

The Joys of Flying with Fred.

Ironic, a word used by Fred in almost every sentence he utters, and it is ironic that despite everything he is actually an excellent pilot with over 30 years experience. But still, sitting in the back seat of a Cessna with Fred thinking out aloud, can turn your joyful flying experience into a nightmare. You become a complete nervous wreck, capable of chewing your fingernails to the bone. That's if you weren't using both hands to hold on tight, to whatever, or whoever was available. Your imagination going crazy, wondering when you're going to drop out of the sky, be involved in a midair collision, or worse still, have a crash landing from lack of fuel, or running into some poor unfortunate beast, when coming in to land on a bush runway, which could be a stony creek bed, with or without water, on top of a mesa, strewn with shrubs and metre high ant hills, or on a pot-holed runway or dirt track through the mulga scrub. Even Council roads were not safe, after checking traffic conditions from the air, Fred would swoop down to speed along a corrugated dirt road, dust flying everywhere, then, pull up just metres from a cattle grid, and park in the table drain.

The Cessna, some 40 years old, was a little rusty and had doors that didn't quite close properly, causing it to be a little chilly and breezy when flying high. These quirks made it necessary to put on more than the usual layers of woollies for the trip, only to have to strip them off as you descended to land in the hot summer heat

of Western Queensland. Fred did a lot of the repairs on the plane himself, and knowing the repairs he carried out on other machinery he owned, thoughts of tie-wire, chewing gum, Band-aids and black pepper did nothing to calm us down. Better not to think about it.

Fred ran the plane on petrol, it was easier to come by in the Outback, and he had been known to keep his emergency beacon in a safe place – on top of the wardrobe at home! He didn't like rules or regulations, that meant no flight plans, despite at times crossing the path of F1-11 fighter planes. So he was always wondering if there were other planes around, muttering over the headphones, "I think there's another plane around here", reminding us to keep our eyes open. I thought he was joking, but no, as I was to learn, one thing Fred never did was joke.

On days of high turbulence from thermals, Fred would fly high above the updraughts, among the thunderheads, higher than was legal for such a small plane. You felt you weren't moving, just a speck in the sky, and just as you began to enjoy the experience, Fred would remind us to check our fingernails, for if they were looking blue, it would mean we were not getting enough oxygen.

Every trip Fred would wonder out aloud whether he really had enough fuel left to get us to our destination, because of a headwind, or being blown off course with a crosswind otherwise he would doubt that we would make it before nightfall. At

those times you would find yourself trying with all your might not to think of landing in the dark, on top of an anthill covered mesa, or torn to bits crashing into wild mulga and gidgee scrub, or worse, into a mountainside. Rather than returning home to the farm in the highlands of New England my fate might be to never be found, with bones scattered far and wide, bleached by the sun and forgotten by loved ones.

One memorable trip back to the farm, after two weeks working on the mine, will always be imprinted on my mind, confirming Fred as a mad pilot who could always come up with something new to shock his passengers. It would be unbelievable, if you weren't there to see it with your own eyes.

We left the mine on one of those forty six degree days, unbelievably hot, dusty with strong updraughts and gusty northerly winds. Just to make it more interesting, we were overloaded with the usual bag of rock specimens from the mine. We taxied down the pot-holed runway, gathering speed, faster and faster. Mulga scrub flashed by, dust swirling each side, then the wind caught us, and up we went in a cloud of bulldust. Or perhaps to say we went up sideways with a twist would be a more accurate description, but thankfully we were airborne.

Unfortunately there must have been oil on the windscreen and the dust clung to it, obscuring the pilot's view completely. This wasn't a problem for the three and a

half hours flying to the village where the farm was, however as we got closer to the mountains and the cloud cover was descending lower to the ground this vision became necessary.

The village on the tableland, high above the ranges was covered in dense cloud. Landing was always difficult in fine weather, but finding the runway that ran down a lane between huge granite outcrops, in low cloud, was going to be impossible with a dirty, dust-covered windscreen, and we all knew there wasn't enough fuel to fly anywhere else.

Yes, we were all very scared, even Fred this time. Fred then slowed the Cessna right down, and handed the controls over to Wally sitting beside him. Now that was enough to make me start praying real fast. Then he asked Peter, sitting in the back seat with me, to remove his T-shirt and hand it to him.

“Oh”, said Peter, “you’re not going to do what I think you’re going to do, are you?”

Me. I was silently screaming, “What on Earth is Fred going to do now?”

Well, he opened his window and he hung out there with Peter's T-shirt in his hand, being blown back and forth in the wind. He managed to reach around and wipe a small clear patch in the oil and dust to see through.

So with all the inhabitants of the village on the pub verandah listening and waiting for the crash, we came out of the clouds, just in time to touch down safely in the mist, scrawny sheep scattered in all directions as we sped down the laneway, coming to a stop, right beside the farm gate. We all quickly got out, legs shaking like jelly, and had the ground not been wet and muddy or covered in cow-pads and sheep nuts, I would have dropped to my knees and kissed it soundly.

But I did promise myself that I would never, ever, fly with Fred again. But I did of course, and as Fred would say, "How ironic is that?"