

■ Every pilot has a love affair with that *first* solo.

It is connubially enshrined in every logbook. It is the exciting part of the process which takes place before eager, panting pilots can fully emerge from their chrysalis student state. But once the metamorphosis of the solo is successfully done, every puff, gust, bounce and squeak becomes part of the fiber of every newly emergent flying bug.

But what about that more obscure, less frequent happening, which has the same built-in, lonesome, sweat-soaked fascination, and which, though it could occur accidentally, is not part of the required ordeals of FAA law? It's the first, all-alone, actual instrument flight.

"No one says you have to do a low-ceiling solo," an instrument pilot friend recently said, "so I'm on my third year of rainy-day dual." He didn't actually mean "dual," of course. He was merely paying tribute to the average pilot's reluctance to leave the womb of the hood and the confidence of copilotage.

Nevertheless, there is a poignant moment in a pilot's flight history when he is all fired up and ready for cloud nine. It is in the days immediately after he gets that hard-won instrument ticket. And no wonder. For the past 50 or 60 hours he has been rewired, tuned up and geared to more demanding flight procedures. He doesn't even walk to the airplane without filing a flight plan.

Then, alas, much like a weather pattern, this "high" gradually dissipates. Good habits and good intentions slowly diffuse in that drizzly stationary front of procrastination.

My own case was no exception. When I got my instrument rating some years ago, everything started off with that full-throttle burst of enthusiasm. Not all at once, naturally, because when I finally switched off the engine after that awful everything-but-the-kitchen-sink flight test, the inspector, Charlie Melley, just sat there, wordless, puffing his pipe. Sort of as if a crime had been committed.

In fact, I remembered what the crime probably was. Maybe I was too low on minimums on that ILS into Providence. Or was it that I went a couple of miles wide of an intersection while copying an amended clearance? So, like many before me, I sat, waiting, listening to the gyros winding down. Finally the oracle spoke from behind the haze of smoke.

"I'm not going to get out of this [puff puff] underslung airplane until you remember to put up your stupid [puff puff] flaps," Charlie said, puff puff.

There was a long review of the pros and cons of the flight, but finally there

it was: the signed piece of paper, the magic passport into a new kind of sky.

Then what happened? From that moment on, the weather began to get better.

Not just psychologically better. Meteorologically better.

For the next four or five weekends, New England got so much sunshine Florida threatened a lawsuit. And that white little instrument column in my logbook had to be appeased by peekaboo hood time. My instrument license was all marriage and no honeymoon.

Eventually it came: a Saturday with a genuine 4,000-foot overcast. It wasn't bad enough to cancel an outdoor church supper, but it was the nearest thing to a real hung-over sky the airport had seen in a long time. Trembling with the urge of duty, I checked out the airplane, trotted to the telephone, and filed a flight plan.

But that long, sunny intermission had worked its villainy. My original, golden zeal for IFR flight was becoming tinged with the greenish-yellow of uncertainty. Uncertain? Well, I say uncertain, but scared was more like it. I adjusted my brand-new kneepad five times.

My clearance came. It sounded like a memorized rendition of "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" in Portuguese, possibly recited by someone's six-year-old daughter. I couldn't even read what I had written down. It looked exactly like a map of the Maine seacoast.

With the beginner's obsequious persistence, I finally got the clearance repeated and rewritten until it was right, and then off I went, feeling like Dr. Strangelove.

Sad to tell, I was to remain a fair-weather virgin.

I was given 3,000 feet as an altitude, which kept me in pristine VFR right under the nasty overcast. And the longer I skittered along underneath that bilious ceiling, the less I wanted to poke into it.

Then came the doom-defining voice from Departure Control. "Comanche 8575 Pop, stand by."

I stood. So did the hair on my neck.

"75 Pop, expect a change in altitude."

