



Hello, Columbus – by John Allard

Loosely based on Just Flight Cargo Pilot® - Microsoft Flight Simulator experiences....

Chapter 5 – Columbus

Now I'm the one who's nervous. We're still descending in the hold over the Rickenbacker 5R outer marker. I had taken the controls from Joe a few moments ago and he's busy studying the approach plate with his flashlight.

"Mark", he says. I roll left to a standard rate bank, working the trim wheel a little to maintain 500 fpm. We've pulled the power back some more, but the airspeed is still 145, reflecting our ever so slight nose down attitude.

I work at keeping my scan going; it's kind of a juggling act, trying to hold the flashlight and the yoke, and still have a hand for the big trim wheel. Flashlight in the right hand, left on the yoke seems to work. I can turn the trim wheel with the heel of my palm while still holding the light, if not exactly aiming it accurately, as long as I don't have to adjust it too far. It just takes a little trim change going into the turn, then going the opposite way by the same amount as we roll out.

Fifteen minutes of this and I'd probably get pretty good at it. I'm rough, but it's good enough. We won't have fifteen more minutes.

Before I know it we're going through 3,500 and in the turn back inbound. Finish this turn, then one minute straight, one minute turning outbound and we'll be in the procedure. It will all come together quickly now, one way or the other. Have to do this right – damn sure don't want to end up going around to try again. We have enough fuel by dead reckoning from the last known quantity for at least two more tries, maybe three, depending on our unknown climb performance but that's not the way I plan to spend the evening.

"Mark", again from Joe. I'm a few seconds behind him. I'd let the bank angle come shallow and the nose hasn't come back around to 050 yet. I hold the turn for a few more seconds, then begin rolling level, palming the trim with the light shining around madly. This is the last inbound leg, parallel with but offset from the extended runway centerline. The next turn will line us up on that line headed away from the airfield. 3,100. It's time to raise the nose. I add a little power, but not much. I want to get down to 130 knots now, but don't want to sink below 3,000 yet. Back pressure...more back pressure....that's it. Trim...trim...good.

"Full rich", I say. Joe pushes the mixture levers the last inch to the full forward stops. I can hear a slight downbeat in the engine noise. They were making more power while still leaned out a little, but I have all I need for now.

The big plane is stable. At this weight there's a lot of inertia and nothing happens very fast unless you let the nose drop and the sink rate creep up. It's a predictable sweetheart of an aircraft, a pilot's airplane. Big enough not to be skittish and dance to every little gust and turbulent eddy, but still small enough to feel through the controls. The big Fairchild talks back to me through my left hand on the yoke and through the soles of my feet and my posterior in this damnable uncomfortable seat. Its message is more subtle than the bellow of the radial engines; this is the wing and the control surfaces speaking silently to me. The aircraft seems to be telling me it will do me right if I do my part.

"Mark"

"OK, last turn in the hold." We'll make this final one-eighty and roll out on 230 degrees, the reciprocal of the approach course. After flying five miles we'll do the procedure turn; forty-five left...straight for one minute...a one-eighty left...a short straight leg and then intercept the approach course, 050 degrees, with another forty-five degree turn, this time to the right. Done right, this will place us inbound on the extended runway centerline at about eight miles, still three miles out from the outer marker. It sounds easy. It is easy, if the lights are on and the NAV1 radio is alive. Well, easier than this. I'll never bitch about having to fly an ILS again.

We're level at 3,000, not yet in the clouds, but I can see them not far below us. It looks nearly solid. I need to concentrate on flying the approach as precisely as possible. If anyone's going to be looking outside, it should be Joe, not the guy flying the approach, though it's not as if I've got localizer and glide slope needles to concentrate on or anything. I'll be getting my cues from Joe verbally from here on, and from those gauges I'm trying to scan. Everything else on the panel is meaningless.

"Mark!" This time I'm right on, heading is coming round to 230. I roll level, with the airport over our shoulder at five miles. Five miles now to the turn; about two and a half minutes. I fidget in the seat, watching the five staring flight instruments. Drifting up, speed bleeding down. My nervousness translates to an unconscious pull on the yoke. Correct it; that's better. Relax!

