

ep-4-on-top-of-a-fault-line

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00:01 Enid Otun: Hello, and welcome to the fourth episode of If Women were meant to fly, the sky would be pink. On Top of A Fault Line. I'm Enid Otun. This episode, I'm carrying out my long cross-country flight to Palm Springs. I realise that I need additional help with my instrument rating theory, as well as my mental health, and I also receive my first flying assignment as a qualified commercial pilot.

[music]

01:04 EO: It's a Sunday morning, and instead of venturing out to the beach or into the city, I've decided to take advantage of a slow training day at the airport and start to plan the first of my long cross-country flights. Destination: Palm Springs, a city in the Sonoran Desert of Southern California, southeast of Los Angeles. Known for its hot springs, golf courses, a favourite haunt of crooners like Bob Hope, my mother's favorite singer after Bing Crosby, and as hot as hell. Up until then, I'd been honing my skills as a prospective instrument-rated pilot with good success. Practice was going well, and I had been sent off to explore the rest of California on my own. I'd also graduated to the Cessna 172, a high-wing, four-seater aircraft, much like the smaller Cessna 152 trainer in layout, but carried more fuel in the wings, was slightly faster and roomier, but essentially had the same layout. I started to get more adventurous with my flying and head out for the south to places like Salinas in Monterey, which is on the coast south of San Francisco. Another favourite was Placerville to the east.

02:10 EO: My planned route, yet to be approved by my instructor, was direct to Palm Springs, using Fresno and/or Bakersfield as possible field stops, if necessary. The plan was to leave early morning and be back in San Carlos before nightfall. Planning such a trip for the first time was quite a rigmarole, but I've always been a very keen planner. I have very strict and meticulous packing rules even now when we go on holiday. My, how my family love that. But obviously, this skill is important when flying, and the consequences of not doing it could be the difference between life and death, and old habits die hard. I had planned cross-countries before, but this was pretty big.

02:49 EO: I sat in one of the empty flight planning booths, surrounded by my flight bag, maps, and planning sheets. I had memory cards for the frequencies I would need to contact air traffic control and weather forecast sheets. Obligatory fuel planning as well, making sure that I've calculated the correct fuel up-lifter, as well as contingency plans for alternative airports should the weather deteriorate or an emergency arise. With an expected cruising speed of 125 knots, I estimated a flight time of just over three-and-a-half hours over a distance of 356 nautical miles. I loved flying the Cessna 172. It was a natural step up from the two-seater trainer I'd done the vast majority of my flying in. And I was also lucky enough to be beginning some flight experience in the Cessna 172's big brother, the Cessna 172RG. RG stands for retractable gear, which means you can retract the gear to make it more streamlined and, therefore, a little bit faster. It would go on to become one of my favourite aircraft.

03:47 EO: Palm Springs was surrounded by rather interesting mountains and required a good amount of concentration getting into, not least of all a spiraling descent as part of the approach into

the airport. A spiraling approach in this instance was not as scary as it sounds. It simply required me to lose altitude in a smaller space as possible, keeping out of the way of high ground, which surrounded the airport. Its location made it susceptible to turbulence and wind shear, and as you quested the hills on a hot day. Hence, the plan to have an early morning stop. You didn't particularly want to arrive when the heat of the day was at its maximum. Well, I didn't anyway, not in a single-engine aircraft.

04:23 EO: Even though I'd learned lessons from my mistakes and become more comfortable as a pilot, I still had a more than healthy respect for flying. I was still prone to nerves, which had me doubting decisions and fear getting lost. But in spite of this, I had made considerable progress and was enjoying my partnership with Beth, my new instructor. As well as guiding me through this new phase of flying, she was also a very caring individual who was concerned about me as a person. And to this end, I had confided in her fairly early on about my life experiences. So, when I started to struggle with things, she'd kindly suggested I talk to an old friend of hers who was a counselor. He was different to most, as he preferred to talk with people in the great outdoors, places that were open and free, instead of the confines of any office. And although I was still slightly fearful of the outcome, I decided to accept her offer.

05:10 EO: For our first meeting, he travelled up to see me in San Mateo and we sat at the nearby park. First impressions were good and we got on well. He seemed an easy person to relate to, and there was no pressure to delve into the deepest recesses of my soul on the first meeting. We walked and talked and enjoyed being outdoors. These weekly meetings were to be the start of my learn-to-love-you journey, guided by someone who was to become a close friend and confidante, and be instrumental in guiding me through the next few years of self-healing.

