



WHY I FLY

Three arms, and a poet's soul

By Pat Malone

It remains vivid in my mind's eye, as though it happened this afternoon; but I see from my log book it was twenty-three years ago. March 13, 1985, G-KAFC, C152, Pu/t, Biggin to Biggin, 1:30 dual, 1:20 instrument flying. Instructor: Peter Cosker.

Peter Cosker! My heart quails still. I would approach the front door of King Air Flying Club hoping and hoping I'd been rostered with Gordon King, or Cyril Knight – easygoing, *understanding* chaps – but it would be Peter Cosker who would advance on me, rubbing his hands, his mad professor hair askew, smiling the smile of the man who *enjoys* tormenting small animals. "Ah, the student!" he would exclaim. "On time! And have you learned the lesson?" Woe unto the unfortunate who hadn't.

Peter had, I believe, been head of the maths department in some secondary school and could do quadratic equations in his head. He had little patience for the dunderhead who couldn't work out a *simple crosswind component* while struggling down finals on a choppy day. And he had – this is true, I swear – three arms. Two were in plain view, the other was off somewhere tampering with circuit breakers or meddling with the mixture. But I hear can his voice now, repeating his mantras,

especially when I'm neglecting my checks or I'm about to do something bad. "We don't do that at King Air!" It's a rare and precious talent to be able to make a man feel guilty at a distance of 23 years.

And he had the poetry in his soul. I turned up on one grey day with eight octas of overcast and we flew up through it to find the tops about 3,000 feet, brilliant white, unbroken and flat as a football field. Far to the south was a little bubble of white in the blue. "Heat from Shoreham Power Station," Peter said. We porpoised in and out of the clouds, looking back to see the tip vortices curling behind us, and laughed like idiots while far below, the earthlings complained about the weather.

On this day I had to make up some instrument time for my PPL. We took the hood even though there was a lot of IMC about and we might not need it much. "Let's do it properly," Peter would say. It was not an easy sortie. Turns, climbs, descents, slow flying, the constant effort of fighting to relax... After fifty minutes of sensory deprivation I had long since given up tracking my whereabouts. Peter decided I needed a break. "Okay, set up a descent. We'll simulate an approach and go quite low this time. We're in a clear area."

Top: Same place, another day - still the province only of those who fly

The descent went on and on. We seemed to break cloud, but all below was still grey. Finally, at around 100 feet, Peter said: "Level off here. I have control – take off the hood and have a rest." I did so, and emerged in another world, a world so strange that I was utterly lost in it. Below, a serrated slate grey, and it moved. Above, the grey and white of the clouds. To my right, a wall of white. I became aware of a sudden slash of red as my brain put it all together. A lighthouse. We were about a mile off Beachy Head, suspended between sky and sea. Grey waves, white rocks, and the little Cessna humming contentedly around us. Peter was looking at me, waiting for my reaction. He was grinning, and I was grinning. We grinned all the way along the Seven Sisters and said nothing, because there was nothing to be said. After five minutes Peter finally piped up. "Well, you're paying for this – better get your money's worth. Hood on." And he tormented me all the way home.

After the debrief I went back to the office.

"Been flying?" asked one of my colleagues.

"Yes," I said. And I thought briefly of trying to describe it, but didn't. What would you say?

I can close my eyes now and be a mile off Beachy Head on a grey day, and I can see the black interior of Fox Charlie, the blue of the artificial horizon, the orange of the cowl, and Peter Cosker's wide grin under his mad professor hair. I knew then that I would always find solace and refuge in flying, in the good times and the bad, and I was absolutely right.

KAFC (King Air Flying Club, geddit) came to a sticky end, blown over and written off in the 1987 storm. It was a good aircraft. I remember it well. ■

New regular feature

Many readers comment favourably on *General Aviation* magazine but say that when they're finished reading it they want to slit their wrists. So as a counterbalance to the gloom and doom we present "Why I fly," a new and hopefully regular feature which helps us remember why we put up with all the hassle in the first place. If you'd like to contribute, email pat@richmondaviation.co.uk.