

As One

by Bob Kirkby © 1993

Crunch...crunch...crunch...crunch. The snow-covered tarmac glistens with the light from the halogen floodlights perched atop the main hangar as I walk from the dispatch office toward the Cessna Skyhawk. Tied down behind the fuel pumps, the high-winged Skyhawk squats on its splayed-out landing gear, looking for all the world as if it will leap into the air and fly away on its own at the instant of its release from earthly bondage.

It was time to fly the mandatory five take-offs and landings at night to keep my night endorsement current. Since I hadn't done any night flying in over six months, I would have to perform this little ritual before carrying passengers again at night. Earlier in the day I had called the dispatcher at the Okotoks flying school, to reserve a plane for tonight, and had specifically asked for their only Cessna 172 Skyhawk. The 172 was much faster than the more common Cessna 152's they had for rent - \$10 per hour more expensive too - but would get the ritual over with that much sooner.

I lean into the cockpit, toss my gear on the passenger seat, then lower the flaps in preparation for the pre-flight check. The flap motor moans in protest at being disturbed, then whines mercilessly as it dutifully rolls the flaps down to full extension. With fuel dipstick and sampling cup in hand I start my walk-around from the pilot's side door. First stop is to take a sample of fuel from the left wing tank, check for water drops - ice crystals tonight - none present, that's good. Check the left brakes, then back to the tail to inspect the elevator and rudder hinges and actuator linkages. Everything looks good back here, at least as far as I can tell peering through slits by the narrow orange beam from my pocket flashlight. Back up the right side I repeat the fuel check on the right wing tank, then move along the back of the wing to check flap and aileron hinges and linkages. Around to the front I untie the right tie-down rope and clamour up onto the wing strut to dip the fuel tank - never trust the fuel gauges, they are notoriously inaccurate. After checking the oil level, front wheel, prop and alternator belt, I move to the left side and repeat the wing checks. Back in the cockpit I flip on the master electrical switch for the final check. Navigation lights on - the reflection of green light on the snow at the right wing tip and red light at the left wing tip confirm they are functioning. Landing light on - nothing. Around to the front of the aeroplane I find a dark, glass eye in the cowling peering at me, where a dazzling light should be. No landing light - no landing - no flying.

Back at the dispatch office I stomp my feet loudly as I come through the doorway, partly to remove the snow from my shoes and partly to vent my frustrations. The sole occupant of the office looks up from her dog-eared paperback and winces slightly as the cold air reaches her. "The landing light is burned out in the 172," I blurt out unceremoniously.

"Can't do much about that tonight.", she counters, "I'm the only one here and I can't even change a light bulb in the toilet."

"Great, now I'll have to take a 152 and do another pre-flight." The irritation in my voice is not lost on her. In her best feeling-sorry tone she says, "Why don't you go back and secure the 172 and I'll pull a nice warm 152 out of the hangar for you."

Back out I trudge to tie down the Skyhawk and retrieve my gear, with just a hint of disappointment in my posture. When I look up to see what is rolling out of the hangar, I smile and forgive the not so mechanically inclined dispatcher. Sitting under the bright ramp lights, that little Royal-blue and White 152 sparkled as if it had just been painted. C-GZCP was the aeroplane I had done a lot of my flight training in, and the one that served me faithfully on my first solo and ultimately on my flight test. With renewed enthusiasm, pumped up by a wave of nostalgia and pride, I eagerly go about the task of pronouncing her airworthy - landing light included.

With the engine fired up and the checklist completed, ZCP and I become re-acquainted as we taxi out to the button of runway 34. I had forgotten how nice ZCP was to handle. Her throttle has a nice short, crisp throw, unlike the other 152's I've flown, whose throttles are long enough to give you tennis-elbow after two circuits. All of her plastic trim and cockpit bits and pieces are in place (most flying school AME's never bother about cosmetic repairs). For about 30 seconds, when her radio is first turned on, ZCP talks to you in her raspy, crackling voice. A stranger might put it down to just an old radio warming-up. To me, tonight, it sounds like, "Welcome back - let's go flying".

