

CLOSE CALLS IN FLYING

POINTS OF DANGER THAT COME TO ALL AVIATORS.

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As swiftly as it had come the danger had passed, the machine had righted herself, and after what seemed a whole lifetime of uncertainty in the very presence of death itself I opened my eyes, to find myself sailing easily away on an even keel, safe, alive and thanking God for it.

I looked beneath me and I saw that the mechanics were gazing up at me with no idea of what I had just passed through. Mac, however, looked as white as a ghost. He knew.

Naturally my nerves were about gone. My heart was thumping like a trip hammer and I could scarcely get my breath from the excitement. But I made up my mind that Mac was not going to see me quit, so as though I had intended just what happened, I went sailing away to the far side of the ground and came back again in wide, easy, sweeping curves that landed me at the feet of my excited partner in perfect style.

I did not fly again that day. My other narrow escape was the result of a fluke, and I was saved by a fluke. To this day I have not been able to figure out why either of the flukes happened.

I was practicing at Beaulieu, for height altitude work had attracted me from the beginning, and I practiced constantly. In fact I had several times exceeded the world's record for height as it stood then, but could not claim it officially, as I used my own barograph and aneroid, and the flights were made with Mac and the mechanics as the only watchers.

On this day I went up toward evening. It was one of those gray days with a thin mist over everything, and a damp feeling in the air suggested an impending fog. I should have known better than to attempt to climb under such conditions, but I was keyed up to it and I did not want to put it off.

The mechanics turned the propeller over and I was off. The engine was running with that smooth purring that is music to the ears of an aviator and the machine seemed to mount without the slightest effort.

I went up in big circles, a mile or more in diameter, perhaps, as I got into the thinner air I paid more attention to managing the aeroplane. I doubt if I looked down toward the earth once after I passed a height of 2,000 feet.

Without any incident whatever I climbed to something like 6,000 feet, which was then above the record, and was debating whether to try for any more altitude with the darkness of evening gathering, when my engine began to sputter and miss in a way that sounded as though there were no more gasoline in the tank.

This, however, I knew could not be the cause of the trouble. The tank had been well filled before I started and there must have been enough to last me another hour at least.

What the trouble was I have never ascertained, but I felt the power beginning to give out and I showed my steering post forward just about in time to get the machine's nose pointed down when the engine stopped entirely. There was nothing for it but to plane down and get as near back home as possible.

With the machine pointed right for a long spiral glide, I looked below to get my bearings and that is where I got my first fright. The mists had gathered so thickly that I could not see a single glimpse of the earth. There was nothing below me but a billowy sea of clouds, impenetrable to the eye.

I blamed myself in picturesque and forcible language for my folly in not taking more careful note of my position on the upward climb. Now it was too late.

I had not the slightest idea what part of the country I was over or in which direction I was headed.

I might have taken my bearings from the glow of the setting sun, but I had all I could do to take care of the machine, rushing downward through space as I was at the rate of seventy miles an hour or more. I thought of nothing except the steering and instinctively tried to keep her going in a general way in about the same wide circles that I had followed on my journey up.

Soon I entered the clouds and began to catch glimpses of the earth. I thought I saw something that looked like one of the buildings on our grounds and I steered accordingly, aiming to plane down so as to have plenty of room in the open land that stretched for miles away from the hangars.

Suddenly the mists seemed to clear away completely, or rather I seemed to plunge through them and get into the ordinary atmosphere of the earth's surface. And there I got my second and really great fright.

Instead of seeing beneath me the broad, smooth, clear lands of our aviation grounds, as I had confidently expected, there was nothing but trees—trees, trees as far as the eye could reach. I seemed to be directly over the heart of a limitless wood.

To land in the branches meant certain wreck. I had no power in the engine to give me a chance to look about me for an opening. There was nothing for it but to plunge down among the forest giants and trust to luck that the wreck of the machine would not cut me up badly and that my fall from the top of whatever tree I landed in would leave my features in good enough shape for identification at the inquest.

Without knowing just why I did it, but in an instinctive attempt to gain time, I took a deep swoop downward and then desperate to advance the aeroplane's nose upward to coast as high as the momentum would take me and search for a clearing in this momentary respite.

I plunged downward for a hundred feet at a terrific rate, then at the moment of turning up my heart nearly stopped beating as I heard a choking cough from the engine, then another, then another, and suddenly the br-r-r-r of the cylinders as the explosions came with full force, and the propeller, getting its grip on the air, put on all its power, and I climbed safely away from the treetops, everything working perfectly and once more in control of a safe and efficient piece of machinery.

My relief was so great that I was almost tempted to start climbing again, but it was rapidly getting dark, and I had no idea where I was. So I sailed to the ground until I recognized some houses over the edge of the wood. I was more than twenty miles from home, but with the engine working smoothly the trip back was mere child's play, and I was soon on the ground again, being alternately cursed and hugged by Mac, while the mechanics trundled the Bleriot to the hangar.

They are never pleasant to talk about, these narrow escapes. It is best to forget about them as soon after they have occurred as possible, for they get on the nerves and things that get on the nerves are not good in aviation.

It has always struck me as odd that the general public does not seem to realize this. I mean by that that most people seem to think that a man who flies likes to talk about these thrilling moments, and

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