was ready for that if the occasion warranted a missed.

I did my landing checklist as the tower called, "Cessna Zero-Eight Foxtrot, turn left, heading Zero-Two-Zero, intercept the localizer, descend and maintain 1800."

I acknowledged my instructions and knew that things would need to be done precisely—and that when the localizer needle swung, I'd better be already turning to intercept, and not overshoot, the approach course. Midway Tower was not only watching, but sequencing me. I had a strong hunch that they were working to get that other Cessna – the guy collecting ice over the lake – into the traffic pattern and onto the ground a.s.a.p.

And things did happen rapidly. The localizer needle on my #1 OBS began to swing and I had already begun preparing for this: 90 knots, one notch of flaps, stabilized and ready for the approach. Staying at 1800 MSL, I intercepted the needle. It began to center, then swung slightly left. I crabbed left another 10 degrees but had the airspeed at 90 and the flaps in as well. Things were happening fast and it didn't matter that I had no visual reference. But I was wondering if I was going to break out at or before decision height. *And here's the glideslope*. At this reference airspeed and height, I should be at 3 degrees all the way down to the DH, so I just attempted to stay right on the glideslope amidst the turbulence. I was really flying that airplane hands-on, on this approach.

Midway was calling the ceiling right at measured 1200 overcast, visibility ½ mile in rain showers. Field Elevation at Midway then was at 619 feet ASL, so visibility was just below 600 feet AGL—true IFR weather. At this point, all I was doing was flying the airplane down the glideslope—that, and about 15 other things.



There she is! As I broke out of the clouds, there was the runway below and in front of me, a little over a quarter-mile away. It was a visual landing from here, but I stayed with the gauges even though everything was visible now in the windscreen.

"Zero-Eight Fox wind check," I called. "Three One Zero at one-two gust two-zero," Tower replied. And, within moments, "Cessna Zero-Eight Foxtrot, cleared to land, Runway 31 Left."

"Clear to land three one left, Zero-Eight Fox," I responded. I pulled power, saw that I was still on the glideslope, pulled another notch of flaps, then flaps for final approach, monitoring my power settings but pulling more until, at power off, I made a perfect landing not too far from the runway's numbers.

After letting me roll awhile, Tower asked, "Cessna Zero-Eight Foxtrot, where do you park?"

“Zero-Eight Fox is going to Monarch.”

“Roger, Cessna Zero-Eight Foxtrot, turn left second intersection and contact Ground, Point Seven.”

Still in Multitasking Adrenaline Overdrive at that moment, I clicked the mic twice in reply, then made the left turn onto the East-West Taxiway and contacted Midway Ground Control at 121.7 MHz.

They replied, “Cessna Seven Six Zero Eight Foxtrot, Midway Ground, taxi to Monarch.”

“Roger, taxi to Monarch, Zero-Eight Fox.”

Total relief. No ice, just steady rain. It was a very good day. I knew that Monarch, the FBO on the airport, charged more for 100LL avgas than anyone else did—but I didn’t care. Not this day. I had just negotiated the IFR system with precision and was safely down. The system worked, IFR flying worked, I worked, and I had proven myself as a competent, single-pilot IFR flyer in the U.S. airspace system. I felt like every penny of my expensive instrument rating had been worth it. Had I flown today without either the rating or the recent comp check, and tried to make it into this field, I would have either been forced to turn back into very uncertain weather—which had closed in quickly—or worse. And without the NOS charts Tom had lent me, tragedy would likely have reared its head in an otherwise benign situation, and I would have become a statistic. Better pilots than I certainly have. Circumstances had conspired to keep my safe outcome in doubt, due in large part to my carelessness and neglect – but not in the end. Some actual IFR has to be flown, and this turned out to be a notable non-event. I was very fortunate.

By the way, I never again thought of Monarch as an overpriced fuel supplier to be avoided; it had been such a welcome sight after landing that day, and that would prove to be the first of many more fuel stops there. I became a regular customer as long as I flew Chicago Skyline’s airplanes.

Flying is an awesome thing. And every flight is an adventure.

I don’t know what became of that other Cessna pilot, but I know I would’ve read about him in the papers if he had gone down. So ice or no ice, he landed in the rain and survived. Many things had gone well for two pilots on this day.

I had made two very foolish pre-flight decisions: Not taking the time or trouble to get in-depth terminal and area forecasts for Chicago, Aurora and Rockford, knowing that the winds were from the northwest. The second had been to leave important charts home. It has often been quoted that, “Aviation in itself is not inherently dangerous. But to an even greater degree than the sea, it is terribly unforgiving of any carelessness, incapacity, or neglect.” Ironically, I had first read that framed saying at the FBO at Aurora Airport almost five years before.

The truth is that I had not been fully prepared to face the prospect of deteriorating weather today—and that very same issue has weighed critically in the majority of fatal, weather-related general aviation accidents. It still does. What weighed in my favor is that I was destined two fields with operating control towers. Had that not been the case, I

would've been at the mercy of the weather with no options for guidance to a precision approach. Flying blind wouldn't have been an understatement. Additionally, the fact that Midway, on this very day, had commenced their precision approach to Runway 31L, was a circumstance crucially affecting my safe arrival. The Decision Height for 31L is 900 feet. If winds had dictated a circle-to-land approach on this particular day, I could likely have been faced with risking a botched missed approach because the ceilings were indeed that low. And if Runway 31L had still been utilizing a Localizer approach, as it had just a day before, I would have been in cloud at the MDA and unable to land on that runway. Yet another factor involved is that Midway's visibility at that hour was three-quarters of a mile in rain. I broke out on a quarter-mile final over the runway...so to me, at my proficiency level of rusty-but-legal, this was an approach to minimums. I was very fortunate.

And finally, I'm not altogether sure I would've ventured into the air today had it not been for Tommy and my IFR comp check less than 24 hours before. Our time in the air and his sorely needed instruction had allowed me to fly competently in the IFR system once again. Because of that factor alone, I had a sharper, safer aspect to my flying in this true instrument flying environment than I would've had to settle for without it.

I had also foolishly decided to ignore the hunches those Midway weather signals were kicking up in my mind. Add to that my ridiculous assumption that any bad weather in the Midway area would have had to move in from outside, as I would see it do with Rockford and Aurora—but not Midway. In reality, all by themselves, thank you—the telltale signs I had seen and brooded over on my departure had set up their own instrument weather system, independent of any in other areas. And it came complete with a temperature inversion, icing, rain showers and plenty of IFR weather. Next time, I'd act assertively on my suspicions and hunches.

Looking back, I see many points of light to this day's flying, and how each one of them had been integral to my safe arrival at Midway Airport at the end of it all. Contrary to the adventure of today's flight and the adrenaline rush it produced in yours truly, the prosaic logbook entry for that day emotionlessly reads:



4/16/83 C-172 – N7608F – MDW – ARRxMDW – Pattern practice, short & soft field t/o & ldg. + IFR back to MDW, ILS RWY 31L app. Icing & RW.

Tongue-in-cheek...that's what all pilots' logbook entries are. And there's nearly always more to them than meets the eye. In the vast majority of cases, they'll never expose the feelings...the elation of flight, and the thrills. Or the dangers or the stupid pilot tricks.

What's the take-away here? Be more careful than I was. Take nothing for granted. Get thorough weather briefings. Take all of your flight grip, including your charts—just in case. Have fun; stay sharp, stay in front of the airplane always. Have escape routes and contingency options. And last but not least, have a good friend who looks after your sorry rear when things do go a little upside down. (Sorry, no pun intended...in IMC you want to stay right side up all the time).