

A Cold Winter's Night

North Dakota nightmare

BY JEFF SKILES

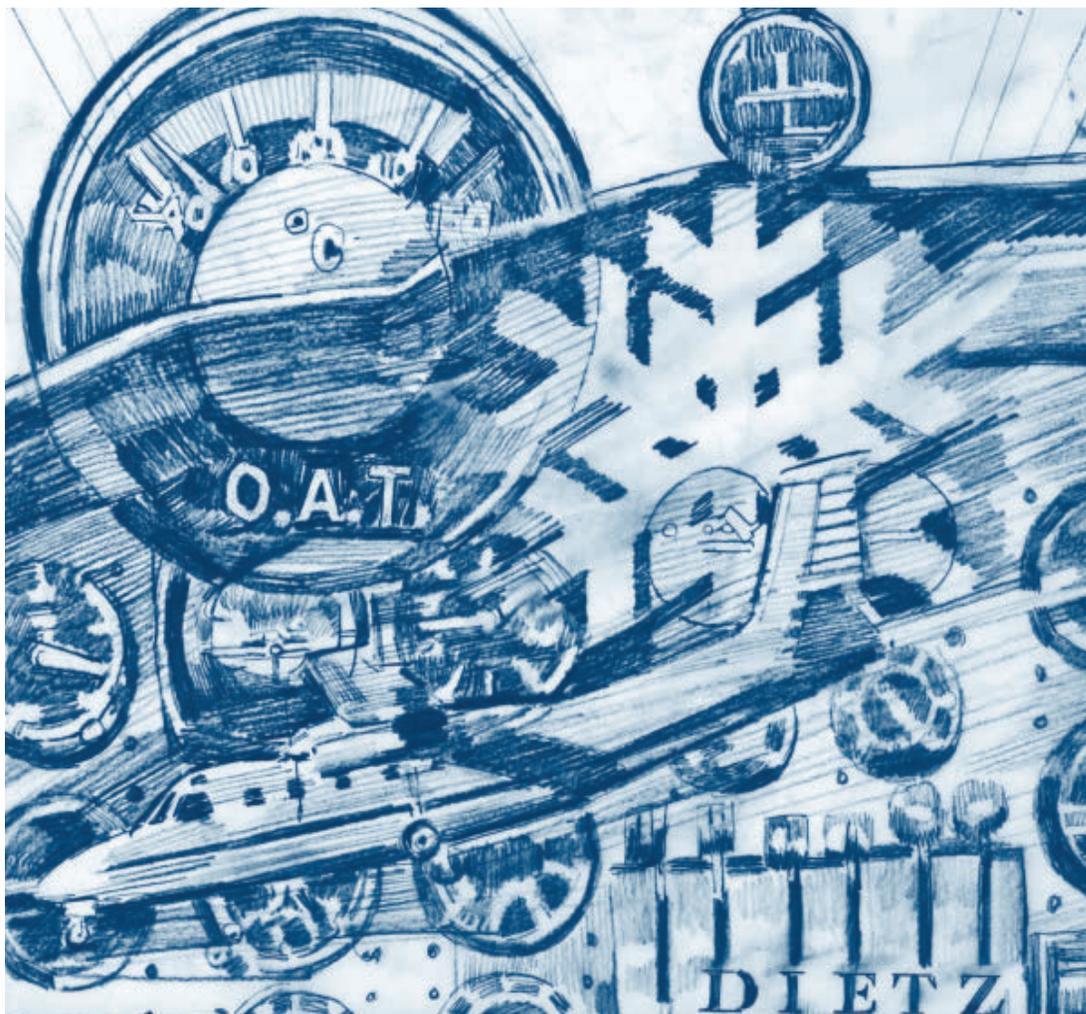
IT IS BITTERLY COLD, unbearable conditions, and the raw wind that never stops blowing across the plains makes it seem that much worse. The frigid air is almost invasive, probing every point of attack in my outer armor of gloves, insulated flying suit, and Moon Boots. Every night this Grand Commander and I travel from Omaha to St. Paul, on to Fargo, and back. Three legs of a triangle with the outside air temperature dropping 10 degrees with every landing. It is a balmy 5 degrees below zero as I leave Omaha. And it is only going to get colder.

St. Paul is only a short stop. I am on the ground only long enough to transfer cargo, and then I am aloft again heading northwest for Fargo. When I open the cabin door in Fargo, the Commander is

instantly an icebox. Twenty degrees below zero and a 25-knot wind.

After a two-hour wait the props are churning again. The needle on the outside air temperature gauge has now slid to minus 28. I push the throttles forward and accelerate down the runway, and I am in the air once more.

