

There are several lessons to be learned from the following article

- a. Just because the weather is good at your departure point doesn't mean it will be good along your route of flight.
- b. Flying over the top of a cloud deck is not a good idea.
- c. If the ceiling/visibility is 1000/3 that's technically VFR. Is that really OK weather for a cross country destination?
- d. Finally: If you are the only pilot in the aircraft, neither the dispatcher, the boss, your flight instructor, or even the Chief Flight Instructor is the Pilot In Command. YOU are the pilot in command! (even if you only have 10 hours of flight time)

Never Again Online: New York City Fog

By Nick Carroll

I was a 100-hour private pilot working on my commercial and instrument ratings in 1967.

It was New Year's Day, and my wife and I had flown to Morristown, New Jersey, in a rented Cessna 150 for a New Year's Eve celebration the night before. I didn't drink at the party knowing that I'd be flying home the next morning so, amazingly, I was totally sober during the following series of mistakes.

The weather was absolutely clear with unlimited visibility at Morristown, and I could distinctly see the New York City skyline. We would be flying to Deer Park Airport on Long Island. Mistake number one was departing on the northbound flight without a weather briefing.

As we flew east of Manhattan, I realized there was a solid undercast. A broad carpet of clouds ran north and south across Long Island, just east of LaGuardia Airport (LGA). I flew over the top for about 10 minutes hoping for a break to descend through, but the

cloud deck looked like it stretched all the way to Europe. I returned to the clear area south of LGA and decided to attempt to fly home underneath it.

That didn't work, either. I needed to go well below 1,000 feet to stay clear of the clouds, and visibility was well below three miles. I then made the only intelligent decision of the day by landing VFR at Flushing Airport (now closed, but right next to LGA). I called the chief pilot and owner of the Deer Park flight school and told him what had happened, and said I'd return to Flushing to bring and complete the trip to Deep Park the next day when the weather improved.

He told me that the weather at Deer Park was "a good 1,000 and three," the VFR minimum requirement for ceiling and visibility, and that I should get back in the airplane and overfly Southern State Parkway to Deer Park Avenue, and then turn north to the airport. Since he was clearly the superior pilot in terms of experience, skill, ratings, and hours, I made mistake number two: I followed his advice.

As we flew below the overcast along Southern State Parkway, I was able to stay 600 or 700 feet above the ground, and I could see a reasonable distance ahead. Suddenly, a stream of extremely bright flashing lights flowing left to right appeared in the windshield almost immediately ahead. I instantly realized this was short final to Runway 13 at John F. Kennedy International airport. Mistake number three was not making a 180-degree turn and returning to Flushing. Instead, I figured that if I got right down on the deck, any arriving aircraft would pass safely above me. If I had ever heard of wake turbulence, it didn't enter my thought process at the time.

We passed east of the lights and climbed back up to about 500 feet remaining just below the cloud base. A few minutes later, a radio or TV tower appeared out of the mist ahead. I racked into a very steep left turn and missed the tower. I then figured I should slow down and give myself a chance to see and avoid other tall obstacles. I put in 10 degrees of flaps and slowed to 65 miles an hour. By then we were down to about 300 feet agl to stay clear of the clouds, and I could read exit signs on the Southern State Parkway.

Eventually, I spotted the Deep Park exit, followed it north, and came to the airport. Sure enough, the weather over the airport was 1,000 and three, just as the chief pilot had said. I landed uneventfully, parked the airplane, got out, and became violently ill. It felt like I lost everything I had eaten in the last three days. I tied the airplane down, crawled into the back of our car and stayed there while my wife drove us home.

I learned from this misadventure never to let someone else override my responsibility as pilot in command—regardless of their level of skill or experience. The lesson served me very well in my future career as an airline pilot and flight instructor.

Nick Carroll is retired from airline flying, holds commercial land and seaplane ratings, and is an active flight instructor.