I LEARNED ABOUT FLYING FROM THAT!—NO. 2

by PAUL MANTZ

This famous airman was pretty sure of himself when he took off for San Francisco. Before that flight ended, though, he had learned an unforgettable lesson.

Paul Mantz, 36, regarded as one of the nation's outstanding long-distance pilots, is also famous as an aerobat. At present he is president of United Air Services of Burbank, California. He operates the "honeymoon express" for lovelorn Hollywood couples who must fly right to Yuma, Arizona, or Las Vegas, Nevada, without waiting the three days the California law requires; operates a flying school and furnishes planes, equipment and stunts to the movies. You've seen his work in Universal's "Air Mail," MGM's "Test Pilot," Fox's "Tailspin," Paramount's "Men With Wings," and many other productions.

THEORY is all right in a nice, comfortable classroom.

Theory is all right, too, when you're flying on a bright, sunshiny day over the flat fields of Texas. But when the time comes to get out over the California mountains on a cross-country trip of 350 miles from Los Angeles to San Francisco it's a darned good idea to have a little practical knowledge mixed in with your theories. In other words, ground training is swell—but it's also swell to have a dash of that Boy Scout motto, "Be Prepared," thrown in.

The year was 1928. It was spring. I was feeling pretty good about myself and my flying. I was riding in the saddle of a nice, shiny Stearman biplane which I had purchased second-hand from Cliff Durant. I had signed the papers in Los Angeles, had the plane at Metropolitan Airport and I was going to take off for San Francisco which, at that time, was my base of operations.

I was supposed to be a trained pilot. I'd taken my first flying lessons in 1919 and had soloed. I'd been in and out of flying until 1927, when I'd applied for a year's course at the Army Air School at Kelly Field, San Antonio, and had been accepted. I'd been with the Army for the past year.

Yes, I'd had everything from class work to aerobatics, and from military duty to cross-country flying over those nice, flat fields around San Antonio where they don't even know how to spell fog. Nobody could tell me anything.

"Plot a compass course. Fly in a straight line from take-off to destination."

That's what they'd told me out there in the sunshine, so that is what I did. There were a couple of things I didn't think about, didn't bother to ask about. I'll come to those later. They're the things I learned on this day of 1928, when low clouds hung like the bottom of a plate over the San Fernando Valley and I wheeled out the winged chariot to go places.

I poured on the coal, got off the field and went into the soup. Right on up through it to make an over-the-top flight. I had my map all laid out and I swung the ship until it was heading on course. All I needed to do when I got on top was to stick to the compass and I'd be flying right up Market street, San Francisco.

The first rude shock I got was when I came out of the overcast. About half a mile from the point where I broke through a mountain also had broken through. It suddenly occurred to me that the mountain was more permanent than I was, that it would have won an argument with me and that the only reason I hadn't plowed into it while climbing up through the soup was simply that I hadn't headed in that direction. No science, all luck.

I shook off the picture of $8,000 worth of biplane stacked on the mountainside, got my bearings and went onward over the top with less assurance. It was swell, though. It really was. Except that I was getting cold. I was still grabbing altitude, the soup wasn't far below me—and I *had* to stay up there. Because I didn't know where the clouds left off, visibility began and altitude ended. So I hung on for a while.

This is the author, just before taking off for some stunts before the camera!

I was bucking a jolly little headwind. It prevails at that time of year. I didn't know it then, but I know it now. But I stuck with the compass. Until I got too cold.

I went down, down and still down through the muck. Imagine my surprise when I found I was over Coalinga. Just over Coalinga. In fact, hardly over Coalinga at all, if you know what I mean. And Coalinga is surrounded by mountains.

So I went up again. I flew along, getting numb, when I saw a beautiful cumulous cloud on a higher strata. I was tired watching the compass so I checked myself against the cloud. I did some fine navigating, using that cloud as my

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bearing. What I didn't stop to realize was that, while it looked very permanent from where I sat, there wasn't any anchor on it. And it was drifting. So was I. By the time I realized this I was far off my course, and corrected about 30 degrees. I corrected because I was practically among the trees on a mountain. Of course, I over-corrected and swung far off my course once more.

I got a hole, went down and found out where I was. Then I went up again. I'd figured on a short flight and the wind was making it a long one. The wind certainly lengthens out a flight in a 90-100 m.p.h. ship. I hung on doggedly, wishing that I'd never taken up flying for a living in the first place.

After a long time I figured that I must be somewhere near the San Francisco Bay region—if not right over Market street. I went down through the soup and found out that generally I was right. I was in California, all right. I had about 500 feet altitude and I was flirting with the Oakland side of the San Mateo bridge. I got my bearings right away only because I was so familiar with the country.

From that point in was easy.

A short time later I had to return to Los Angeles. I threw theory into the wastebasket. I asked a lot of questions and found out that it would take me ten minutes longer to go via Lebec and Sandberg, which is a sort of pass, than it would to go the way I had come—practically smack into Frazier Mountain and over the Matau flats, which is very, very tough country.

I asked more questions and found other little detours I could make, thus adding a few minutes to my flying time, but giving me peace of mind. I also added another little innovation to my flight. I took the trouble to check the weather along the route and at my destination.

These two things: 1) checking the route over which I was going to fly, and 2) checking the weather at destination became two inviolable rules to me from that time on. I never have made a flight since without knowing exactly what I was going to encounter.

Of course, that one flight didn't cure me of everything. For some time later I'd do odd things such as flying at night with only a flashlight. I had one field into which I flew quite a bit after the shades of night had fallen. It had high tension wires. I flew around with my flashlight until I found the wires, then used them to guide me into the field.

But I stopped doing these things after a while, just as I stopped relying on what I didn't know, what I thought I knew and began asking questions.

Young pilots are often afraid to ask. They think they are showing themselves up. I have known a lot of guys like that. They were fine fellows.

May they rest in peace.

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