



THE FLYING CARPET anxiously awaits better weather.

FOGBOUND AWAITING BLUE SKIES

It was one of those awful stories you assume happens only to other people: Jean and her sister Jo were chatting by phone after Thanksgiving, when they suddenly realized their mom hadn't returned their holiday phone messages. They contacted their mother's residential community manager, who discovered the unfortunate woman lying in her bathroom where she'd fallen on Thanksgiving Day—five days earlier. Jean jumped into her car and drove two hours to intercept her mother at a Phoenix emergency room.

When Jean returned home four days later, she was clearly shaken. Her mother had suffered serious injuries, and even if she survived it was questionable whether she could continue to live on her own. We arranged to temporarily park a car at Glendale Airport for easy hospital access via *Flying Carpet*. Jean asked me to fly her there a few days later when Jo arrived from Illinois, so the two could rendezvous at the hospital.

Sunday morning we awoke to rare ground fog in Flagstaff. I filed an instrument flight rules (IFR) flight plan and told Jean to expect a takeoff delay. However, she was eager to go, so we hurried out the door. Only at the airport did we realize how dense the fog was; we could barely see past the first tie-down row. The sun

dimly shone through, however, with occasional patches of bluish sky.

"How long until this lifts?" asked Jean.

"Who knows?" I shrugged. "Maybe 45 minutes?" We pulled out the airplane, preflighted, and waited.

"You filed IFR. Why can't we take off?"



LOW STRATUS clouds linger just beyond the airport boundary at takeoff.

Jean asked. It was a reasonable question. Since ground fog occurs under narrow atmospheric conditions, it rarely afflicts widespread areas here in the mountains, as it can in flatter country. When fog shrouds a given airport, others at differing elevations or terrain are likely clear. Indeed, if we could just escape the ground there were plenty of fair-weather alternates, including nearby Sedona Airport. Still, Flagstaff's poor visibility precluded returning to land in case of problems. And at takeoff speed we'd outstrip our field of vision—by the time we saw, say, an elk on the runway, it would be too late to stop. Better to wait.

I phoned the control tower to ask if the fog was lighter elsewhere on the airport.

"Visibility is under a quarter-mile in every direction due to low morning sun," said the controller. Jean was increasingly agitated, but I felt no rush; after all, her sister would be staying for a week. To kill time, I strolled to where Pat Kelley keeps his kit-built Vans RV-6A.

"I intended to fly to Grand Canyon Airport this morning for breakfast with the 'airport slugs,'" Pat explained, "but it could be lunchtime before the fog lifts. I'm getting hungry and think I'll drive into town instead." Walking back, I noticed the airport beacon tower materializing out of the mist.

"Let's crank up and head for the runway," I told Jean. "If necessary we'll shut down and wait a little longer at the end."

I started the engine, collected the automated weather, and requested "taxi for takeoff. Please hold our IFR clearance request until..." While transmitting I looked up in preparation to taxi—to my astonishment the fog had mostly dissipated in those few seconds, with just a trace remaining at the takeoff end of

the runway! Without releasing the mic button I changed my tune to “No, wait a minute, we request our clearance now.” By the time we reached the runway, the tower had updated the recorded weather from “low IFR in fog” to “clear and 10 miles visibility.”

“Hold for IFR release,” said the tower. I momentarily considered canceling my instrument flight plan and taking off under visual rules to avoid delays. But reduced visibilities were still possible nearby. We’d await our clearance, just in case.

“Cleared for takeoff,” said the tower. Sure enough, low stratus lingered beyond the airport boundary, but not enough to impede visual flying.

“I hope Pat gets to fly to breakfast,” I commented upon leveling in blue skies. Only then did Jean reveal that because of our belated takeoff, she’d miss a scheduled 11 a.m. doctor’s consultation regarding her mom’s status.

“You never mentioned that appointment,” I said, surprised given its importance.

“There was no point adding pressure when you felt it was unsafe to take off,” she replied. “I’ll reschedule after we land.” No wonder I married that girl!

Fickle fog works both ways. With Jean’s mom improving, I decided a few evenings later to practice night landings. The airport reported clear skies, but with a slim temperature/dew point spread and fog forecast after 8 p.m. That was still two hours away, so I figured I had time for three quick landings. Besides, if I saw fog forming I could just land, right? Haze enveloped a nearby street lamp when I backed out of the garage a few minutes later, so I phoned the airport’s automated weather system. The field now reported a few clouds at 400 feet; within minutes it deteriorated to “indefinite ceiling 100 feet in fog.” Even one circuit around the pattern might have gotten me into trouble. 🧐

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