[music]

05:48 EO: Meanwhile, back on the flying schedule, and I was pressing on with instrument training and ground school for the theory. Finding it difficult, I decided to do extra study with a home course to give me a boost for my exams. Remember, these were the days of cassettes and workbooks, but amazingly, it proved very helpful in the end. The day before my long cross-country and I was receiving final briefings, and it was forecast to be a lovely day with no expected weather along or near my route, I was told to have fun and above all enjoy myself. I'd have plenty of company during the flight in the guise of air traffic control through some of the busiest air space in California. I would always be talking to or listening in to someone. D-Day finally arrived and my spirits were high. After this was completed, I was home and dry as a commercial pilot.

06:34 EO: Registration N6669E, my favorite aircraft on the line, was waiting for me as I arrived. I'd managed to secure our newest Cessna 172 for my trip. She was pristine and her interior layout was very familiar to me. A quick "good morning" to our local air traffic controller, a recheck of the weather, and my usual pre-flight checks had me airborne and over the Redwood shores 15 minutes earlier than planned. Visibility was excellent as I climbed out and turned right to pick up a southerly heading. With Livermore off my left wingtip and a heading that would take me through San Jose's airspace, I climbed initially to 3500 feet, with very little wind to push me off course, but a slight headwind. I picked up Monterey off the west as Watsonville, a familiar destination, glided underneath. Climbing to 5000 feet, and I made good progress passing Salinas and Carmel, a couple

of other favorite airports.

07:27 EO: My San Francisco VFR sectional chart was soon to be replaced with my Los Angeles sectional chart, as I continued to make good progress, south to Palm Springs. A military operations area to my right to be aware of kept me on track, and a further climb to 7000 feet and higher kept me above high ground. Very soon I'd come overhead Bakersfield, paralleling the Sierra Nevada mountains. Weather and visibility was fine, conditions were smooth. As I approached Palm Springs just over three hours later, having seen Los Angeles pass by on my right wingtip, the heat had been building up and my spiral descent to Palm Springs became wild and bouncy. The 172 though handled it like a pro, and although I had a new approach to master, I'd gotten in ahead of the big birds and was therefore under no pressure for landing. I felt calm, but also elated. Everything had gone to plan, and I really enjoyed the flight.

08:19 EO: I plodded over to the Flight Center to request fuel and file a flight plan, as well as to stretch my legs. A quick coffee and a sandwich later, and I was heading back out to the flight line to sign for my fuel. No time to hang around there, a quick pre-flight and start-up clearance saw me back in the air about 45 minutes later. The only thing more bumpy than my arrival was my departure, as I slowly climbed to altitude, trying to keep the aircraft in check. Hitting constant updrafts, which are small currents of rising air, helped a lot with quick climb. But an updraft is always followed by a downdraft and that wasn't so much fun, trying to keep the aircraft at the correct speed.

08:54 EO: My nerves hadn't been an issue so far, and my continued confidence had grown on the inbound sector, having been kept busy with airmanship, tracking, radio calls and traffic. However, just east of Watsonville, parallel with the cruise mountain range and 40 miles south of San Carlos Airport, I was alerted to a higher than normal oil temperature reading with a lower than normal oil pressure reading. My heart sank. "Not now. Please, not now," I said out loud to myself. These combined readings could have signalled imminent engine failure and were an important part of a single-engine pilot's instrument scanning checklist. I continued to monitor the two gauges whilst preparing myself mentally for an emergency landing, if I couldn't reach an alternative airport. I'd just passed Hollister Airport, and my first thought was to turn 180 degrees and head for them. I couldn't really risk Salinas or Watsonville off my left wingtip as I had to cross a mountain range.

09:46 EO: San Jose, however, was ahead of me and was also an option, although a little bit further away. I reported a possible problem to air traffic control, who were waiting on my decision but very helpful. I glanced at the gauges again and again. One gauge I could risk as a sticky indication, but both were working in unison. In the end, I decided to continue on to San Jose's Reid-Hillview Airport and was given a straight-in approach runway 31 right. An uneventful landing, and I could finally breathe. I had the aircraft checked by an engineer, who gave me the all clear, and once again I was on my way back home. An uneventful return to San Carlos had resulted in a total of 7.8 hours of flight time, in spite of my detour, and a successful completed requirement along with a wealth of experience and a slightly nauseous feeling that I've been lucky this time. Confidence was high, and my fellow students welcomed me back essentially to glean as much information as possible for their own upcoming trips.