An eternity later I hear, "Fifteen seconds"; a half-mile from the turn now.

"Turn."

I start the turn, concentrating on maintaining a steady 3,000. We'll lose a couple of knots in the turn. Better add a little power. We're at 130 now and don't have much idea how far the flaps are down. Better not get any slower, especially in a turn. Handling is mushier now, more hesitant with those extra 15 knots gone.

Should have held on to 145 knots through the procedure turn, but we'll ride it out like this now. Stick to the plan unless it's fatally flawed.

The procedure turn goes better than we have any right to expect. I've got the altitude and airspeed nailed now. The big Fairchild seems to want to do it right too. A little over a minute for the one-eighty, but a shallower bank is better than one too steep at this speed. Now we're turning right to 050, headed for the barn.

"You're left a little." The heading is good; I bank right, turning the nose less than ten degrees.

"Coming in, that's good." I return to 050. "Seven miles", still at 3,000. I reduce power a little, letting the nose come down a degree. I want to cross the marker in two miles at 2,500. The VSI needle seems riveted in place. My head knows that it lags, it's supposed to. My hand wants to push the nose down, start the little needle moving. Hold on – it'll respond. It does, at last. We're descending again.

"Six miles." The altimeter still shows 2,850. I'm higher than I'd planned, but still OK. Crossing the marker a little high is acceptable; we've got five more miles between marker and threshold to adjust. Three-fifty down, now four hundred, still increasing. Let it sink. I need seven hundred per minute after the marker. Don't get timid now. I fight the urge to add power.

The VSI is at five hundred with a slow downward trend when Joe calls the marker. 2,600 – too high. Back another nudge on the throttles, the nose dips almost imperceptibly. Everything needs to be smooth now. Anticipate, don't react. Trends are as important here as instantaneous values. The vertical speed is increasing. Don't want to let it get too high. I need to arrest it at seven hundred, seven-fifty tops. It's hard to read 50 fpm on that gauge – the graduations are pretty closely spaced on the face of the meter. A glide slope needle would be a big help.

At four miles I'm working hard. It's a natural tendency to pull back on the yoke when the pucker factor starts to climb. Have to fight it. Let the trim keep the nose where it should be. Fly the throttles. I should be at 2,150 here, but still have 2,250. Is there a tailwind? No, I don't think so – I've been too timid with reducing the power to get my sink rate right. Back some more on the throttles.

"How's our line?" I ask Joe in a staccato query full of adrenalin.

"Just starting to drift left again – still close." I adjust. The VSI is at seven hundred now, maybe the width of a graduation mark more. Watch it; don't let it go lower now. I sneak a look outside. Cotton wool, the darkest shade of gray; the stars are gone. We're in it. Let Joe look. Keep the scan going – don't fixate on one gauge.

As we come ever closer to three miles, my inner ear exaggerates the sink rate, screaming at me to push the throttles, pull back the yoke – do something! It's difficult – no impossible – to ignore it. Don't succumb! The VSI is right on; the altimeter says we need to be lower. Joe calls the milestone. The altimeter says 1,850. Still a little high, but only 50 feet; the trend is in the right direction. Can't let it sink too far though. Will need a little power soon. Now? No, not yet. Hold on for a few more seconds. Let her come down to that imaginary glide slope line we calculated so calmly almost a half-hour ago.

"Anything", I ask Joe. He's craning up to look over the top of the panel. He wants to see the ground as badly as I want him to see it.

"Nothing."

"Too soon."

He's back on the GPS. "Drifting left again, just a little. Cross wind?"

"Maybe a little. I'm not correcting much." I nudge the rudder again, slewing the nose a degree or so, hold it for a second or two to let the aircraft actually change direction, then relax it.

At two miles the altimeter is right on our target altitude, 1,550. I give the throttles just a tiny nudge forward to stop the increasing trend. The flight instruments all seem to be OK. Only two hundred feet to the MDA. We should be breaking out any second.

"Lineup?"

"OK." Joe's looking hard again, craning up as high as his belt will allow, glancing back to his GPS every few seconds. Our nose is higher than for a normal approach, because of the flap setting. Our higher approach speed helps some, but the AI says we're still a couple of degrees more nose up than we're used to.