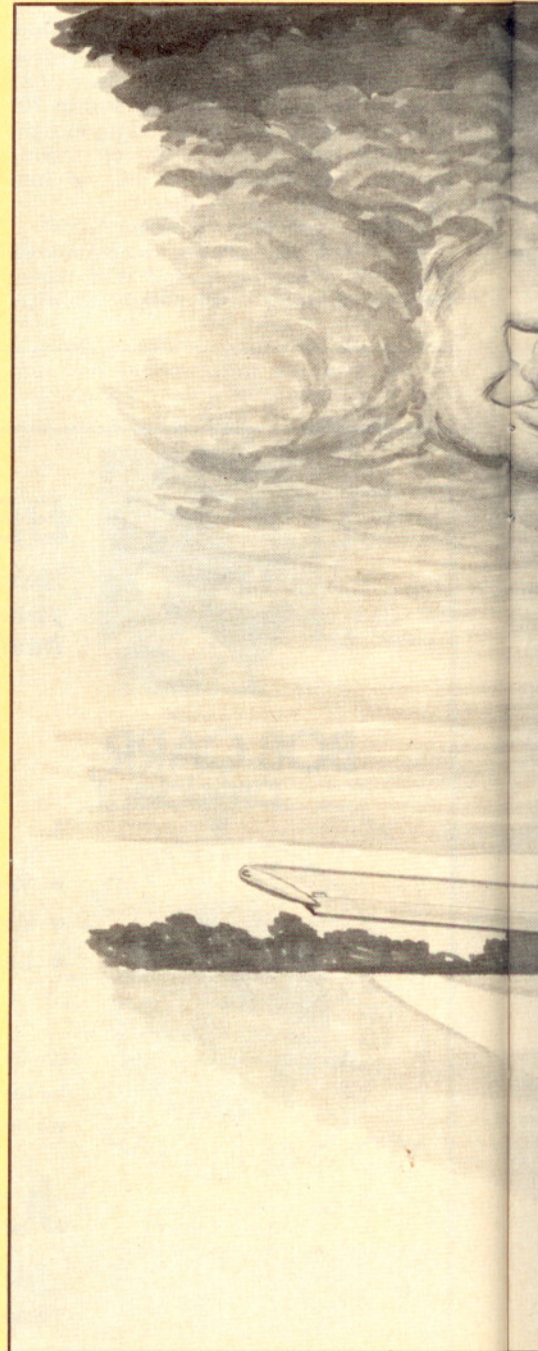
I leaned forward, expecting.

"75 Pop, climb and maintain five thousand."

I lost a couple of pounds in beaded moisture as I diddled the prop and throttle controls and said, "Out of three for five."

Can you believe Moses and the Red Sea? When I arrived at the shore of 4,000, the overcast parted and I went through a hole 10 miles wide.

What's more, believe it or not, when



SECOND SOLO

For a new IFR pilot, the first flight alone in actual instrument conditions can be much like the original solo: equal parts bliss and terror



I descended at my destination the clouds again cringed away as if I were a quarantine ship.

It was a trip full of unrequited panic and glassy-eyed relief all the way. By the time I got back to home base late that afternoon, I had collected two procedure landings and five altitude changes, but not one single cloudy embrace.

I crawled out of the plane like a banjo with snapped strings.

By the end of that summer, with the weather still dallying with my affections, I had become a fugitive from a flight plan.

Then came the gray lady known as Nantucket.

The day beginning my weekend trip to the island, the forecast was bright not only with widely scattered clouds, but also with widely scattered optimism. It was a beautiful flight, generous with visibility. I landed on Runway 24 at the Nantucket airport like a sweet caress, met my friends, lunched at the Coffin House, fished off the beach near Madaket, and after dinner smiled smugly up at the clear, starry evening.

But Nantucket makes strong weather-men weep.

The next day dawned like a cold plate of oatmeal. Nothing but gray murk spilled into the bedroom to meet my baleful morning eyes. At breakfast I chatted bravely while the crumbs from my toast shook in all directions. And even while my fork chased bits of scrambled egg, my mind was off somewhere, plotting some way to keep from getting sucked up into this weather.

Contrary to public opinion, it takes great skill to conjure up really plausible IFR excuses. They must have just the right balance of imagination and unconcern, and be uttered with a careless smile. To put it bluntly, I couldn't come up with a thing.

So when the time came, my friends loaded me off to the airport and, with nonfliers' annoying unawareness of sky, left me standing dreary and alone while they went speeding hilariously away to some cozy, earthbound appointment.

Chilled and motionless, I stood staring at the infernal, blinking red light displayed by Cape Cod and the offshore islands in bad weather. I blinked back with my own reddish eyes until finally, with a shuddering sigh, I scuffed into the flight service station which at that time existed on Nantucket.

The FSS was filled with what can only be described as a happy staff of shirtsleeve sadists chortling fiendishly over a chart full of isobars.

A big, round Mr. Helpful came over to the counter, sipping aromatic coffee from Ginger's coffee shop next door.

"W-w-w-what's the B-B-B-Boston w-weather?" I asked in an offhand manner.

"Boston, well now, let's see here," mused Mr. Helpful between sips, scan-

ning 10 feet of yellow teletype carpet at a glance. "Ah, yes, here we are. Boston, hah! Not too good. Not too good. Eight hundred. Rain."

I began to limp around the room, hoping someone would ask me what was the matter, and maybe suggest I'd better not fly in that condition, whatever it was. No one noticed.

