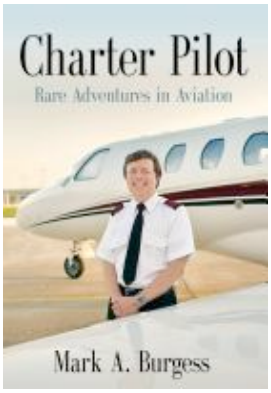
Charter Pilot

Rare Adventures in Aviation

Mark A. Burgess



Anyone interested in general aviation, its history, and the funny and sometimes-scary adventures of a professional pilot will enjoy Mark Burgess' stories. With wry humor, he takes us on his journey from an airplane-happy small-town youth, to certified 17-year-old pilot, to instructor and inspector of other pilots. He has flown donated organs, fire patrol, and the rich and famous, and today is a successful entrepreneur with a rapidly growing company employing nine pilots.

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Introduction
"You Do WHAT *for a Living?"*

Most people have some knowledge or understanding of flying and aircraft ranging from one extreme of being a pilot themselves to the other end of the spectrum, which is "I saw an airplane once." The most familiar realm is airline travel. The majority of the population has flown on an airline for business, family emergency, vacations and such. They know of the smartly dressed pilots with their gold bars and fancy hats.

Commercial pilots fly huge jets with hundreds of passengers and tons of cargo all over the world. They have worked very hard and put in myriad hours to get where they are. They are trained professionals that are very well compensated for what they do. Although I had a desire to pursue that type of flying, it just never worked out. More on that later.

The next-most familiar category for the public would be military pilots or "fighter jocks." These pilots have been immortalized in movies, books and now on CNN. Much like their airline counterparts, they too have worked hard, are well educated and are some of the most elite pilots in the world. They have the most dangerous job in flying, mostly because people are trying to shoot at them. They fly the most expensive, sophisticated and exciting equipment in aviation. They are not very well paid, but the adrenalin rush from the type of stuff they do seems to be compensation enough for them. In my youth, I had also wanted to be a fighter pilot, but that too did pass.

The least familiar category of pilots for the public would be general aviation or GA flying. This consists of a variety of activities, including flight training, cargo flying, air ambulance, charter, corporate, crop dusting and on the list goes. This is where I have spent the last thirty years of my aviation career, with experiences ranging from the mundane to the exciting and everything in between. Or as pilots put it, "Hours and hours of boredom interrupted by moments of sheer terror!"

This book is part explanation of things you can do in aviation (without getting shot at), part personal story of how I got here without getting there and a liberal sprinkling of funny tales to give you an idea of what happens and why in this relatively unknown world of GA flying.

One warning: aviation is chock full of acronyms and abbreviations with a multitude of letters, phrases and sayings familiar only to pilots. I'll do my best to explain them and use them during these stories. If you take nothing else from this, maybe you can amaze your friends at parties or better yet correct the news anchors when they show their ignorance on the nightly news.

I must admit I am truly blessed. Although I had my heart set on military followed by airline flying, God didn't seem to work it out that way. But, I get to do things, go places and see things that most people never get to experience. I enjoy flying, I enjoy people, I like the challenges, and it pays pretty well, too. So if you like aviation, airplanes, cocky pilots or just glimpses from the non-fiction side of life, I hope you'll enjoy my stories.

If you have a desire to enter this little-known world of GA flying, then perhaps my tales will inspire you to do just that.

Chapter 1
Getting Started

My family was not rich by any stretch of the imagination, but coming from a small town of Marionville, Missouri, population 1,200, my dad did fairly well. I say dad did well because in the early 60s dads worked, moms stayed home and kids were happy. By the way, Marionville is "home of the white squirrels." According to everything I have been told, it's one of only a few towns in the country where you can find a white squirrel. (We always said only two towns have them, but the Web says at least six, so this is the first test of your belief that this is a non-fiction book.) They hang out by the "old folks' home" and happily gather their nuts all day long. What a life.

