

Rain Landing

By Colorado Ric

Let's get this straight from the get go. This is no "I am Joe cool pilot story," but rather an "I was lucky to get out of that mess story."

I worked part time in Phoenix and part time in Grand Junction, Colorado for a few years, about two weeks in one location, then back to the other. I cheated a little, down in Phoenix a little more in the winter, a little more Colorado in the summer. I flew my Piper Comanche 250 back and forth, with a hangar in Grand Junction and a sun cover at Deer Valley airport north of Phoenix.

I left the oppressive heat of the Phoenix valley just before midnight one Friday headed home to Colorado. I knew it was iffy about getting all the way home due to a huge storm coming in from the west, but any progress out of that heat was a welcome relief. I loved flying at night. In the west, due to the compacted large cities and vast darkness in between, navigation was a breeze. After leaving the blinding lights of the metro valley, ahead of me was mostly darkness with twinkling of lights here and there against the velvet black blanket of night.

A ribbon of white lights in one direction and red in the other came up on the horizon as I neared Interstate 40 near Winslow, Arizona. I sang the obligatory "Standing on a corner in Winslow, Arizona, such a fine site to see. It's a girl my Lord in a flatbed Ford, slowing done to take a look at me. Take it easy." Then mostly darkness as I passed the four corner meeting place of Arizona, Utah, New Mexico, and Colorado.

As I neared Lone Cone, the western most peak of the San Juan Mountains just north of Delores, Colorado and just west of Telluride, a lightning show lit up the northwest sky and destroyed my night vision. I had Montrose, Colorado as an option, and sleepy little Delta, but I was less than an hour out and thought I just might outrace that storm to my home base of Grand Junction, Colorado.

The lightning intensified as I closed in on the navigation aid 15 miles southwest of the Grand Junction airport. I was now in light rain. I put the nose down, keeping the RPMs just under the red and still in the green on the tachometer. I needed down, and now. I knew carb icing was a possibility and pulled full carb heat. As the airspeed indicator neared the red warning marker, I reduced power and made a slight right turn taking me over the small settlement of Whitewater, then slight left for a direct route to GJT, Grand Junction.

No need for communication. The tower closed hours ago, and no one else was stupid enough to be in my airspace. As the rain intensified, I made a direct approach to runway 29. While I thought it not possible, the rain came down with even more force. The white runway lights were still faintly visible, but the blue taxiway light had faded into the denseness of the rain.

I went through an abbreviated checklist in my mind, just enough to get me down safely, carb heat still on, gear down, one notch of flaps, landing light, fly the plane. I quickly turned the

landing lights off. The rain was so hard that the light just reflected immediately back into my eyes.

The wind was gusty, but thankfully straight down the runway against me, reducing my ground speed and aiding in my landing. As I touched down, I could see the white glow of runway lights off my left wing, but obliterated by the rain to the front of me and to the right. My landing was followed by a very short roll. Even though the plane was dead stopped on the runway, the fierce winds shook the wings like a toy.

I inched forward, less than walking speed, with the runway lights just off my left wingtip, waiting for an opening trimmed in blue taxiway lights. After an indeterminate time, I just stopped the plane right there on the runway and fully realized what a stupid risk I had taken, and how lucky I had been to be here, right on the runway, unable to see my way off, just listening to the thunder of the rain against the metal of my trusty airborne steed.

I put the parking brake on and closed my eyes as the rain and wind continued to chastise me. The chortle of the idling engine was now beginning to make its way heard over the rain against metal. While it was still raining hard, I could now see the blue taxiway lights forcing their way through the night. I taxied very slowly to the most northeast hanger, home for my every dependable bird.

I would love to tell you how my incredible flying skills saved my life, but the facts are that I put myself in unnecessary danger just to get home one day earlier. Risk to reward? Not very damn good.

So, it is my hope that you the pilot, and you the potential passenger, will spend a night in a motel and get there a day later. Grand Junction was still the next day. I checked.