



With all 150 horses slowly dragging the Piper Warrior skyward; the full majesty of the big mountain range to our immediate left begins to sink in. "If we're ever going to get up that high you'd better start a left turn out early" comes the reassuring voice of the Chief Pilot and CFI in the right seat beside me. I glance at the VSI indicating a paltry 600 or so feet per minute 'up', and remember Jeannette Nosko's downdraft description from our briefing minutes earlier: "3000 feet per minute 'down' is not uncommon out here". From just 900 feet I roll the Warrior left until a 5000 foot mountain fills our windscreen. Pinch me - my mountain flying course in the Canadian Rockies is underway!

A two-week trip to Abbotsford, BC to see family had initially included the notion of a short local rental to see the sights, however when my research turned up Principle Air of Chilliwack, BC (www.principalair.ca), with a real mountain flying syllabus in a Piper Warrior (I own a share in a very similar Ottawa based Piper Cherokee), I took it as a true sign from the aviation Gods to a flat-lander like me.

The individual ground school for this mountain flying course is intimate and informative; big on mountain weather phenomena and map reading, and full of important local take-aways like "you'll never out-climb that" and "leave the GPS in the back seat - the magenta line always leads into a mountain." We bring along a personal locator beacon and a substantial survival kit just in case.

We were out of the circuit and into our first mountain valley almost immediately, with a little stream only one thousand feet below and mountain peaks soaring two to four thousand feet above us. Most of the time the only forced landing option is a (hoped for) gravel bar at the bottom or nothing at all. It is impossible to describe how small a GA aircraft feels in the Rocky Mountains with its many glaciers, and at the same time how peaceful it feels to have giant snow covered pine trees looking close enough to touch just off of your wing tip.

Just as I was getting comfortable "picking a side" and "feeling the winds", Jeannette steers me into a narrow dead end valley with a cheery: "oops, no room to turn around in here so I'll demonstrate a canyon turn for you". What followed was a blur of hands and feet that might best be described in two dimensions as down-shifting from sixth to first gear with a Tokyo Drift through a Grand Prix hairpin turn. Once my senses registered the 'all new' scenery in front of us, I stole a glance at the altimeter - it hadn't budged! The next words I hear are: "your airplane". Really?!

"Now you're going to chop the power to idle yank 40 degrees of flaps push the nose over and drop a wing sharply away from the near mountain side then pull up pretty hard and apply full power quickly while keeping your eyes outside, then take out the flaps in stages. Okay? Now which way are you ready to turn? Here comes a rock face" Jeannette instructs me way too calmly. I'm not quite sure what I did next but we were quickly headed back in the opposite direction - albeit 200 feet lower!

I do this another five or six times before I would lose fewer than 50 feet of altitude on a single canyon turn and my excellent instructor on this impossibly fun flight would declare the procedure 'complete'. The rapid deceleration and snap turn procedure tightens the turning radius so much you'll be amazed at how little horizontal space is actually required to execute a good canyon turn. Be forewarned however, only a very experienced mountain flying professional who can 'wear' their airplane like a tailored suit should be trusted to attempt the 'impossible turn' on climb-out engine failure!

We navigated the Chahalis River to Stave Lake, along the Stave River into Sloquet Creek over to Harrison Lake, along Spuzzum Canyon to the Fraser Canyon, we then began a winding, awe-inspiring descent through gorgeous, permanently snow-capped mountains to a little grass strip in the mining town of Hope, BC (CYHE). (Hope is the town where the movie 'Rambo' was shot.) Jeannette assures me that there is in fact a real town and a useable landing strip ahead if I just trust her and follow the river downstream. I've never landed on a difficult to locate (for me anyway) grass strip in the Rockies before, so that too is a new personal GA highlight for me. The strip was a little soggy from the recent snow so I had to keep the yoke fully aft and the power up in a continuous ground circuit and back into the air - incredible.

Without the nose wheel ever fully settling, we are already climbing out of Hope and making our way over to the Skagit River, Hicks Creek and finally Chilliwack Lake. The scenery in the second half of the course does not disappoint either, and Jeannette even has me assess and execute a high ridge crossing before navigating home. Back at Chilliwack (CYCW) a short 2.1 hours later, my impossibly fun mountain flying memories were still replaying over and over in my mind's eye. Hard to describe, but easy to highly recommend to any flat-land GA pilot.

It was an epic GA experience that I would not hesitate to repeat. You'll get a souvenir pen from your instructor, and a detailed logbook entry that I'm proud to show to anyone asking 'so what did you do out West?'. The useful investment in your stick and rudder skills is well worth the cost, and the option of a celebratory piece of pie waiting for you from the Chilliwack Airport Coffee Shop (their motto: "We Fly for Pie"), is pretty unique - and very Canadian too.

- Jeff Darwin, COPA Member No.: 1600242 ('08)