Anyway, Mom, Dad, my older sister and I vacationed a lot. We saw at one time or another most every major area of the United States. However, air travel was NEVER involved. We drove. I spent hours and hours in the back of the car, mostly sleeping. However, we always ended up at every major airport in the country Dad just loved to watch the planes. We would sit on the end of the runway outside the fence line and watch airliners fly over. I regret never asking him before he passed away why he liked it so; maybe it was the roar of the engines, or something. But there we were: LAX – Los Angles International, ORD – Chicago O'Hare, and even SGF – Springfield, Missouri – now my homeport.

Today, I still see droves of people camped out at the edges of runways all over the country when we fly in. I don't really understand it, but that early experience must be what warped me. I would stand on the hood, or let dad hold me in his big arms, and watch these huge metal birds lumber on and off the hot concrete. It was fascinating, for Dad and me anyway. Mom and Shelly couldn't stand it. And when air shows came to town, there we were. Watching the Blue Angels, Thunderbirds or just the aerobatic guys doing their thing. It was great, probably one of the fondest memories of my youth. My advice: Do something with your kids - anything – because it will impact them forever.

My first introduction to small aircraft came along in my early teens. Dad planted the seed, and my uncle watered it. I spent most of every summer in Neosho, Missouri, with my favorite and most adventurous cousin, Carl. We ran around all over town, bowling alley and pool hall, anything we found interesting. Most of our time was spent on dirt bikes ripping up the back woods and hills of his small town.

Uncle Floyd and Aunt Imogene were always upbeat, happy and excited. They enjoyed life. Floyd worked at a company called Rocketdyne that made engines for the space program. There was nothing more fascinating than that for a teenaged boy, considering it was the late 60s, and we were in a "space race." He was a licensed private pilot, which means you've met the qualifications to endanger someone else's life as well as your own. He took my cousin and me for my first flight. It was fantastic. I always liked fast bikes, hot cars, big engines but this was a whole new level. The freedom of separating oneself from earth's terra firma was more exciting than I ever imagined.

Here's a side note about first flights. I've done hundreds with family, friends and strangers. Make sure the first time you go up it's with someone who truly appreciates aviation and isn't just trying to show off. For example, my daughter loves the negative G forces and roller coaster thrills that I can easily induce to the extreme in an aircraft. However, most people do not. A true aviation lover will take that into consideration on your "first flight" giving you a smooth, easy, relaxing – while still exciting – ride. A show-off will scare you to death and convince you train travel is for you. The right first time will enable someone to embrace aircraft as a lifelong interest.

Uncle Floyd did it just right. Checking out the miniature cows, horses, cars and people from just a few thousand feet up was amazing. Even to this day, some 14,000 flying hours later, I still find it a beautiful experience. I could have stayed up there forever, but as you very quickly learn in aviation, time is money. The short ride ended and between Floyd and Dad, my future was sealed. We did two or three more rides after that, and none ever lost their appeal. I don't know if Floyd still flies, but in my heart he always will.

I assumed that considering you had to be sixteen to drive, (I knew that because of the traffic ticket dad got when I was riding my

motorcycle all over town at age fourteen), then you had to be at least twenty or older to get your hands on a plane. I investigated it no further and resigned myself to bikes, cars and high school life.

At some time, I read a small article in our local paper, *The Marionville Free Press*, on about page 2 of its 4, that a schoolmate of mine was taking flying lessons. How could that be? I knew he hadn't been held back; it was time to check this out. The closest airport was Aurora so off I went on my investigative journey. Much to my surprise I learned you could start flying at pretty much any age. However, you had to be sixteen to fly solo and seventeen to become a private pilot and carry passengers other than your instructor. I was pissed: "I'm already six months behind. At sixteen and a half I could have been flying solo for months." Time to get with it.

As I mentioned earlier, flying isn't cheap, if it were we'd all be doing it all the time. So I maximized my time earning money so I could take lessons. Mom and Dad helped a lot and would lead you to believe they paid for it all, but I paid a fair share myself. They owned a gas station, and I worked after school and weekends pumping twenty-cent gas and changing tires. I also found out that playing sports paid nothing, while working the clock at ball games paid something. I'll take the latter. Plus you can't get hurt. I also learned my first lesson in multi-tasking before it was even popular. Taking notes about the exploits of the Marionville Comets teams while I was running the scoreboard, I would write articles up for the *Free Press* called "Comets' Tails." That paid off as well.

