

Tales of a Wayward Yak

By Lt. Phil Webb

The Boeing 757 rumbled down the runway, and I was on my way. Destination: Livermore, Calif. Grinning from ear to ear, this moment was the one I had waited for. Over two years of research, preparation and hard work finally was coming to fruition. A proud, new owner of an airplane, I was on my way out to pick up my “Yakquisition,” a 1983 Russian-made Yak-52. Total time on the airframe was 490.0 hours, and it had a 10.1 SMOH engine. It was a dream comes true. Little did I realize I would come close to seeing it reach a disastrous finale less than two short weeks later.

I slid back the hangar doors, and it was love at first sight. She was absolutely beautiful. Sitting high off the deck on a set of landing gear beefy enough for carrier operations, she sparkled in her new silver over-all livery. She had a half-black, half-white prop spinner. The black and white checkers on the engine cowling accentuated the huge two-bladed, paddle-shaped prop mounted on the business end of the powerful 360-horsepower, M-14p Vedneyev, radial engine. Gleaming red stars on the fuse-

lage and tail denotes this plane’s Russian-military heritage. I couldn’t help thinking, “Son, this ain’t no Cessna.” I felt like I already was late getting airborne.

Fast-forward two weeks. I had been extremely busy, making final preps for the long cross-country back to Pensacola, Fla. I had completed the minimum required five-hour checkout with a CFI, and, of course, there was the obligatory paperwork to complete the purchase. Luckier still, I had the grand opportunity to work up-close and personal with the FAA. Contrary to my plans, I still was not home.

My XO already was clamoring for me to get back and crank out Xs. A week of ground fog had kept me helplessly grounded on deck after completing just my first leg. “Get home-itis” had started to set in. When the Central Valley fog finally did lift, a good day of flying got me all the way to Santa Rosa, N.M. I was optimistic—another good day of flying would see me home—mission complete.

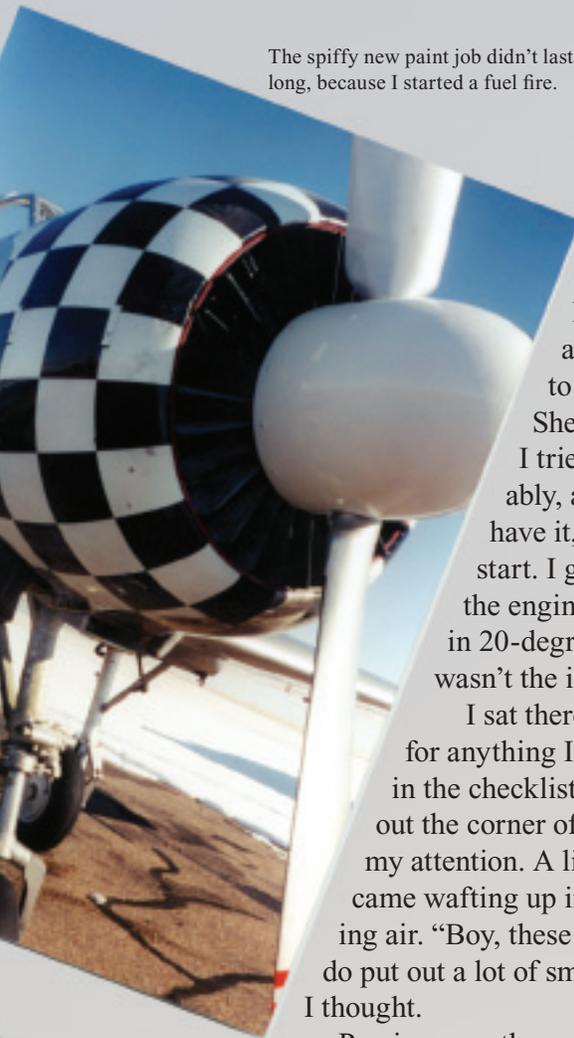
The trip was looking up until I awoke the next day. A low-overcast ceiling, with snowstorms, was throughout the local area. Fog obscured the mountains, and six inches of snow was on the ground. I could hear the sneer in the FAA weather briefer’s voice as he chirped, “VFR flight is not recommended in your area or along your route of flight.” Four more days would pass as I sat and stewed under a massive stationary front.

When the weather finally broke, I naturally was antsy to be on my way. Prepping the aircraft for flight had taken longer than expected. Finally, I was all set for engine start. Checklist complete, here we go: Clear, primer out and ready, starter button press, one blade, two blades, magnetos on, and a

Here she is, my
pride and joy,
Yak-52 SN 833603



The spiffy new paint job didn't last long, because I started a fuel fire.



little shot of prime as the engine began to cough and sputter. She didn't catch, and I tried again. Invariably, as my luck would have it, no joy on the start. I guess cold soaking the engine for four days in 20-degree temperatures wasn't the ideal setup.

I sat there double-checking for anything I may have missed in the checklist when a movement out the corner of my eye caught my attention. A little whiff of smoke came wafting up in the clear, morning air. "Boy, these radial engines sure do put out a lot of smoke on start-up," I thought.

Peering over the canopy rail, I saw fire! My heart was pounding. Mags check off. Fuel shut-off valve pull to off. Hurry! Primer to stowed and locked. Ignition checked off. Battery to off. Harness unlock. Faster! In a second, I was bounding out of the cockpit, and off the leading edge of the port wing. "Fire! Fire! Fire!" I screamed at the top of my lungs.

Uncombusted fuel from the start attempts had run out the exhaust stacks and had pooled on the ground, igniting as the engine backfired before dying. The fire on the ground under the nose of the aircraft already was racing up the nosewheel strut and engulfing the lower side of the engine cowling. Things were happening fast, but, in retrospect, it seemed like everything was in slow motion. Still yelling, hoping to draw attention to my plight, I jumped down on my hands and knees and started fighting the fire. I gathered up dirt and gravel to throw on the flames. The frozen ground didn't help much. Frantically, I threw whatever dirt I could gather on the flames at the bottom of the engine cowling. I thought, "That's it; I'm going to lose the airplane."

A feeling of resignation began to take hold. Maybe I should think about my safety and get clear of the aircraft before she goes up in flames. Never in a million years would I have envisioned the nightmare unfolding before my very eyes.

Fortunately, the story has a happy ending. As I continued my feeble attempts to put out the fire, the airport manager, a crusty old Marine aviator who had flown Corsairs over the Pacific in World War II, heard my cries for help. He immediately sized up the situation and sped to the site in his station wagon. Screeching to a halt, he pulled out a fire extinguisher as I sprinted over to grab it. The rest is, as they say, history, as we put out the fire.

Post-fire inspection revealed only superficial damage to the paint on the bottom of the engine cowling and one pilot-owner with frazzled nerves. This situation easily could have been a disaster, ending in the loss of an aircraft and possible injury. Through no doings of my own, I got lucky.

Furthermore, I learned many valuable lessons that day. Primarily, I came away with a true appreciation for the necessity of having a plane captain or fireguard present when starting any aircraft—military or civilian. I have applied this lesson to my Navy flying. Whenever I operate outside my home base, and a plane captain is not available, I make sure I have a fire extinguisher handy, or I know where the nearest one is located. I also brief my crew on their duties should a fire occur on the ground, and I am ready to declare an emergency via radio to the tower or to the FBO. 

Lt. Webb is stationed at NAS Whiting Field and flies with HT-18, and, yes, if you fly in the local pattern, you just might see a Yak on your tail.



Scorch marks under the cowling.