1,500 - - - 1450 - - - 1400... Come on! 1,375. I begin to get mentally prepared for the go around that I so desperately wanted to avoid. 1350. I tighten my grip on the yoke, reach for the throttles.

"I've got...something...", Joe says tentatively. I begin to pull to arrest our sink, fixated on the altimeter descending through our MDA. I try to push the throttles, but my right hand doesn't respond. My left hand is doing the right thing; my right seems to be listening to Joe.

"THAT'S IT! I've got approach lights. Threshold. We're out!" My left hand pushes forward again, while my right recoils from the throttles. Airspeed? I was pulling. 127 and sinking, get the nose down some more, get those three knots

back. OK. That's good. I look up. What a beautiful sight! Laid out before us in twenty plus mile visibility is the entire field, with both those beautiful, beautiful runways and all the lights in the world. I'm craning up too now. It's hard to see with the nose this high, but it's doable. Our position looks good. I note red and white on the approach slope indicators. Three of the four are white; we're a little high.

An airport at night is an attractive panorama, particularly viewed from the air where you can see it all, the colors, the patterns, sometimes the moving traffic, rotating beacons, flashing amber lights on ground vehicles. It's just breathtaking sometimes and I've never tired of seeing it. Any airport, any night, but never more so than tonight. I'm almost moved to tears by the sight. Except for our two flashlights these are the first lights we've seen in almost two hours.

"Traffic?"

"None. Nothing I can see." Joe's almost standing now, straining against his seatbelt, looking over the nose. His excitement matches my own. We're like a couple of kids who've been given the keys to the candy store.

I'm not going to hit the numbers. I'm too high for that. It looks like a normal touchdown zone arrival, maybe a bit long even. I hate to give away those precious feet of runway, but making a play for it now is just going to upset the approach. Take what you get! I pull the power back another good handful and the nose comes down enough for a better view. Nine-fifty on the altimeter now, but it may not be right. We're going to lose the threshold lights under the nose in a couple of seconds.

"They found the green light" Joe says matter-of-factly. I glance left to the tower cab and see a bright green light coming from near the top. I'll be damned. First time I've ever seen one used.

I'm watching the runway edge lights now. I can still see the approach slope lights and just the last couple of threshold lights on the extreme left as I press my head against the side window for a better angle. Everything else is blocked by the panel. The threshold flashes beneath us on my left, fast! Flare...back, back, throttles back some more. It's hard to judge the height with the high angle and no landing lights. The runway lights are moving by so fast I can't get an impression of how high we are. We're floating along who knows how high above the rushing tarmac below. Fly the speed off. I'm still watching the runway lights flash past on my side.

Joe say's "Right of center", with some concern in his voice. We're still floating...ground effect no doubt. Suddenly the little hairs snap up again. This is too long in the flare – we're high. I grab for the throttles, add some power to arrest the sink, trying to hold the nose level. I don't have the flashlight pointed in



the right direction now. Damn! Now my inner ear senses a sink rate and this time it's not wrong.

Wham! The sound of wheels screeching and rolling, just for a second, then silence again. A bounce, we're airborne again. Keep the throttles in, arrest it. We arrive a second time, this time sounding more like a normal touchdown. Wheel noises from the main gear. I try to hold the nose off as long as possible to get some additional aerodynamic braking from the wings, but it doesn't last long. I'm on the rudder pedals as the nose comes down. The nose gear makes its own arrival after a few seconds and I've finally got a good view of the runway ahead. We're far right and still drifting that way. Left rudder. Look at the airspeed. Still 105, can't use the brakes yet. We're really rolling fast, dangerously close to the right edge of the runway. The right main gear must be very close to going off. The rudder begins to bite and we start to move left, slowing, but still racing along at a good clip.

Slowing now... 95 knots. We're moving back toward the center line. At 90 knots I begin to use the wheel brakes. This is looking comfortable now. We appear to have plenty of runway left. We're still maybe a thousand feet from where the lights go amber, marking the last thousand. The red threshold still looks far away.