Don't get me wrong: I didn't struggle a lot as a kid. My folks gave me everything I needed and a lot of stuff I didn't. They were always there to help out. I drove a different old car about every six months. Even though my Dad offered me a new Monte Carlo I would much rather fix up a hot rod, sell it and then try something new.

First rule about pilots, we get bored very easily. I'd had a motorcycle since I was about twelve, starting with a 50 cc Honda and ending with a 1,000 cc full-dress Kawasaki.

Second rule about pilots, we like lots of power and excitement. I could not have gotten everything done without my parents. However, you can be resourceful on your own. If you want something badly

enough you will find a way to earn the money to be able to do it. Don't ever let the lack of money steal your dream.

Lessons began with Lawrence Stoll, my first certified flight instructor (CFI), requiring me to get a student pilot certificate, which is nothing more than a physical by an FAA-designated doctor who can give pilot medical exams. Thus started the non-stop outflow of money. I bought all the books and manuals, read everything I could as fast as I could. I made a trip to Aurora for a lesson once a week, which was as fast as the checks would clear.

Normal progression to achieve a license is about eight to ten hours of dual instruction. You sit in the left seat, the captain's seat, right from the start. All the basics are covered along with learning about how the aircraft flies, doesn't fly (which is stalling), gets on and off the ground, as well as what to do when the engine decides not to generate power anymore. Once you've mastered all that you have completed Phase One.

Stalling is making the aircraft fly so slowly it just can't stay in the air. Every wing must have air flowing over it at a specific amount or it no longer creates lift. That's why some planes will occasionally fall out of the sky. The pilot has forgotten the first basics he learned on day one. You slow the bird down by pulling the power off, which slows the engine and your forward thrust. Then you keep pulling back on the yoke, which increases your angle of attack and results in the airspeed decreasing even more. If you maintain your altitude long enough the eventual outcome will be a shuddering of the whole bird like someone is trying to shake you out. All you have to do to correct this is let it have its airspeed back either by giving it power or by letting the nose down and it happily flies again.

Later in life you get to go to the next level with stalls, which I really enjoy. That's the spin. Hold that yoke back long enough, get it to bucking on you and don't give it back the power it needs to accelerate nor reduce the pitch, allowing the nose to pitch forward and break the stall. With a little coaxing from the rudder, controlled by pedals on the floor that move the rudder on the tail, it will gladly pitch nose down and start spinning like a top, straight toward the earth. Hang on to the yoke, and it will just keep doing it, all the way to impact. However, ease up just a little, give it back its reins and everything goes back to normal.

Aircraft are designed to fly. Let go and most will. It's usually the pilot who pisses off the bird and makes it mad enough to smash him into the ground. Spins are great, definitely an E-ticket ride. For those of you younger than me, those were the most extreme rides at the carnival when it came to town, the ones that cost more and made you vomit.

You also get to learn how an airplane flies without an engine. Here's a clue: it doesn't for very long. Part of your training is to simulate a loss of power just in case your engine decides to give up the ghost. In such a case, it's just a matter of extending your glide, finding a soft field, without trees, and making an uneventful landing. Of course, you can't simulate that all the way to the ground, but you can get close enough to spook a few cows before you have to power back out. I think years of pilots training for this event is what caused mad cow disease. I know most of them that I saw at eye level were pretty mad when I buzzed by.

All of this, along with lots more training and knowledge, is designed to lead up to a main event: your biggest moment in aviation history, also known as your first solo. That means at some point in time the instructor has determined you can get the small bird on and off the ground again without crashing it. After countless touch-and-go's, takeoffs and landings without coming to a full stop, the CFI in all his wisdom decides to get out. In most cases, he doesn't let you know ahead of time. That seems to work toward the student's advantage as he or she doesn't have time to think about what's about to happen and start shaking uncontrollably.

Everyone has traditions with regard to first solo flights. Most instructors mark the event by cutting off your shirttail, symbolically clipping your tail feathers. Then they write on the remnant with a magic marker the date and names and hang it on the wall of the training office. Our tradition was a photo of the newly crowned pilot next to his trusted steed, still dripping wet from the sweat in the captain's seat. No matter how you celebrate it, I think any pilot will tell you he remembers that day like no other.

