

Big Egos *in a* Small Plane

By Lt. Chris Perry

I was halfway through advanced helicopter training at Whiting Field and looking forward to a long weekend off from flight school. My brother, a civilian pilot, had borrowed a friend's plane to pick us up and head back to Tennessee for the weekend. I also was bringing home a Marine-helicopter-pilot friend to show him the Nashville nightlife.

My brother and his friend brought the single-engine Piper to Pensacola Regional Airport in the midafternoon. My friend and I arrived while they were refueling the bird; we topped-off the fuel. After introductions, my brother and I went to file a flight plan. The weather did not look great, and the plane just was big enough to hold our gear and us. All four of us were instrument-rated pilots.

I was anxious to get away from all the military preparations I'd been dealing with in flight school, so I didn't do a weight and balance. Besides, I had nearly 70 hours flying this aircraft and thought I knew her capabilities well.

On the takeoff roll, I realized how bad a mistake I had made. As we reached rotation speed, I pulled back on the yoke, but the bird wouldn't leave the ground. The plane needed an extra 20 knots of airspeed to get off the deck. I could feel the plane still struggle in the climb, somewhere between stalling and 75 fpm on the VSI. When we cleared the trees at the end of the runway by 15 feet, and I let out a sigh. We continued to climb so slowly that departure would not let us turn on-course until we S-turned for nearly 10 minutes to reach a safe altitude.

As we turned northward and climbed, the

small plane handled better as she burned off fuel. When we made it to the Montgomery area, I felt much better about the flight. I had learned from my lack of proper planning, and I thought we would make it through the rest of the flight just fine.

The thought of a smooth flight was short-lived, as a large line of thunderstorms loomed over the northern horizon. I could foresee using my newly acquired instrument rating from flight school, but I wasn't too worried about the storms because my brother was a charter-jet pilot, with thousands of hours. Reassuringly, he didn't appear to be taking our ride in the little Piper too seriously—that is, until I saw his reaction to the approaching cumulonimbus clouds. It got quiet as he decided to go on through the clouds.

We flew into the darkness, with the rain becoming deafening. The small Piper felt strong, but the altitude oscillations were scary. My brother said not to try and hold steady on the altitude, but to let it vary a few hundred feet with the up and down drafts—it would put less stress on the aircraft. He was right; it would have been impossible to hold it level, anyway. He said I had done well with the rough flying, and the little plane had made it through much better than expected. Once we had made it to the other side of the storm over northern Alabama, the sun started to shine and the sky had begun to clear up nicely.

We got to a part of the state I knew very well. As we approached my grandparent's house on the Tennessee River, my brother said one of our friends was staying there and probably was fishing.

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We cancelled IFR and continued on. I checked the fuel gauges; we had 10 gallons per side—plenty of fuel to finish the short 15-minute flight to our home airport south of Nashville. We planned to have a little fun, in true civilian style, and take her down low to see if we could buzz our buddy on the river. It had been a while since I'd done this type of flying, but such idiocy doesn't take much practice. My Marine friend in the back was wide-eyed and nervous (from the tone of his voice). This “flat hatting” is not allowed in flight school, and I was deter-

mined to show him a different side of flying.

We were down to 50 feet and having a good time. The fishermen were waving as we flew past at 120 knots. We were about to turn up and out of the basin when my brother's friend said, “You guys do know that since they replaced these fuel tanks, they indicate five gallons when empty...” He had been a certified flight instructor in this aircraft, and our silence answered his question. No, obviously, we did not know that fact.

The fun was over, and I slowed and banked up to a safer altitude. The next 15 minutes



Photo-composite.

were some of the quietest I've ever heard in an aircraft. All four sets of commercially-rated eyes stared at the fuel gauges from the front and back seats.

We were five minutes from our home field and about to cross parallel with the last airport before our intended field. We discussed whether we should stop and get more gas or continue on. Our question was answered for us when the engine made a slight chug. My brother took the plane to a hard right, onto the off-duty runway of the small country airport. It was closed for the day, so we had to call the airport manager by cell phone. We bought enough gas for the five-minute flight to our home airfield.

I have thought about this flight many times in the past few years. It still amazes me that four experienced pilots almost killed themselves in a small Piper. I could imagine the headlines now: "Four commercial-rated pilots killed in a plane barely large enough to hold them and their egos."

Three of us were very familiar with this aircraft. We had more than 4,000 hours of experience among us and more FAA licenses than I would care to count. We simply had gotten too big for our britches. Because of our experience levels, we felt this small aircraft simply couldn't hurt us-wrong! Nearly dead wrong!

Don't forget the importance of fundamental safety procedures; anything can happen to you, no matter how experienced your crew.

Lt. Perry currently flies with HSL-48.