



One evening in 1976, I got a call from Bob Berry who had just bought a PT 23 that had served the previous year as the towplane for the Smirnoff Transcontinental Sailplane race. He had heard that I had some PT 23 time (photo above) towing gliders and asked me to ferry his new plane from Mountain Road Airport in Maryland back to the Transit Airpark. He had just gotten his private license and had no tailwheel time. He would fly me down in a 172 and lead me back home because the PT had no electrical system and thus no nav gear. I told him "sure, I'd love to."

Then he told me the rest of the story. It was out of license, but he had a ferry permit. It hadn't flown in over 6 months and was tied down outside. Oh, by the way, it had a non-standard (tank engine) 240 Continental, but was just like the standard 220!! This was going to be one *helluva* preflight inspection!

We flew down to the airport and found that it had, in fact, actually been a mountain road at one time, but was now a dirt runway. It looked to be about 1500 - 2000 ft long (was just labeled "Private" on the sectional). I was relieved when he asked me to land the 172.

I spent a couple of hours checking the plane out, expecting to find some reason to say "No way." It actually looked quite nice in its "stars & bars" WW2 paint scheme. It did have one brake pedal that was inoperative, but with good tailwheel steering and one good brake, it was possible to control it with a little innovative technique and a lot of caution.

Bob put 5 gallons of gas in the empty wing tank while I checked that the vent was clear of bug nests. Then I had him check that the airspeed needle moved as I very *gently* blew into the pitot tube. He said that it did so we proceeded to see if we could get this odd engine started.

After ensuring that the tail was firmly tied down, we primed the heck out of it and pulled the prop through a bunch of times. The original engine had an inertial starter that you cranked up to high RPMs and pulled a knob to engage the starter. The tank engine had no inertial starter. We had usually handpropped the towplane used a few years before so it wasn't new to me. After the

third or fourth try, it kicked over, coughed a little and settled into a nice, smooth idle. Darn, I guess I would have to fly this thing back after all!

We had to stop at a small airport a few miles away across a river to get more gasoline for the trip back. I taxied to the end of the "runway" and ran up the engine as much as I could with one brake. After starting the takeoff roll, I added full power for a quick engine check and then concentrated on missing ruts and bumps in the run way. As soon as I cleared the trees, I checked my airspeed. Imagine how shocked I was to find it pegged at 195 knots, the max number on the gage! No matter what the speed was, it read the same.

Bob took off and made a beeline for the little airport. I decided to stay over the runway at about 1500 ft to see how this PT 23 felt near the stall. It was very docile and, like a glider, you could feel speed changes easily.

I flew to the little airport for fuel and made my first no-air-speed-indicator landing ever -- no sweat.

After very cautiously taxiing near the gas pump, shutting down, and removing an inspection cover near the pitot tube, I discovered the problem. The rubber hose (that should have been attached to the metal pitot tube) was only resting lightly on the tube. When I blew carefully into the pitot tube before, it was enough to move the needle a little, but with the vacuum produced in the wing while flying, it came off. This caused the needle to go the wrong way around the gauge until it hit the peg. I quickly wired the hose back on and was planning to have Bob look at the gage while I blew into it again.

But ---where was Bob? He took off before I did, but wasn't anywhere around! Finally, the 172 came screaming into the pattern and landed at about cruise speed. He had gone to the wrong airport after flying right over the correct one. After landing, he started to taxi to the FBO before he recognized the control tower right in front of him! He found the tower freq and called them. They just said, "We *thought* you would call us sooner or later." Things were different in 1976.

As I didn't know what the fuel flow of the non-standard engine was and didn't trust old fuel gages, I decided we would not go straight home, but refuel in Pennsylvania. That leg was uneventful and the airspeed gage even worked.

Before leaving College Park, I could see it might be a little dark when we got home, so I briefed Bob what to do if it was so dark that I didn't want to land over power lines at Transit in a plane that I wasn't real familiar with.

I told him that if it was dark when we got in the home area, he should go to Niagara Falls airport, tell the tower that he had a wingman, without a radio (or lights), following him in. It shouldn't be a problem. What could *possibly* go wrong??!

When we crossed the NY border, it was blacker than the inside of a cow. Bob headed for Niagara Falls as planned. If I had had a map, I would have simply found an uncontrolled airport and spent the night. As it was, I was pretty well committed to follow him as I had no maps, nor lights to see one with if I had one.

I dropped back far enough to be safe following a brand new pilot at night. As this would be my second no-air-speed-indicator landing (due to no instrument lights), I wanted to give myself lots of time to get stabilized on final.

It looked like there was only a Cessna 150 in the pattern, so my plan should work OK. When Bob turned final, I turned a loose base. Just before I turned final, that Cessna 150 rolled out on final ahead of me. I was a little confused so I went around and pulled up to downwind for

a short pattern to stay well ahead of the 150. My pattern was essentially a 360 degree turn. As soon as I was on the ground, I quickly cleared the runway and taxied back to Olsker's FBO.

As the prop was coasting down after shutdown, the ramp worker ran up to tell me the controllers in the tower called and they wanted me to call them back. No surprise there.

I asked Bob why the heck he didn't tell the tower that I was behind him. He said that he didn't see the blue exhaust flame from my engine so he thought I had gone to another airport.

I decided to go talk to the tower operator in person. I rang the bell, they pushed the unlock button, and I climbed up the stairs to the tower --- again, remember this is 1976. As I entered the cab, one of the operators said, "Oh, for God's sake, it's John Ball. We should have guessed!"

He said they were there thinking that they were controlling traffic when, out of the dark, here comes a ghost plane with a blue fuselage, yellow wings, and red and white stripes on its tail just slowly taxiing by. It was like something out of *Twilight Zone*." At least, he didn't turn my pilot license into confetti right on the spot!

The next day I phoned the tower to tell them that I wanted to take off in my no radio plane to go to a little sod strip ten miles east. He asked me, "OK, you want to takeoff, depart east and never *ever* return here, right?" I meekly agreed. It was the only time in 42 years of flying that I ever used those red and green lights they told me about in basic flight school.

It doesn't take an aviation safety expert to make a long list of dumb things I did that day. I've done lots of other dumb things in airplanes down through the years, but this is the record for the most in one day. In hindsight, it makes most of the things I did in flight test seem like a piece of cake!