The next set of hours (Phase Two, or solo flying) is dedicated to teaching you how to get from Point A to Point B without ending up in point, "Where the heck am I?" Cross-country flying at that time was taught with dead reckoning and VORs. VOR, or Very High Frequency

Omnidirectional Range, messages tell your distance and direction from their position, thereby allowing you to determine where you are. But most of the training was you figuring it out for yourself: calculating headings, time, wind and distances while you track your position over a given plot on a map. Watching towns, rivers, railroads and other landmarks and keeping up with the meticulous flight log you prepared before departure, you make the A-to-B journey without getting lost and without running out of gas. Dead reckoning in its basic form.

To prove you made it, they required a signature from someone on the ground at your point of landing. I guess that was to keep you from just flying around in circles until you had put enough time on the aircraft to convince your instructor you really did go. It was great fun and like being on your own personal adventure in space. With today's technology and GPS equipment, the days of getting lost are pretty much over. You can get a graphic picture of exactly where you are at any given point and at any given time anywhere in the world. Of course you can do that in your car too, but it's not quite as glamorous.

After knocking out the cross-country flying requirements, other emergency training, cross wind landings, etc., you get to move on to night flight. There you experience a whole new world of awe and beauty. Night flying is like being next to heaven. To look up at all the stars and vastness of space, while also looking down at thousands of tiny lights and homes, you truly realize how insignificant a speck you are in the greater scheme of things. Numerous times over the years I've been at various altitudes to witness this ever-changing array of light and dark, and it still takes me back to realize how large earth, space, life in general really are. You can't see that and believe God didn't create it.

Get through the night landings and cross-country flights coupled with about twenty hours of dual and twenty hours of solo, and you've just about completed training for the private pilot's license. Hours of book study learning weather, aerodynamics, mechanical, electrical and more are almost done. Before you get to take the final test and get that coveted pilot's license, you have to pass a written test with a score of at least 80 percent. The subjects are numerous, and the test is typical government tricky, with each question offering one wrong answer and

about three that could be right. Get through that, spend some more money on pilot stuff and get ready for the flight check.

Once the instructor has deemed you worthy and capable of passing, he sends you to a designated examiner (D.E.) for your flight check. This is a fellow pilot who has been assigned by the Federal Aviation Administration to act on its behalf and test applicants for licenses. You arrange a time and place to meet, show up with your log book, written test results, properly certificated airplane and, oh yes, more money, and you too can take the practical flight test.

The D.E. is usually a salty old bird with lots of hours under his belt. D.E.s can be very intimidating and sometimes try to be, just to see if they can rattle you. Some were considered easy and sure to pass you no matter how bad you were. I guess that's acceptable seeing as how your instructor has said you were ready. But in some cases a few pilots were pushed through and sent to the "easy" examiners because their instructor knew they probably were weak in some areas. This is the most outrageous part of instructor shortcomings. How can you take a person's money and several months of their life, not get them ready or safe, and then sneak them through for a cheap check ride. My take was always that I was putting these people in the air with their families, and they might be up there when I'm flying with my family. It might pay if we all knew what we were doing and if we were all good at it.

I don't recall how well I did. The first hour or so was an oral on everything and anything that you had learned so far. A good examiner would even throw in a few life lessons to help make it a learning experience for you such as a technique or a suggestion that he has experienced in his career. Then you would go fly where a demonstration of slow flight, steep turns, stalls, engine out emergencies, short and soft field landings and anything else the almighty examiner might ask to see. If you did well, didn't scare them or yourself and got the majority of the questions right, the moment of truth would be at hand.

Most examiners, including myself when I was an examiner later, would keep their paperwork in a flight bag. There were two small booklets that held the coveted prize and the not-so-coveted prize. The one you wanted was white, the one you wanted to avoid was pink. Many times I would grab the pink one just to see the applicant's reaction, then

say, "Oops, grabbed the wrong one." Another rule: pilots have a very sick sense of humor. Luckily my man pulled out a white booklet, filled in the blanks, we both signed it, don't forget the money, preferably cash, and that was that. I was a freshly licensed "Private Pilot" with the ink still wet on my temporary certificate. I could now take other people with me and slip the surly bonds of earth. Of course there were limits on this first license. I could fly only if the weather was good, if the aircraft had only one engine and if, of course, I had some money for the aircraft rental, always the last catch in aviation, it always takes money.

