

# This Gift of Time

## By Stu Simpson

Time plays a crucial part in nearly everything we do as aviators. Most critically, of course, it tells us when we have to land, because there will come a time when the fuel gauge reads empty and gravity will forcefully remind us of our own mortality. I like the old Transport Canada poster that gravely proclaims “That’s time in your tanks”.

Time is also a way for pilots to keep score, a way of measuring who has the biggest, uh,... log book. It often seems he who dies with the most hours wins. Other things being equal, we seem to naturally respect pilots who have a higher number of flying hours. Of course, it’s important to remember that anyone with 10,000 hours at some point had 10.



Time is important to our airplanes, too. The number of hours an airplane has under its wings tells a lot about it; things like how the airplane’s been flown, and maybe by whom. Alternatively, an airplane’s age may also give it a certain value. The date it was built might cause a pilot to stare misty-eyed into the sky and dream of a different, simpler time when Cubs, Vagabonds and Taylorcrafts ruled the lower regions of the sky. Time tells whether I need to change the oil in my airplane’s engine. Time tells if a helicopter’s rotor blades need replacement. And like it or not, time tells each of us when we’re used up, too.

But to me, time is so much more than just a measuring stick. When it comes to airplanes, I think of time as a gift. The more time I get in the sky, the more cherished the gift.

For instance, some guys I know love speed. There are few things that excite them as much as 200 mph. They want to get into the sky, go as fast as they can, and *get there*, all in the shortest possible time. After all, speed is really just a function of time.

I subscribe to a different logic. For me, speed just isn't where it's at. I don't need a lot of speed with my airplane. Fact is, I prefer to go slow. If I go too fast, I get there too soon and I don't get to fly as long. I don't really have any place to go, anyway. I've no family far away that I visit regularly (though I did fly a few hundred miles to see my folks, recently). Nor do I use my airplane for business travel. For me, and most of the guys I fly with, the journey really is the destination. And the destination is always an adventure. Wherever I end up is pretty much where I want to be, as long as I flew there. If I have at least *some* airspeed I'll be content.

I miss too much if I go fast. I don't get time to see the fields beneath, or the rivers, mountains or clouds. When I fly Merl I get to really see the world. I see where people live, what their towns look like, where they've built roads and water towers and gardens. I see the things I want to see. Going any faster I might not have the time to watch and enjoy all that.

Yup, Merl and I cruise along at about 80 mph, and I *do* get to fly a little longer. Oh, I know it helps to have a little extra go when the sun's getting weak and the wind's getting strong. But if I went any faster I'd lose time and flying would just be too easy.

I like to truly appreciate each second I'm aloft, to enjoy where I'm at, what I'm doing and the people I'm with. On each flight I look at the world in a new light, looking for things I've never seen before. I take time to enjoy the subtle shades of sunlight bouncing off the Rockies during a winter inversion. I look for the beauty in the planes flying off my wing, to see the sun dazzling off their fabric, or throwing tiny shadows past their rivets. And yes, we really do fly close enough to see all that.

I also use the time to enjoy Merl. I try on each flight to cement in my memory the feel of the controls, the way I pull the stick when we climb. I absorb the gentle bounces and the minute sensations of each flight. I take time to feel what it is to fly, to have Merl at my whim, to sense the tilt of the wings – to really *feel* it - as we bank into a turn. Indeed, I try to get the absolute most out of the time in my tanks.

You see, I know that someday this will all be gone. There'll come a time when I can't fly, when Merl, whose engine dates from before the middle of the last century, will be no more. I know there'll be a day when I look up at a plane in the sky and say "I used to do that". And young people will stare at me and wonder what it was really like to go up in machines that burned 100LL and took thrust from propellers, of all things.

Time, in fact, is one of the main reasons I write of flying. It's my feeble attempt to actually capture some time, to harness it and hold it back so that far from now I, or someone else, can read my scribbles, return to this time and know again how it feels to fly - not merely drive - a small, simple airplane around the sky.

And, too, many years from now, the writing will help me remember after they're gone, the men and the airplanes with whom I've flown. It gives me a chance to say now that I'm glad I've known you; glad for all the time I've spent just off your wing; glad that I've shared with you the wind and known what it truly means to fly; that I'm glad for this gift of time.