On the climb-out I shine my flashlight on the OAT gauge. Minus 37 degrees, or is it 38? It doesn't matter; the gauge doesn't go beyond minus 40.



I sail through the cold, clear night sky. The stark pale light of the moon only seems to accentuate the cold bleakness of the landscape below.

SOUR NOTE IN THE SYNCHRONIZED HARMONY

Ever so gradually I become aware of something wrong, a sour note in the harmony of the synchronized engines. I'm really not sure if I hear it, or if I just feel it. It seems like a vibration or a miss in the engine. I shine my flashlight on the left engine as if something would be apparent from viewing the engine in such a manner. Nothing. I crane around in my seat and do the same for the right. Nothing. Engines still attached, props still turning.

I think a moment and then turn up the panel lights to view the engine instruments more clearly, and as I focus on the indications my veins suddenly run as cold as the air outside. Both oil temperatures are off the scale well past redline, and the oil pressures, conversely, are languishing at the bottom of the gauge right on their lower red arc.

As I try to make sense of what I'm seeing, one of the engines starts missing, or detonating, quite noticeably. I think it's the left engine. I shine my flashlight onto the engine once again, looking for leaks. My eyes focus on the oil cooler sitting right below the prop. Could that be the culprit? This just doesn't make sense. How can the engines be overheating in the most frigid temperatures I have ever experienced, and how long until the right engine is stricken with the same roughness as the left?

The cause of this commotion is a mystery, but the effects are pronounced. I reduce the throttle on the left side because it has begun to shake and run extremely rough. Reducing the power doesn't seem to help the engine much, but it makes me feel better. I can't really shut the left engine down, since the right side is showing the same overheating indications; it's just being more polite about it at the moment.

It's 70 miles back to Fargo. That seems like a long way given the situation. Out ahead about 50 miles is Watertown. If the engines fail, I could probably make a successful gear-up landing on the snow, but if the cabin door jams, I'm trapped. What if I have to walk to a farmhouse? Farmhouses look few and far between. It's entirely possible that I could survive the landing and freeze to death walking for help!

FINDING THE WARMTH

I swallow hard and force myself to think clearly. It's cold. I want to get to where it's warmer. I ask the controller for a descent, but I'm too confused and too proud to declare an emergency. How would I explain my situation to the controller anyway? I ask for a descent to 6,000 feet. I'm not enthused about going any lower than that. Altitude will at least prolong my meeting with destiny. The good news is that the right engine still seems to be running smoothly despite the wild indications on the gauges.



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It's 3 a.m. over South Dakota, I'm alone, my engines appear to be overheating, one of them is running very rough, I don't know why, and my options seem very limited.

I have the hollow feeling of fear in my stomach. It has been only about five minutes since this all began, but it feels like an eternity. I know there is warmer air to the south, if I can just get to it!

I level at 6,000 feet and wonder what to do next. As I ponder my options, I slowly become aware that the left engine's bucking and shaking have abated slightly. It's still there, but less pronounced. I shine my

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flashlight on the engine, gaining no more insight than the last 15 times I have done so, but I'm sure of it, the roughness is definitely decreasing, and the OAT gauge is now minus 30 degrees! It has warmed up!

I can see the lights of Watertown ahead. My life is looking brighter by the moment. The engine miss is noticeably better, and the needles on the oil temperature gauges are moving in the right direction.

After another minute, the roughness disappears completely, and the engine instrument needles stabilize to their accustomed positions. The Aero Commander drones on through the night as solid and dependable as it always has been. The engines produce their full, rich melody, pulling me through the night sky.

I don't know how to characterize the problem to the uncaring mechanics awaiting my arrival in Omaha. This particular Commander has a conversion to eight-cylinder IO-720 engines. Maybe something in the

oil system plumbing of these 400-hp engines is causing the hot oil to completely bypass the oil cooler in extremely cold conditions. My decision to descend to only slightly warmer air seemed to cure whatever was causing the problem.

The passage of 30 years hasn't shed any more light on the cause of this mysterious malady, and it will never be known why the right engine continued to perform flawlessly while being subjected to the same temperature abuse. Experience, even more than flying ability, is the most valuable tool an aviator carries in his toolbox. About this experience I can wholeheartedly say...I'll never do that again. *EAA*

Jeff Skiles, EAA 366120, has been a pilot for 34 years and has almost 21,000 hours logged. He is EAA Young Eagles co-chairman, owns a 1935 Waco YOC cabin biplane, and was first officer on US Airways Flight 1549, the Miracle on the Hudson.

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