



**SUNSET ILLUMINATES** an isolated snowshower over Sedona, Arizona.

## FICKLE SNOW

### LITTLE ROOM FOR ERROR

**D**ark clouds fringed the western sky when I departed Prescott. With appointments to make, I'd monitored the weather all day. Our home airport of Flagstaff Pulliam expected gradually lowering ceilings after 6 p.m., and snow beginning after 8. I picked up Jean in Scottsdale at 4:30, later than I'd hoped, but a tailwind promised to hurry us home in under an hour.

Our destination still reported clear skies when we took off, as did all stations along our route, but those ominous clouds approached relentlessly from the west. Williams, 40 miles west of Flagstaff, reported VFR in light snow. In any case, we carried plenty of fuel to land at Sedona, Cottonwood, or Winslow—or return to Scottsdale.

Halfway home over the Verde Valley, I noted shades of green threatening Flagstaff on the datalink weather display. Little precipitation was likely reaching the ground, but this was unexpectedly early. Then the tint changed to pink. Snow! I told Jean we might be driving a rental car home from Sedona tonight.

“But we’ll arrive well before 6,” said Jean, taking the forecast literally. “Surely, we’ll beat the weather.” Maybe she was right. Flagstaff still reported good visual flying conditions: clouds at 2,400 broken, 6,000 overcast, and nine miles visibility in light snow.

Nearing Sedona, we heard Albuquerque Center clear an aircraft for Flagstaff’s instrument landing system. That’s a popular training approach, so I asked the controller whether he’d issued it for practice or for “real weather.”

“Flagstaff is still reporting VFR,” he replied, “but the last two pilots landing there thought a visual approach would be sketchy, so both shot the ILS.” These were

turbine aircraft descending from the flight levels, however, so they’d need to penetrate the overcast while we approached from underneath. Sedona soon sparkled delightfully beneath us, crowned with a solitary snow flurry illuminated by the setting sun. Ahead, the distant horizon bisected an inviting if faraway sliver of sky beyond the overcast.

It’s always a bit discomfoting flying under a cloud ceiling onto the plateau. Here you are cruising comfortably under a high overcast, and the ground suddenly rises up to squeeze you. Confirming as we approached that the ceiling indeed floated a healthy 2,500 feet above the plateau, I took momentary leave from Center and radioed Flagstaff Tower that I was seven minutes south and requesting the trend.

“The weather’s definitely deteriorating, but we’re still decent VFR, especially to the south where you’re coming from. If it’s a matter of just seven minutes you should be in good shape.” Retrieving instrument charts for backup, I advised Albuquerque that we’d proceed visually to Flagstaff with Sedona as our alternate. Topping the plateau, we intercepted Interstate 17, which would lead us directly to the airport and ensure terrain clearance. Flight conditions remained excellent, so I said goodbye to Center. “Be safe!” said the controller as we cruised blithely homeward.

“Shouldn’t we see the runway by now?” Jean asked a few moments later. Sure enough, the GPS revealed that despite seemingly good visibility, we couldn’t discern the airport just eight miles away. We couldn’t see it at five miles, either—just two minutes out. Hazy snow flurries apparently cloaked our destination.

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I considered shooting the ILS, but didn't relish climbing into potentially ice-laden clouds—doing so would consume valuable time and the weather might get worse before we got back. Nope, we'd best return to Sedona. Before I could turn, Flagstaff's runway dimly filled our windshield.

"You're cleared to land, Runway 21," said the control tower. "Winds are 210 degrees at 14 knots, gusting to 20." Flight visibility was obviously nowhere near the reported nine miles. I could barely see the approach end of Runway 21, and momentarily considered requesting a closer dogleg base to Runway 3. But for the whopping tailwind, that'd be far preferable to losing sight of the field on downwind. The tower controller must have read my mind.

"Visibility looks as good or better at the northeast end of the runway," he casually remarked, so I joined the downwind for Runway 21. To ensure keeping the runway in sight I flew abnormally close

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and turned base hardy beyond the end. That took planning and concentration. Instrument pilots learn that flying a tight circling approach in low visibility radically skews normal visual and procedural cues. Accordingly, I conserved airspeed and altitude through my base and final turns.

Jean let out a "Yippee" as we landed at home. I thanked the controller for his contagious calmness and invaluable pattern-visibility call. Then we heard him tell the approaching airplane behind us, "We're changing the recorded weather to three miles visibility," before switching frequencies.

"That was exciting!" said Jean, and asked for my thought process through

our final moments of flight. Although I'd handled the situation safely, answers were hard to come by. Yes, there'd been caution signs, but I thought I'd addressed them effectively.

The weather had been benign until we entered the traffic pattern. Had I committed too quickly to land? Would turning around have been safer? Despite seemingly careful and conservative planning, unexpected last-second decisions had left little room for error. How cautious we pilots must be. And how fickle is snow! 🌨️

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