On the button now, its full throttle, confirmed by the swing of the tachometer needle and engine's roar. I jump on the right rudder to keep us straight down the centre-line, airspeed comes up nicely. ZCP tells me, "a little more back pressure", by the front wheel dancing back and forth over the furrows of snow left by the plow. I see the blue taxi lights at the intersection coming up, we'd better be in the air by then or we shut down and stand on the brakes. No problem, an almost imperceptible nudge backward on the column and ZCP jumps into the air, as if on cue. We quickly establish our climb speed of 65 knots and I pop the flaps up. She reports their progress to me with a whine in my headset - the servo motor obviously needs new brushes. The runway lights fade away below and we're following that imaginary dotted line that marks our path around the circuit. We each know the routine. ZCP shows me the wind and I adjusted our heading. I work out the headings needed to keep each leg nice and square and ZCP keeps me honest by wildly swinging that heading indicator whenever I let myself spend too much time admiring the light show on the ground. She tells me when to turn with her altimeter. She acknowledges my throttle adjustments by changing the pitch of the tune she is humming with her deep, gravely voice.

ZCP reports 4100 feet, time to turn cross-wind. We start a climbing left turn and ZCP again tells me when to straighten out. Continue climbing and start looking for traffic that might be sneaking in on the downwind leg of the circuit. Now that we're moving right along, its starting to get hot in the cockpit. I'm tempted to close the cabin heat control, but I know all too soon it will get cold again, so I leave it open and enjoy the heat while I can. Approaching 4600 feet, time to start turning downwind and levelling off. Again, ZCP tells me when we're on downwind and to throttle back a little. We make a radio call to no one in particular, just in case someone out there in the dark is listening, "Okotoks traffic, Zulu Charlie Papa, on left-hand downwind for runway 34". I don't expect a response, of course. If I heard one I would probably jump out of my harness.

As I gaze at the night sky I recall that the famous aviator Jimmy Doolittle once flew a circuit, from takeoff to landing, completely on instruments. That may not sound like a great feat today if one's aeroplane is equipped with GPS and all those other nifty gadgets. But he did that back in the 1930's. All he had were basic Visual Flight instruments and a stop watch. Flying with ZCP around the circuit that night, I began to understand how he did it. Pilot skill and a dependable aeroplane were only part of the equation. He was one with his aeroplane - they were synchronized.

After a few brief moments of cruising I start my landing checks. Primer in and locked, master on, mags on "both", oil temp and pressure good, harness secure, fuel cock on. Now its time for me to share my heat with the carburetor to prevent carb-icing during the landing approach. I begrudgingly pull the carb-heat lever to divert half the engine heat to the carburetor. Instantly, I feel the incoming heat slow to a trickle. For this last half of the circuit I know I'm going to get colder and colder as my precious heat filters out through the window and door cracks into the frigid night air. Time now to turn base and pull the throttle back - ZCP tells me when to stop by changing the pitch of her faithful hum. Airspeed below 85, we throw down some flap. ZCP reports back with the servo whine in my headset and she bucks her nose to remind me to watch the airspeed. "Decent rate looks good", she reports on her VSI.

Another look around for wayward traffic, all clear, turn final. Check runway alignment, about 3 degrees off. I tell ZCP that we're not ready for the Jimmy Doolittle circuit yet. She sighs lightly as I make the corrections to get us in between the rows of lights. ZCP pretty well takes it from here. I just provide the visual input to keep us on centre-line and she bring us in, as smooth as could be. There's one more radio call to let any unsuspecting clods on the runway know we're about to descend upon them.

After four circuits, an amazing thing happens. We are climbing out from our last touch & go and I am busy scanning the instrument panel, bathed in the soothing red glow of the panel light. The runway lights are just fading from my peripheral vision. The altimeter is telling me we have 200 feet, plenty of height to clear the power lines I know to be just ahead. Heading indicator showing 335 degrees, just right to compensate for the light breeze blowing from the northwest. ZCP humming her throaty song, letting me know that everything is going great. I smile. I can't see myself, but I know it's a big smile. I suddenly feel a oneness with ZCP. I with she and she with me. We are flying together in beautiful harmony, isolated from the world, a canopy of stars above and a carpet of lights below. We are each dependent on the other, trusting in the other - working together as one.

Before quitting for the night we fly a dozen more circuits. We have a great time together. We're in tune with each other.

As the hangar doors rumble shut I give ZCP a pat on the nose and whispered, "Thanks for a great time old girl. Next time I'll ask for you." Glancing back over my shoulder on the way out, I notice a curved shadow from the prop across ZCP's engine cowling - or is that a smile?