

HOSTILE PASSENGERS

Dark. Turbulent. Rain. In the clouds. Changes in my route clearance from La Guardia Approach Control as fast as I could write them down and faster than I could execute them. This was single pilot instrument flying at its busy-as-a-one-arm-paper-hanger worst.

There was only the dim red glow of the cockpit lights to give me cheer that Friday night as I started home from the Hampton Airport on Long Island to Washington, D.C. in my single engine Comanche.

The voice of the Controller was a continuous staccato barrage in my headphones as he directed me and at least thirty-eleven other airplanes through the stormy New York City weather. I have been given two changes in my flight plan clearance sitting on the end of the runway and another as I lifted off the runway. Not three minutes later, they were changed yet again and I was to the point of making rash promises to God that I'd never fly alone in bad weather again.

Suddenly, I glimpsed a movement out of the corner of my eye! On the floor, in front of the empty co-pilot's seat, there were two claws waving back and forth and moving towards my right leg! The only thing that prevented a severe dent in the roof of the cockpit was the seatbelt which limited the height of my jump. There was something alive in my airplane, and it was after me!

Now they say that in moments of great stress one's life flashes through one's mind. What flashed through my mind was that time in my youth when I got locked in a barn with a skunk; I don't know which one of us wanted out the worst.

I pushed my seat back, reached for the flashlight, lifted my legs, and yelled loud enough to be heard down on Broadway. Needless to say, the airplane was doing its own thing while I was doing mine, which was not exactly in accordance with the Approach Controller's most recent instructions.

There on the floor staring balefully back at me in the beam of my flashlight was an obviously displeased and highly agitated two-pound lobster.

Now the reader may wonder just how did a live lobster come to be hitching a ride in a Comanche on a stormy Friday night? I knew how come, but what I did not know was why in the world I ever had such an unbright idea to start with.

It all began the day before while returning from a Boston to New York business trip in the Comanche with my attorney. He mentioned that his family was on Long Island in their summer house and that if we were to go to the Hampton Airport and call his wife, she would pick us up and we could enjoy a lobster dinner. Afterward we could continue to Teterboro, where I temporarily based the airplane, and thence back into New York City where we worked Monday thru Friday.

We did. It was a feast fit for royalty. I was so enthusiastic in my praise for the wonders of such a dinner that my hostess offered to obtain a bagful of lobsters for me the next day. I could fly over and pick them up in the evening while enroute to my home in Washington, D.C.

I did.

They were in a plastic bag, and it was raining, and I was in a hurry to be gone. And I really didn't notice that they had no pegs in their claws to keep them harmless when I put the bag on the floor behind my seat.

Now a good sense of humor, nor a high level of patience, are required by the FAA in their personality-profile criteria for controllers. Accordingly, I was advised in no uncertain terms that I was 30 degrees off assigned heading and 300 feet below assigned altitude.

I acknowledged the rebuke and set about straightening up the airplane while keeping a wary eye on my antagonistic passenger, who had clearly decided that there wasn't enough room in that airplane for the both of us.

Amazingly agile that lobster, and very quick and once free of captivity, quite determined to stay that way. Furthermore, he was totally willing to do bodily harm to anyone who disagreed with his position on the matter. He got me twice before managed to get hold of him long enough to throw him as far back to the rear of the airplane as I could. I then blocked his counter attack with my flight kit.

This time the Controller not only advised me of my wandering ways but wanted to know if I was rated for instrument flight. I meekly told him that I was and that I had had a small problem which was okay now. Famous last words.

Lobsters, I quickly learned, belong to a mutual protection society. Not only that, they are sneaky. I wasn't aware of the next attack until I had become a casualty of it. Lobster Number Two, taking a lesson from Lobster Number One, gave no warning before he provoked another screech from me, the result of his attaching himself to the calf of my right leg.

As we broke off that engagement, I reviewed his ancestral indiscretions quite vehemently and before finally sending him on a short trip to join his friend in the baggage compartment. How many damn lobsters were still in that bag?

The Approach Controller by now was becoming a candidate for an early medical retirement. He not only pointed out that my erratic flying was probably a good reason for staying out of New York airspace in the future, he also really wanted to know what exactly was my problem. In fact, one would say that he was somewhat insistent.

So, I told him.

There was a rather long silence on the headphones. No doubt every other pilot listening on the radio frequency was waiting to hear what would come next. It was a classic. "Sir", he said, "what are your intentions?"

Well, I had all sorts of intentions. I had intentions on staying alive. I had intentions on catching the rest of those lobsters before they caught me, and I damn sure had intentions for what to do with those lobsters if and when I got them home. However, all things considered, it seemed like the best thing for me to do was declare an emergency and then to do battle with the remaining lobsters in (or by now, out of) the bag.

The Controller and I had some discussion then over the nature of my emergency, (lobsters loose in the cockpit?) followed by the inevitable telephone number for me to call should I ever land in one piece (Big Brother Bond would want to hear about this!). Then he finally gave me a vector out over the water where I could wander about in the soup at will during my great lobster crusade.

To the accompaniment of sly suggestions by other anonymous pilots on the frequency to "ride'em cowboy" and "boil 'em in oil", I headed east out over the Atlantic and for awhile it was everything but "shiny side up".

After landing in Washington I was on the phone to three different FAA supervisors for over an hour before I finally convinced them that I was neither drunk, crazy, incompetent nor illegal and that I would definitely file a written report of the incident.

Near midnight, I had my sweet revenge when I dropped those lobsters, one at a time, into the pot and watched them turn a bright red.

They were scrump-dilly-iscious.