I had made it. I had accomplished something that only a small percentage of the population had ever done, and I was barely 17 years old. I was on my way to my career in aviation. It was expensive and time consuming, and I had learned about lots of things I would have never studied in my life. I had convinced and performed to my instructor's satisfaction everything he could throw at me. I had passed a federal written test and an oral and flight test given to me by this guru of aviation that the government had determined could tell me how good I was. All was well with my soul.

Then it hit me. "Wait a minute, I've got to fly back to Aurora, and I sure hope I don't buy the farm on the way back." This was very humbling for this fresh "ace" aviator. Little did I know how much farther I had to go. I really need to get into the Air Force and let my second favorite uncle – "Sam" – train me.

Did I mention I needed lots more money?

At some point in this block of my life, my dad decided owning an airplane would be a good idea. He liked flying, and maybe was living vicariously through me – either way that investment proved a huge advantage for me and my ability to get the rest of the experience I needed. In those days, a nice older single engine plane would run you about the same as a newer car. Not so anymore, but this was the mid 70s. They were cheaper to operate, too, with gas running just twenty cents a gallon. So he found a clean Cessna 172. I kept the gas in it, and he had me fly him a few times to various places, and I gave rides to anyone who helped pay the way. One nice perk of the dreaded Federal Aviation Regulations that all pilots live and die by, was the ability to

share expenses with your passengers, as long as you didn't get paid. All those rides helped me build time and experience.

On a side note – social in nature – in high school I wasn't the hot stud I am now. No laughing, please. My days were filled with polyester slacks, good grades and no sports. I didn't like to sweat, so I guess I ranked somewhere between geek and average. I always had a nice set of wheels and now, during my senior year, I also had access to an airplane. What a way to meet chicks! Everyone wanted a ride, and I was always more than happy to oblige. When I needed a flying buddy that wasn't female, it would be my best friend, John Bateman, and me sneaking out of 7th hour to fly over the school. I don't know if all this made me more popular (I did get elected class president) but it was always a great time.

All those flights would net me more flight time, the absolute thrill of giving someone their first plane ride and a chance to meet girls. We had a very small school, 65 in my graduating class. I did finish in the top 10 percent – but barely. I was number six. So I venture to say that by the time my last year was done, most every female I had any interest in had ridden along. That would also result in at least one date – then that was pretty much it. I wasn't smoothed and polished, nor was I an athlete, so that left me pretty much sans girlfriend. High school can be cruel, but you have to make it fun and profitable for you – and no one else. Our school culture has twisted completely sideways from academics and good citizenship. Now, if you're a jock you can get a free ride to college and get girls, too. The rest of us in the majority fend for themselves. Sorry, soap box tirade, probably will happen numerous more times throughout.

After I graduated, I felt it was time to get into the Air Force Academy and do the ultimate in aviation – fly fighter jets. You have to obtain an appointment by an elected representative, and that takes top grades, lots of extra-curricular activities, sports (oops, I'm slipping) and perfect vision. Those factors broke it for me. At that time the country was bailing out of Vietnam, and the military didn't need more pilots. I still have etched in my memory television pictures of helicopters being pushed off of aircraft carriers into the ocean. Something to do with flooding the market back home – like everyone wants to buy a Huey?

There lies another of many great ways we waste money in this country. Sorry, tirade, digressing.

Everything seems to be based on being in the "right place" at the "right time." This was neither. Overloaded military didn't need pilots so the regular enlistment was out, and the academy wasn't taking less than 20/20 uncorrected vision. I did estimate that I could possibly get in as a "back seater" WSO – weapons systems officer – and knowing my prowess of manipulating the system, odds were I might sneak into the front seat later on. Not my path of choice but might be doable.

The academy appointment never happened, the shot of the ultimate flight job was gone, so I had to adjust. I would be forced to pursue the civilian route. More costly, not as much fun, but still a viable avenue. Short life lesson: Never give up! Doors close, situations change, opportunities come and go. Make your own way. Anything is possible, as long as you don't give up, never quit and keep looking; I believe God will honor your persistence.