[music]

10:49 EO: There was still much to be done, and the following days would see me working diligently through my instrument work book along with my training cassettes numbered one to eight. I was working late that Monday night trying to get ahead of my schedule, when all of a sudden I felt what I thought was a floor move, thinking that I was tired and mistaken I ploughed on. But seconds later, the only way I can describe it was that the earth did move. It moved continuously, and I realised, "Oh, this might be an earthquake." I was very aware of San Francisco's earthquake history, tremors, etcetera, but I didn't actually expect to experience one. I wasn't sure what to do. All the helpful advice about what to do during an earthquake left me at that exact time, and I proceeded to race through the house screeching like a headless chicken and reverting to my Nigerian roots by flinging insults at all the items that had started to come off the shelves, beseeching them to "Stop all this nonsense right now or I'll be forced to lose my temper. Ah-ah."

11:46 EO: It was an extremely unnatural and weird thing, for the only thing beneath your feet that generally didn't move to start being unstable. I ran outside for some reason, maybe hoping that, if I got out on the street, the earth would quit moving. It didn't. And I was definitely more exposed here and much more than I would have been under a table, as the advice had suggested. Well, the tremor had only lasted for 30 seconds, but to me, it was a lifetime. I was probably quite lucky that no one, to my knowledge, had filmed this incident, because it appeared that I was the only one who had exited the house to throw themselves on the mercy of the front lawn. Most residents took it in their strides and were probably not have disturbed their beauty sleep unless the walls had started caving in. This was the first of many similar experiences, and to my surprise, I began to get used to the sensation and eventually felt fairly relaxed about it. Well, maybe not relaxed exactly, just more resigned.

12:42 EO: Once my commercial license was obtained, I spent a lot of time building my flight hours for the next stage of my training, after my instrument rating. I'd be starting my flight instructor course and I needed to get some hours under my belt. Given that San Francisco sits roughly on the northern segment of the San Andreas Fault, there are no fewer than seven major faults in the San Francisco Bay area. The US Geological Service, USGS for short, would occasionally use our pilots and aircraft to fly the San Andreas Fault line to collect data. Usually the pilot would be accompanied, but sometimes they were asked to go on their own. Just such an occasion arose a few weeks before my expected instrument rating exam, when I was asked to carry out just such a flight for them. I was secretly thrilled by this, but I tried to act cool. I was both excited and petrified actually on the day itself. I remember it was a Saturday and my trusty Cessna 172, yes, N6669E, was being modified to carry the scientific equipment slung from the wing straps. They're the part of the aircraft where the wings have additional support to the main body of the aircraft.

13:46 EO: During the briefing, I was handed a small printer unit with a digital interface to read the data being provided by the equipment outside the aircraft, and this was to be strapped to my right thigh during the flight so that I could quickly assess the data being collected. It had a dot matrix-like printer embedded in it that spewed out reams of data, a bit like a cash machine receipt. The idea was to collect data which measured the movement in the fault line over time. Once my pre-flight checks were completed and my briefing accepted, I studied my sectional chart to familiarise the route that had been drawn on it, signifying the flight path that I'd be taking to fly the fault line. I could see that it took me in between hills and valleys for a good portion of the flight, and that I'd have to

concentrate on both flying the aircraft and making sure I was collecting enough data.

14:32 EO: I could see how this was easier for two people, but here we were, today, it was just down to me. Start-up and taxi was uneventful, and I'd been advised that speeds and handling might be slightly different due to the equipment that was now attached to the aircraft. So, with all this in mind, my plan was to practise some handling out to the west of the airport before I started my run down the fault line. Once airborne, I turned west to check handling, but I didn't really find it too much of an issue. The trick here was to be ahead of the curve at all times, which was a key thought process for all my flying anyway. With the tower's approval, I began my first north-south run down the fault line at 1200 feet. It was exhilarating. Most of my attention was between the chart, aircraft direction, and outside the cockpit. Keeping straight and level on a heading was easy. Trying to figure out what the box strapped to my right thigh was picking up was somewhat more difficult.

15:24 EO: The hills flashed past as I steadied the wings and concentrated on my flying. Multi-tasking wasn't new to me now, it was part of every day. One hour in and I was into a routine. Each outbound run south was about 20 minutes long, before you pulled up out of the valley to position the aircraft for the inbound run north and commence the same procedure. So, by the time I was on my final run, two-and-a-half hours later, my thigh, or rather the box attached to it, had produced reams of white paper packed with data all over the cockpit floor. As I landed though, I felt a great sense of achievement. Whilst it wasn't the biggest task I would have in my flying career, it was an important milestone for me, and I now had the most impressive bragging rights in the student bar for the rest of the week.

16:09 EO: Thank you for listening. Your comments and reviews are very much appreciated. Once again, thank you to Lucy Ashby for the dedicated editing of this episode. In my next episode, I'll introduce you to facing down the temptation to fly under the famous Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, dodgy offers of quick money using aircraft on the flight line, and as my mental health journey continues, I venture to Los Angeles with friends to explore my independence. Thank you and goodbye.

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