



# Memoirs

## From A Special Mooney Pilot

BY JIM MILLER

I am an engineer and sociologist by training and a (sailboat/yacht) sailmaker by profession. But in real life I am a terminal romantic, a determined traveler and malcontent- in short, a clear case of arrested development. Long ago I gave up the whole idea of living like other people as unworkable. My wife Joyce and I happily cut the anchor line that attached us to the larger society, and sailed away. Twenty years and eight countries later we were happily living in Florida and planning our next adventure. The risks of being different were acceptable, and I understood them. Yet there is an irreducible minimum level of risk that we accept each day we get up out of bed. We think we know that longshot bad stuff happens-but not to us. Otherwise, we would protect ourselves from light-

ning strike, the bite of a rabid yak, falling Buicks and the like, and stay safely in bed. Right? So life is risk. The worst day in my life began simply. Joyce's car was in the shop, and her boss picked her up to take her to work. Fifteen minutes later she was dead, and my life changed forever. It was a stupid, longshot auto accident that took her life that day. Ten years later, I still remember all too clearly tiny details of that day. Yet I survived. The kindness of friends and the love of Ivonne and the rest of my family made it worth hanging around without her, so I lived to sail, and to fly again.

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"We are playthings of a universal incoherence—" A pilot, Antoine de St. Exupery, said that, and most of us never really understand him, though I suspect every person reading this is saying; "Yeah. But I do." Perhaps. I thought so, too. The day before Christmas, 1999, I took my friend Herbert Sanchez shopping in my GMC van. Herb had a stroke a couple years ago, and has managed a remarkable recovery, but still needs a walker and a lot of time to get around. A trip out shopping is a big deal for Herb, and I had promised him I would take him flying for Christmas. My recently acquired Mooney 252 was still so new to me that I was a bit embarrassed about my landings. You see, I have an ego thing about "squeakers." I like

to do them regularly, and I prefer to do my bouncers, wallowers and go-arounds without an audience. And the Mooney is a different animal than my beloved Cessna T210M. Just as fine in it's way, but different.

We stopped at a local gas station to tank up the van, and I got out to check the oil; a quart low. The attendant handed me a freshly opened quart, and as I began to add it, we heard a crash from behind. I turned around, and there was a Mercedes, about 30 feet away, cruising across the parking lot. I remember that the driver was sitting calmly behind the wheel, and seemed disinterested in the whole thing. The only problem was that the Bentz was coming directly at me at perhaps 50 miles an hour. I simply didn't have time to react. I nearly died on the spot from loss of blood but primarily due to the skill of the paramedics, I now write this.

I will not describe the remainder of the day, except to say that the gas station attendant is fine. He was out of the zone of destruction by a few feet. Not unlike horseshoes, a few inches or feet is all he needed. I lost both my legs just above the knees. I am grateful to be alive, and to be able to fly again. I may yet be able to give Chacho his promised ride.

I have a lot of leg work to do before I can fly solo, but I do fly regularly. My friend Bill Lindberg flies safety pilot in the left seat. Bill supplies only the minimum rudder input to make the maneuvers come out, and applies the brakes on the ground when needed. His nerve and patience are wonderful. I have learned to do almost the entire flight without rudder, and my landings are better. I am up on "stubbies"—prosthetic legs that are

simple sockets with very short fittings and small crude feet attached. Sort of like training wheels. I cannot tell you how much joy I take from just staggering around on these things! I am told that a wheelchair will always be a part of my life from now on, and I accept that. Perhaps it will be useful to carry groceries, —or the pretty cashier at the wine bar might want a ride. You never know. As to doing the North Atlantic again, I surely will. I love the route, and have flown it many times in my Cessna T-210M . The quality of care and competence you see throughout the route is unequaled. I also am grateful to

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have memories like this, and I give you all this treasured gift En route from Narsarsuak Greenland to Reykjavic Iceland, we are cruising on top. We are arriving late, and it is time to let down from our lofty perch two miles above the cold ocean. In the calm, chill night we trade altitude for speed. We are almost there, and though I am tired, my magic carpet is still a joy to fly. The wheel's feel is hard in my hands, and I use a light touch on Tango Delta, for she is near Vne. I consider slowing, but she wants to go, and not a hint of turbulence disturbs this night's strange, icy calm. So I let her run. And she does. Devouring four miles each minute, we streak through the night.

The old, familiar internal grin seeps into my heart, and I wish I could share my joy. We flash

through layers of ice crystals. They hiss across our windshield, and the P-static starts to build. At first just the old familiar frying bacon in the headset, but the intensity escalates. I remove the headset-oddly, it prickles. I lay it on the floor and give up any hope of radio use. Fine. One less thing to do.

Again we are traversing an ice crystal layer, and this one is very thick. Suddenly the HSI develops a nav flag, and I am now very alert. Uneasy feeling here- too many gremlins. As I reach for the throttle, I see a blue glow outside. I lean around in my seat, trying to see it's source. I check the strobe (off), and

all the lights, even though I know that none of them look at all like

that. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the temperature probe, and I am frozen. At some fantastic voltage level, our whole forward airframe has come alive with blue fire. The windshield frame, the temperature probe- any sharp corner on the front of the aircraft are alive with—tiny lightning — curling, wavering tongues of fire leaning, unbelievably unaffected, into the 200 knot slipstream. I wake my sleeping wife and son. They are startled, then mesmerized, enchanted, as am I. And then, just as suddenly as it came, the fireworks are gone, and we are in misty rain, below the freezing level.

The lights of Keflavic are a golden haze below. The earth returns, reasserts itself, the radio

speaks to me again, and I am handed off to approach. The world below remains the same. The approach flows from my memory, the gear whines into place, the tires chirp on a runway that they know by now, but I am not the same at all. I pull the mixture at Flight Services, Ltd. and Sven is there. He is waiting for my papers so he can go home, yet I sit in the plane. Amid the bustle of arrival I sit. Sven knocks on the window, and I relinquish the spell, and get out.

At nine years of age, Adrian is asleep on his feet, but perhaps he will see this again one day. And Ivonne and I- we will remember. When I begin to feel sorry for myself, I remember this, and the scores of other marvels my life has been blessed with. And I am reminded of my fantastic good fortune.

Jim Miller 

*Ed: See our AIRBILL for background information about the undaunted Jim Miller. Besides being an inspiration to us all, he is a highly accomplished transcontinental GA pilot who lives in Florida but loves Paris. As this is going to press, he is out daily practicing landings and exploring installing handicap controls for his all black turbo Mooney.*

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As featured in July '00 AOPA Mag., former Vietnam Vet, Terry Bliquez operates a IRS 501C3 corporation Sky Cross Inc., which air-lifts food, medical supplies, and clothing primarily to rural Mexico areas in dire need of basic foodstuffs etc. Currently Terry utilizes a Cessna 205 and flies over 7,000 lbs monthly of donated supplies to border towns which is then distributed by missionaries directly where needed without any governmental assistance or intervention of any kind. Notably, donations are used solely for foodstuffs etc.



Terry says he could use monetary donations, basic foodstuffs, or clothing. By press time, an independent web site should be set up which will accept tax deductible on-line credit card donations. Contact Terry Bliquez, c/o Sky Cross Inc., 7302 Putter La., San Antonio, TX 78244, 210-661-6808, Magna Marketing hosts a complementary web site for Sky Cross at: [www.skycross.net](http://www.skycross.net), email: [terry@skycross.net](mailto:terry@skycross.net) or [tk-skycrossinc@worldnet.att.net](mailto:tk-skycrossinc@worldnet.att.net) The folks at MOA urge you to become a Sky Cross sponsor.

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