I had now determined that flying on beautiful clear days or starlit nights was fabulous. But, sometimes clouds appear and mess everything up. In order to fly in them where you can't see anything else but your instruments required an instrument rating. Real catchy name for it don't you think? This is another "rating" or license, more time, more training and lest we forget, more money.

In order to simulate the flying in clouds, you would wear a "hood." This white plastic sunbonnet pulled down over your face to block everything outside the aircraft while still allowing you vision of the instrument panel. I had some experience during the Private phase, but now it was time to take it even further. Take off, landing, en route, basically the ability to complete an entire flight without ever seeing anything outside the airplane.

It was determined early on that peeking was possible. By tilting your head ever so slightly the instructor couldn't tell, but you could get a small glimpse outside from time to time. This would help you get orientated again and make your performance a lot more impressive. However, my logical brain kicked in very early on. If I cheat and never learn to do this right – what happens when I'm really in the clouds, tilt my head back, smile and realize I still can't see anything. Probably not

in my best interest, considering I'm not passing a math test, I could actually kill myself. Another life lesson – you can always cheat, short change, fib, slide, what ever you want to call it in almost every situation in life. Bottom line – it ALWAYS will cost you in the long run – it's never worth it.

Instrument flight is probably one of the more difficult licenses to obtain. The majority of the challenge is physiological in nature. If you take away all outside references and move your body around inside an aircraft, you will not be able to tell if you are right side up or down. This is why simulator rides at Disney work so well. They can give you a picture that you're diving straight into the ground face down, make your seat tilt just a few degrees and Mr. Brain takes over – you're screaming. The body believes what the sight tells it, and you can't prove it wrong. Spatial Disorientation takes place and without instruments that you look at and believe, you'll never control an aircraft in the clouds.

A recent accident that took the life of some prominent people in Missouri shows what happens when the instruments are gone. The pilot lost his primary source of aircraft attitude and was flying "partial panel." This is continued flight with only a few remaining instruments to rely on. It's doable, but extremely difficult, especially for someone who doesn't train professionally or fly on a frequent basis. The body and mind is saying turn when you're level already, or climb when your bird is going down. If you concentrate on the instruments, and fight hard with the brain's choices, you can keep it going. In their case, it didn't work out.

I was blessed to have several different, highly experienced instructors to help me along with the instrument training. Each one had different angles to teaching, some frustrating, some enjoyable, all adding to the overall training experience. The instructor makes the pilot. This is never truer than in the instrument-training phase.

One in particular forced me over and over again to fly the instrument landing system (ILS) approach, until I could lock it in the dead center of the instrument. This approach is still the primary way an aircraft gets down in the worst visibility and cloud cover. The instrument shows you a horizontal and vertical set of needles that are aligned with a spot approximately 1,000 feet down the runway. If you

fly the aircraft while keeping the needles centered you will hit that spot. I could easily have passed the check ride without the extreme level of precision the instructor was demanding. Once again, I could have cheated myself with doing less than perfect. But, he wouldn't sign my logbook to take the check ride until I had nailed a series of ILSs so well you would have thought the indicator was broken. He forced me to do my best, which is a great asset in any teacher in any profession. Anything less of the teacher is a disservice to the student.

When he felt I was finally ready, he had convinced me that I was more than ready. It's time for another written test, oral exam and flight check. This time I was prepared and confident that I could do anything the D.E. threw at me. What followed was the biggest joke of a check ride I had ever taken. The oral was only a few questions long, the flight consisted of only one approach on which my performance was less than stellar, and yet I still walked out with the coveted white slip, after writing the check of course.

I'm not saying you need to grind an applicant into the ground or scare them to death (although I confess that was fun when I later became the do-er instead of the do-ee). But, it's nice to think you got your money's worth and show the guy you did know your stuff. By the time you are signed off for a check ride the instructor is supposed to be convinced you've got all the knowledge and skill required to complete the license or rating you are going for.

Back to the disservice issue – how can an instructor in good faith recommend an applicant for a check ride if he felt anything less than complete confidence in the pilot's ability? After all, he's going to be up in the air with you, in the same space, and you may eventually "run into" each other, literally. But, as in all areas of life, some people take short cuts, cheat the system, cheat themselves and get away with it. We've all seen it, but in our profession it can kill you and maybe some passengers as well. I never understood how instructors could sleep at night knowing they are taking people's money and not training them to basic standards. Thank God most of the instructors I had were not that way.

