

Flying Carpet

In search of lost time

Where the heck is my watch? I wondered, upon checking my wrist for the time. I was dining with fellow columnist Rod Machado, his wife Diane, and two of their friends at an outdoor cafe in Palm Springs, California. We had joined pilots from all over the country to attend AOPA Expo, the pilot association's annual convention.

"So Greg," said Rod, continuing a conversation in progress, "how was your flight from Phoenix yesterday?"

"Very pleasant," I replied, massaging my empty wrist. "I arrived early to avoid the heaviest fly-in traffic. It can be a real hornet's nest the afternoon before the program starts."

"I've often dodged those hornets myself," said Rod. "Any delays?"

"None at all," I replied. "I just joined the published arrival procedure and followed the freeway in—no circling was required. I suspect it was tougher late in the day." We proceeded to swap aviator stories with Rod and Diane's friends. Ian, an American Airlines pilot, told of his days flying in Alaska. Jason, an author and internationally renowned professional magician, recounted adventures flying his twin-engine Piper Aerostar. Earlier, over appetizers, he'd dazzled the group with mystifying card tricks.

Even as flying yarns circled the table, my thoughts kept returning to the missing watch. It wasn't valuable, but I liked it and the data bank held important phone numbers. Particularly disturbing was that I'd lost a set of keys earlier that morning. Ultimately I'd found them in the side pocket of my suitcase, but I had no recollection of placing them there. Now I'd lost my watch. *Hopefully I'm not developing memory problems*, I found myself worrying. *I must ask my wife if she's noticed any other symptoms*. Attempting to banish such concerns from my mind, I returned to my friends' ongoing conversation, saying nothing of my loss.

"Did I tell you about flying into Long Beach for the last West Coast Expo two years ago?" I asked.

"No," said Rod. "Did you have some 'close encounters' there?"

"On the contrary," I replied, laughing. "The place was deserted when I landed."

"Where was everybody?" asked Rod. "I drove that year since Long Beach is near my home."

I explained how Long Beach Airport had been shrouded in low stratus the morning Expo began, so I'd filed an instrument flight plan for the flight from Phoenix—a special reservation was required due to anticipated heavy fly-in traffic. When I called for my instrument clearance before takeoff, however, I learned that all IFR traffic into Southern California was on indefinite ground hold because of a communications failure at Los Angeles Center. What's more, if I departed under visual flight rules I'd lose my IFR reservation. With Long Beach weather forecast to remain low all day that could be a problem.

While I sat pondering this at the run-up area, ominous clouds could be seen developing on the horizon. Although VFR at the moment, Arizona had been inundated by thunderstorms the past few days, with more expected that afternoon. Waiting might mean getting grounded overnight, not to mention the likely mess when all those delayed IFR airplanes in surrounding states were released for takeoff at the same time.

"A tough decision," said Jason. "What did you do?"

"Ultimately I took off VFR anyway. I figured that even if my destination remained IFR and I couldn't get a clearance, I could always land somewhere inland and rent a car for the last hundred miles. That would still beat driving seven hours from Phoenix if thunderstorms trapped me there later in the day. Of course immediately after takeoff I started asking controllers for an IFR to Long Beach. Phoenix Departure said 'no'; so did Albuquerque Center. But then a funny thing happened near the Colorado River."

"What was that?" asked Diane.

"Upon switching to Los Angeles Center for flight following, I assumed my politest radio voice and said, 'I know it's probably impossible, but is there any way I could get an instrument clearance to Long Beach?'"

"Sure!" replied the LA controller without hesitation. 'You're cleared present position direct to Long Beach.' As it turned out, the communications outage was between flight service computers and ATC. Although flight plans filed through flight service were inaccessible to controllers, air filing was no problem. With few aircraft flying because of the glitch, controllers routed me straight through the normally crowded LA airspace to what's usually one of the nation's busiest fly-ins."

Pausing for a moment to check my pockets—the watch wasn't there, either—I then described how the *Flying Carpet* was one of only two aircraft worked by SoCal Approach upon arrival, and how three vans converged to greet me at the otherwise-empty tie-down area. "I rode one of those big shuttle buses to the convention center," I gloated, "and chatted with the driver all the way downtown. I was the only rider!"

None of my companions had experienced such a VIP arrival to an AOPA convention, but even as they mused at the unusual experience my thoughts returned to the missing timepiece. Mentally I retraced my steps, visualizing the table where I'd eaten lunch and the bathroom I'd visited afterwards—perhaps I had removed the watch while brushing my teeth.

That train of thought was momentarily interrupted when Jason produced his deck of cards and began more magic tricks. By now, however, I was so preoccupied with the lost item that I couldn't pay full attention. Having revisited all other events of the day, I suddenly remembered I had been wearing my watch while entering the very restaurant where we now dined—being first to arrive I'd checked it while awaiting my companions.



“Wait a minute!” I blurted, interrupting a card trick. Everyone looked at me. “Jason, did you take my watch?”

“Are you accusing me of something?” answered the magician, soberly.

“No, but...” Slowly Jason’s lips transformed from the downward curl of perceived insult to the lilt of a devilish grin. “What does your watch look like?” he asked. I described it: the black band with buckle, the silver face, and the red ring in the bezel.

Jason glanced sideward, and subconsciously my attention was diverted toward Rod sitting next to him. For a moment I thought my fellow columnist was angry with me for insulting his friend—he wore an uncharacteristically blank expression and rested a knuckle under his chin. But then my eyes scanned slowly downward from his face. There, on Rod Machado’s wrist, was my watch. How Jason got it there I don’t know, but apparently there’s more than one kind of magic to being a pilot.

Greg Brown was the 2000 National Flight Instructor of the Year. His latest book, Flying Carpet: The Soul of an Airplane, has just been released. Greg’s other works include The Savvy Flight Instructor, The Turbine Pilot’s Flight Manual, and Job Hunting for Pilots. Visit his Web site www.gregbrownflyingcarpet.com.

By Greg Brown

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