

Creature of Habit



by Lt. Loren Roméus

We had just taken off from Monroe, La., for an easy flight back to Whiting Field. It was one of my last flights in the VTs, and I was beginning to feel at home in the front seat of the T-34C. The air was smooth, and there wasn't a cloud in sight as we purred upward into the clear blue sky. "This is the life!" I thought as the altimeter wound through 3,000 feet, and I prepared to level off at 3,500.

Wham! Bang! Crunch! In the blink of an eye, the perfect view out my front windscreen was marred by the twisted metal of a crumpled engine cowling. For a moment, I pondered the trajectory the cowling would follow if it detached from the airframe. I knew the windscreen, my helmet and visor were my only lines of defense.

While I wasted precious seconds worrying about the cowling, the instructor in the back



seat showed a little more sense. Taking the controls and slowing us down, he asked, "What happened?"

Although I wasn't sure, I carefully described what I saw. To my amazement, the crumpled cowling was holding perfectly steady in the turbulent air right behind the propeller. We might have hit a bird, but there weren't many birds at 3,000 feet, and it was

unlikely a bird could have passed through the propeller.

Rather than speculate about the cause of our precarious situation, we focused on returning to terra firma. After a few controllability checks at altitude, we landed at Monroe Regional Airport. We inspected the engine cowling and prop area, but we saw no signs of an external strike. It looked as if the cowling had simply popped open in flight and crumpled in the slipstream.

Why did the cowling open in flight? Was it a faulty latch? Had we failed to secure it



during preflight? As disturbing as the latter thought was, we couldn't dismiss the possibility. After giving our battle-scarred chariot another careful inspection, we sat down and played the preflight sequence of events step-by-step.

We had begun in routine fashion, starting at the trailing edge of the port wing and heading in opposite directions around the aircraft. I was examining the port side of the

engine, and the instructor was rounding the tail when we were interrupted by an airline pilot who came sauntering over to admire our little puddle-jumper. He introduced himself as a former naval aviator who had flown the T-34B during his days as a student. We stood around shooting the breeze for 10 minutes or so before he wandered off, still reminiscing about the "good old days" when he had been in my shoes. My instructor, noting the delay, told me to go ahead and strap in while he finished the preflight. That's when things got a little hazy. Because I was in the cockpit strapping in and going through the checklist, I wasn't watching the instructor button up the aircraft. It wasn't his normal routine, so the instructor could not remember where he had resumed the preflight and whether he had secured all the cowlings.

That little incident earned me another day in the bayou country; more importantly, it taught me the value of following a routine. Checklists are an indispensable part of aviation, and so are other repetitive tasks for which you develop routines. Since that day, I have made a concerted effort to make sure my routines balance thoroughness and efficiency. Some routines, like preflight, change whenever I transition to a new airframe. Others, like setting up for an instrument approach, require little change. When I deviate from my routine, warning bells go off, and I increase my attention to detail to keep from missing something important.

Pilots are creatures of habit – make sure your habits are good ones. ✈️

Lt. Roméus flies with HC-4

photos by PH2 Matthew Thomas