"Hyannis," continued Mr. Helpful, smacking his lips. "Hyannis, hmmm. Estimated seven hundred, light rain, two and a half."

At this point I managed two excellent fake sneezes. Everyone knows it's better not to fly with a bad cold, I thought. Perhaps some concerned person would console me with that considerate advice.

No one even said "Gesundheit."

"Hah, the Vineyard, two hundred, light fog." Here Mr. Helpful paused, having caught sight of my almost forgotten flight case. "Excuse me, are you instrument?"

"Well, yes," I said, "but—" I was about to suggest I heard a big rumble, which might have been thunder. It turned out to be my stomach.

"Oh, well, instrument," beamed Mr. Helpful, cutting me off. "Instrument, there's no problem whatsoever." And he pushed the familiar little pad across the counter to me and went sipping off to answer a persistent telephone.

Well, that was it. Either I had to fill out the flight plan or run screaming out of the office. Even the pencil was there, attached to a string.

Stoically I filled in the blanks that would evolve as a flight plan for Norwood, Mass. But I hadn't given up all hope. There was still the possibility of a weak mag instead of weak knees.

The drizzle had already started as I climbed into the cockpit, after the longest checkout on the Eastern seaboard. Ground Control, businesslike, sent me taxiing to Runway 24 behind a huge, rumbling twin that was routinely absorbing its clearance on the move. Real status.

I copied my own raspy clearance, hoping the twin wasn't listening, and began my checklist. On the runup I glowered long at each dial, hoping to find some telltale evidence that would give me a reprieve. The oil pressure interested me. Wasn't the indicator a tiny fraction off the mark?

At that critical moment, the radio from the big, fat twin crackled once more into life.

"Tower, we're getting a bad reading on oil pressure. Let the Comanche go by us."

Historians, I hope, will bear me out that a time comes when events just take charge, plans of mice and men notwithstanding. Before I could come out with a mumbled, "Oh, gee whiz, what do you know, my oil pressure isn't so good either!" I was cleared for takeoff, and the rain was streaking the windshield.

Once I was airborne, a sudden change took place in my thinking. By the time I had gotten the gear up, everything had turned opaque gray. Never-

theless, a tingle of exhilaration took possession of me. The automatic reactions painstakingly implanted by two long-suffering instructors, Jim Goode and Al Pratt, suddenly brought back the instincts of more confident days.

I switched to the Otis frequency, and my right turn to intercept V-146 was smooth. I trimmed out the controls and reported on course as requested. I even managed to tune in the Muskeget intersection, unruffled, for a further report.

When the busywork began to slack off, I glanced outside. The oncoming oyster stew seemed something apart, even unreal, so I turned back to my little world of gauges. The cabin, filled with Lycoming lullaby, actually offered a sort of desert-island comfort.

The voice of Boston Approach was crisp but not irritated, as I floundered into radar contact. I was offered bits of kindly information on my whereabouts, along with a polite inquiry as to my altitude.

I felt like a club member.

The voice had continued its friendly intrusion as I approached Norwood, so I wasn't prepared for a punch in the stomach. "Norwood," the matter-of-fact voice said, "is nine hundred feet, visibility two miles in rain."

Did he say 900 feet? Suddenly the DG, the altimeter and the tangent-pointing ADF made very little sense. Little ripples of panic danced from chest to groin.

I began to come out of shock when they let me down to 2,000. By the time they had coaxed me into a vector for the Norwood beacon, I was almost normal again. Cleared for the approach, I realized that this was what instrument flying is all about. I was up there and I had to come down.

On the inbound course not only was there too much to do, but everything I did was too much. Between switching to the tower, landing check, altimeter check, approach-plate review, and getting the gear down, it seemed I zig-zagged across the path at least 10 times.

For the hundredth time I rechecked everything again—gear, mixture, throttle, tanks, prop, needle, speed, landing plate—announced being inbound on the marker, and licked my rubberized lips.

On the hundred-and-first recheck, I frenetically watched the altimeter needle go 50 feet below 900.

On the hundred-and-second recheck, I checked the windshield and, glory be, that wet-flannel blanket gradually dissolved into a glistening wet ribbon of runway.

"75 Papa, cleared to land," said gravel-voiced Eddie in the tower, sounding almost musical.

As I came over the numbers, my second "solo" turned into an orchestrated grand finale, with trombones, cymbals, trumpets, and a couple of kettledrums as my wheels touched. I taxied to my spot as the violins took over. Then I shut down, sat for two or three blissful moments, and stepped out into a friendly, misty rain that had turned forever beautiful. □