

My First Cross Country

I was stationed at Otis AFB, MA in 1968 and decided I wanted to finally learn how to fly. My instructor was a nice second lieutenant navigator. I had finally soloed and my time finally arrived when I was to take my first cross country flight. My instructor had decided I could fly from Otis over to Hartford, CT and back. Saturdays were usually the time I was able to go for lessons or flying lesson practices. Cape Cod area weather can be pretty cruddy at times and my first two weekend cross country attempts had the scud stuff rolling from the water in about mid-morning. Since I hadn't gotten out to the aero club until about then on those two weekends, I had to cancel due to the weather each time. Other guys had the planes already scheduled for later in the day so I was done.

The third weekend I'd decided to not sleep in and get out there earlier so I could do all my flight planning and preflight in time to miss the scud in case it moved in again. So I got up about 8 o'clock that Saturday morning and made it out to the clubhouse. I did my flight planning which my instructor approved, then did the C-150's walk-around. After doing the preflight, it was getting close to 9 o'clock and I could see the scud forming way out to the southwest beyond the bay and ocean for yet another Saturday morning so figured I could be airborne and beat it before it got here. I thought the warmer temps would have it burned off and gone by the time I returned.

So I got in, cranked it up, did my checklist, called the tower for clearance, and taxied out. I was cleared for take-off in short order and was airborne picking up an westerly heading for Hartford. I had been airborne about 20 minutes or so, already across the bay, and about 1000' AGL when I encountered more scud ahead of me and, in hindsight, I should have turned around then.... RIGHT??? Naturally, that didn't happen mainly because I wanted to get that cross country done! So I continued on and thought "Oh, I'll just climb up thru this stuff and get above it".... second mistake! In the first place I'm a student pilot with about 15 hours or so much less not having an instrument rating. Thank goodness I'd been given a couple of hours of under-the-hood instrument training from my instructor.

Anyway, I throttled up, gently eased back on the yoke, and headed upward into the scud. I kept looking around to breakout of the stuff which didn't happen. Finally, I broke out and glanced at the altimeter which showed just over 2000'. As I broke out, I saw that I was indeed above a sea of clouds but not by much and they were on an sloping angle which seemed really strange to me AND I was headed back into a puffy one on my left. I thought, "Okay, I'll get thru this one and be in the clear again." Well, I kept looking to break out again when I heard the engine picking up speed. A quick check of the instrument panel showed the altimeter slowly unwinding and my airspeed approaching a speed faster than I'd ever flown that Cessna! Additionally, looking at the turn & bank showed me in a 15 degree or so left bank. I realized that I had unsuspectingly gotten myself into a vertigo situation and I was descending. I eased off on the power and leveled the wings finding myself now about 1200' or so. Settling down after a few minutes, I started thinking, "So, now what?" Here I was in the soup again with a situation that I never should have been in.

Keeping my eyes glued to that wonderful instrument panel, I gently turned back towards Otis and was

flying along when a very large, beautiful "hole" in the clouds opened up just ahead of and below me. I could plainly see the ground way below me and thought "Hey, I'll just cork screw down into that hole and head back after I'm out of this stuff." NOT!!! That hole closed up on me faster than I could say "What tha....???". I got back on the panel watching the turn & bank stay somewhat around 10 degree left bank with a descent rate of a couple of hundred feet per minute as the airspeed stayed reasonable and watching the altimeter rather closely.

After what seemed like an eternity, I broke out of the clouds around 600' AGL but heading north instead of east so I corrected my heading and flew back to Otis staying just below them, called the tower for clearance when I got close, and landed. I taxied back to the clubhouse ramp, shut down, got out and walked over to the clubhouse. I went inside and some of the guys were still there from when I departed. They asked why I was back so soon. I just said that the weather hadn't looked so good about halfway there so I turned around and came back. My instructor was in the other room with a student and heard the conversation. He came out, smiled at me saying, "Good job, Jim." I thanked him and never said anything else about the flight but certainly did learn from it.