So after this check ride, I've got fresh ink on my instrument ticket. Theoretically, I can now fly safely in the clouds. In truth, however, after

each and every license or rating the true learning has just begun. The experiences, near death and otherwise, that follow are what shapes your true knowledge and skills. My case was not an exception.

In just a few short days, fresh instrument ticket in hand; I rented a brand new Cessna 172 Skyhawk from the local FBO (fixed base operator) and headed for a very brief flight to St. Louis. I think they might have been hoping to collect on their insurance policy, otherwise why would you toss the keys of a very expensive new aircraft to the hands of a 17-year-old kid? I remember someone needing to go to St. Louis but don't recall whom or why, much like many flights over the years. Either way, I'm off, into the clouds, into this new realm of instrument flying, into my newest learning adventure. Oh yes, don't forget, some of these will kill you.

I omitted mention of only one small but essential element of this trip: it's winter. Not snowing or freezing rain, just butt cold. I'd read somewhere about ice accumulation, which happens anytime you're in visible moisture and the air is below freezing. Do you know what a cloud is? Visible moisture. I'd checked all the pilot reports and weather briefings, and all indicated that icing would not be a factor. Besides, I thought, a little ice won't bring an aircraft down. We've learned in later years and through recent accidents that a little ice will not only bring you down but sometimes won't let you even get off the ground.

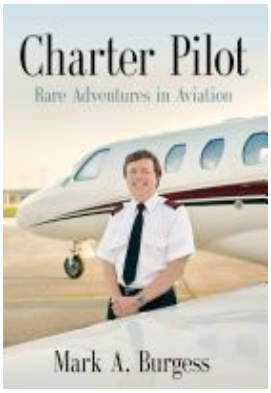
Most aircraft of any size, especially airlines, jets, turbo-props, all have some form of de-ice equipment capable of getting you and your bird out of a tight spot, or at least keeping you in the air long enough to get on the ground safely. But to this day I have never seen a C172 with any of that.

Pilots who get into ice don't always report it back for the rest of us, and weather forecasting in general is a very inexact science. I did encounter my first bout with ice accumulation. Needless to say I learned a lesson very quickly. It wasn't a lot, but enough for me to realize the aircraft was very quickly losing its performance. I have no equipment to get rid of it, I'm too small and slow to climb out of it and the temperature is below freezing all the way to the ground, also known as my impending point of impact.

Next lesson: Always have an out. Have someplace, somewhere to go if everything that can go wrong does. Trouble is, sometimes that's not possible. Situations come up where you just can't make it happen, and that's when you have to decide how bad you want to make the trip.

We made it to the ground with a fair amount of ice still protruding from the leading edges of the wings. I acted like nothing was out of the ordinary so I wouldn't spook my passenger. After all, we had to fly home later. The return flight was less eventful, and everyone seemed happy I had brought the new bird home safely. In later conversations with my instrument instructor, he admitted that they should have never let me go. But this was one of many strange turns that would take place throughout the early stages of my flying. I was young, extremely ambitious, and felt like I was God's gift to aviation. I was fortunate that so many times I'd complete flights I never should have started.

It's amazing. Do something dangerous and die, you're an idiot. Do something dangerous and survive, you're a great pilot. The trick is to survive long enough to learn where that line is. I've found the line moves, as you get older and more experienced. It slides substantially to the more conservative side, mostly when you realize it's just money, just a job. It's not worth killing yourself over, no job is. I've known many who found the line one flight too late. But, I was still young and stupid, indestructible and a pilot. Man, what a wild combination.



Anyone interested in general aviation, its history, and the funny and sometimes-scary adventures of a professional pilot will enjoy Mark Burgess' stories. With wry humor, he takes us on his journey from an airplane-happy small-town youth, to certified 17-year-old pilot, to instructor and inspector of other pilots. He has flown donated organs, fire patrol, and the rich and famous, and today is a successful entrepreneur with a rapidly growing company employing nine pilots.

Charter Pilot