



Flying at night...well almost

Summer 2009

Do you fly at night?

If you are a pilot, you probably already have your belief system in place regarding night flight. You more than likely fall into one of two groups...either you love it and do it, or you would like to but don't because of the inherent risks.

It can be very different flying at night versus in the daytime. The first thing that becomes apparent is the change in your vision when trying to preflight and then read the instruments on the panel. Terrain and mountains are much harder to see, clouds and overcast can appear out of nowhere, optical illusions are prevalent on takeoff, approach and landing, as well as during cruise flight, and trying to determine where the heck the horizon is are all issues. Then, should you have a mechanical problem, trying to find and see a safe landing spot away from an airport is almost impossible.

The statistics reflect these risks: Accidents are twice as likely to be fatal at night, with **CFIT** (controlled flight into terrain) especially in the San Francisco Bay Area, and VFR into IMC on the top of the list. Also, the rate of accidents increases by 10:1 when flying on a dark (moonless) night.

I am offering a solution. Plan your flight late in the afternoon so you return to your airport around sunset or shortly thereafter. If the visibility is good during the day, it will probably be better right before and once the sun goes down. Much of what we see as haze during the day is actually the sun reflecting off the particulate matter in the atmosphere. When the sun goes down, voila- it is amazingly clear. As it gets darker and the lights come on around the Bay Area, they appear to shimmer like diamonds. It reminds me of being on a ride at Disneyland like "*Pirates of the Caribbean*", or "*Mr. Toad's Wild Ride*".



Flying around sunset can be truly spectacular as can be seen in the adjacent photos. At the publishing of this newsletter, sunset is around 7:38 pm with civil twilight ending about 25 minutes later. If you fly at this time, you should be able to get in at least an hour of semi night flying with beautiful, shimmering views, before it is really dark, (as in the reg. that says "night is one hour after sunset and up to one hour before sunrise"), and without many of the risks. Increase your safety even more by flying when the moon is out.

Sue Ballew

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