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CLIF SIMONSON

Enjoys a Lifelong
Love Affair
with Aviation

In the face of an engine failure, Clif finds he has the “right stuff”



by Neil Myers

You're flying along the Southern California coast after a beautiful summer day with your family. It is 6:30 p.m. in late July, clear and a million. From your perch at 4,000 feet, you marvel at the miracle of flight. The wife is relaxed and enjoying the view, your kids are asleep in the back.

Life is good.

Then it happens: The engine is suddenly and unambiguously rough. You adjust the mixture to no avail and now the plane shakes enough that you fear you may have lost a prop tip. You pull the throttle all the way back to stop the shaking and the engine begins to backfire noisily. As you look ahead you see that you're about to enter an area of complete undercast.

Will you have the “right stuff” to handle the emergency? It is at times like this that every minute you've spent flying – every lesson – every instructor – combine to determine your fate. The next five minutes depend on your last 25 years.

Photo: Neil Myers



According to his mother, Clif Simonson's love of flight came early. "We took a family trip to the Seattle World's Fair in 1962," said Simonson. "We flew on a TWA Constellation – a four-engine piston prop the airlines used to fly. It was one of the most graceful airliners ever built, and the pilots who flew them were grizzled veterans of an earlier era. According to Mom, I bonded with aviation right there and then."

From his earliest memories he was fascinated with flight. "My uncle had a flight school and I was a line boy," said Clif. "I would make some money, fly a little, and have to make some more money. Eventually I got my license."

His love affair with aviation continued through college, where many of Clif's friends were also pilots. Clif remembered, "A fellow line boy convinced me to come to Chico State. We had a gang of aviation buffs. I remember once all flying to the Reno Air Races, sitting by the pylons drinking beer and having fun. They all became airline pilots, but my Dad was killed in an accident and I had to come home to help with the family business."

He continued with his flying passion, logging countless flights in the 1980s. "My college roommate came back and we started hanging out. We would rent anything we could get our hands on – Decathlon, Citabria, Cub, Great Lakes, and Pitts. I lived on a ranch and we graded a dirt strip. It had a unique approach between two oak trees and adjacent to the irrigation stanchion. On departure, you had to stay low to get through a whole row of trees and gain airspeed before clearing the ridge. There is nothing like a dirt strip to improve your skills."

Clif never missed an opportunity to combine his love of flight with business. He used to fly an old 152 from his home to an oil well he maintained in Bakersfield. "I would

fly up the canyons. I got real good at that route! In bad weather it was a little hairy. It was an excellent transition from aerobatic to mountain flying."

In the mid 1980's Clif sold his father's business and started Bentley-Simonson (BSI), an independent oil and gas producer. While Clif may have been disappointed in not finding a job in aviation after college, things haven't worked out that badly. Today BSI is one of the fastest growing independent oil and gas producers in the State of California. And the high fuel prices that have contributed to hard times in the aviation business have only helped Clif afford to pursue his passion for flight.

By the end of 2002 Simonson had flown more than 50 different planes but had never owned one. While at AOPA he took a demo flight in a SR-22 and loved it. "My first landing was a greaser. I was a hooked!"

There was only one challenge, however. "My wife told me she loved the Cirrus – but – she didn't want to become a hangar widow. No waxing, washing, changing oil, etc. She laid down the law – with a business, a wife and kids the plane would come fourth – a distant fourth."

Simonson started looking for a solution. "A partnership was out. I was a partner in a boat once and I hated it – I did all the work! A friend of mine calls it the terrorism of ownership." Along the way Clif ran across OurPlane, a perfect solution to his dilemma.

"OurPlane is not really a fractional program; it is more like a time-share. I might have received a better tax break with ownership, but I love not being an owner. There are up-front maintenance and hourly fees. I don't have to worry about annuals, oil changes, etc."

While waiting for "his" plane to arrive Clif began transition training with an OurPlane aircraft from Orange County. "It worked out that

my training was all at night and in bad weather in and around class Bravo airspace. I took my brother-in-law up for one lesson and he told me later he had to turn off the headsets because he was having an anxiety attack. It was excellent training!"

Today Clif has 800 hours TT in more than 50 aircraft. He flies a brand new Cirrus SR-22 G2. All of which came to bear on a summer evening along the California coastline.



Clif described his quick reaction to his lost engine. "I let center know I had a rough engine and declared an emergency. As luck would have it, I was two miles north of Torrance and had the airport in sight (it was just on the VMC side of the fringe of the stratus). I had the altitude, clearance and airspeed to easily make the field."

Clif continued, "The tower cleared me to land on any runway. I pulled the cover off the CAPS, made a fighter pilot breaking and sweeping left turn and made, at least according to my wife, a perfect landing. The airport fire department chased me down as I coasted off the runway and I then had enough power to taxi clear, backfiring gray smoke (according to the Torrance Fire Department folks) all the way."

In the end, a broken fuel line turned out to be the culprit. But luckily for Clif and his family, a lifetime spent flying – with taildraggers, aerobatics, single, multi and even glass cockpits – made this emergency a non-event. And maybe, just maybe, a little bit of the "right stuff" from an earlier era of aviation rubbed off on Clif all those years ago in the TWA Constellation.

Clif Simonson can be found most days on COPA as "Fidodogm" – a name his daughter gave him when testing her typing skills at six years of age.