As we slow and I relax the pressure on the brakes I say to Joe, "I'm going to roll out to the end and stop on the taxiway between the two runways. We shouldn't be in anyone's way there. We'll keep them running and wait for someone to indicate what they want us to do. I don't want to cross 5 L, even at the end without ground saying so, somehow. The emergency is over, so we won't take any more liberties with the system."

As we approach the end I add a little power to make the turn onto the taxiway, rolling forward until I'm sure our tail is well clear of 5R.

"Let's keep them turning for a while and see what happens, Joe. Open the cowl flaps, please."

"Cowl flaps open", comes his normal response after a few seconds.

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BOXWINGS AIR FREIGHT OFFICE – RICKENBACKER says the lighted sign over the door as we walk into the building.

Ed Collier, the night manager leads us through the small lobby, into a beat up conference room, away from the ramp noise.

"You guys sure scared the hell out of us. We got a call from the tower about an hour ago that said it looked like you were having problems, but that you were still inbound. We've been milling around in tight little circles ever since, not that there was anything to do."

"Did you call Ocala" I ask.

"No. Didn't think of it until a few minutes ago; by then you were on final and I didn't want to be on the phone." He seems a little embarrassed.

"There's no one in the office tonight – you'd just have gotten an answering machine." I'm pleased he didn't call my wife at home, but don't say so.

"What the hell happened to you guys?" It had been too noisy on the ramp to talk, so this was our first opportunity to bring him up to date. When Joe and I had come out the door on the left side of the aircraft the first thing we did was to take a few steps aft and look up at the flaps. Five degrees, maybe seven tops – a good deal less than the normal position for the first notch. We use full flaps when we're this heavy, over 25 degrees. Thank God for that long runway. We just looked at one another, each thinking his own thoughts about how this could have ended. At that point Ed had walked up after parking the white pickup truck with the amber light bar on the roof and the big illuminated FOLLOW ME sign in the rear, signaling for us to go into the freight office.

What indeed? As I opened my mouth to begin answering, the phone in the middle of the table warbled insistently. All three of us jumped.

Ed picked it up. "Boxwings Air Freight, Ed speaking." He nods once or twice. I can hear a voice spilling out of the handset, but can't make out anything, just someone talking. He says, "Yes, sir. They're here in the office with me now." There's a pause, then, "Yes, they're both just fine. That's fine. You can come on over any time." He replaces the receiver.

"That was the tower chief. He wants to have a talk. He's on his way over now." Doubt clouds his features and he looks at me. "That's OK, isn't it?" I just nod. This was inevitable. We'd cycled the system and there was going to be a paper storm before this was over. The FAA and possibly the NTSB were going to want to hear from us, and ultimately to be heard themselves.

For a brief second my thoughts turned to whether I ought to have an attorney before giving any statements. No, I don't think I'll go down that road. Let's play this out on the high ground unless it looks like there's blood in the water. If the tone gets ugly I can always stop and say I want counsel before continuing.

"Aaagghmm" Ed clears his throat. "Do you want to tell me about it now, or wait until he gets here?"

"Well, the short story is that we had a total electrical failure about 200 miles south of here; both sides." His eyebrows went up about an inch. "Have you got any coffee around here", I ask, realizing that I'd not had a cup since just after we cleared the Atlanta terminal area.

"Sure, sure", he responded, jumping up to get some. He returned in a few minutes with three big mugs emblazoned with the company name and logo. On one, "ED" is written in felt marker. Classy, I think to myself. As he sets them down he asks about cream and sugar. I shake my head and Joe follows suit.

"Ed, that cargo is going to have to be unloaded tonight. With no power, the aft ramp and door will have to be opened by hand. I think the winches have a manual override but I'm not sure how it works. Have you got someone who can start to look that over? Don't let anyone try to power anything up. Oh, and you'll need to have some portable lights rigged in the cargo bay. We don't want anyone to get hurt shuffling around in the dark in there."

I think some more. "I don't want anyone to start looking for the problem yet, and don't try to hook up ground power to the aircraft. We still don't know the nature of the problem and I want to understand it before we accidentally bury any of the evidence." It's possible that the FAA will want the aircraft quarantined pending an investigation, but I don't think so. This was just an incident. It didn't rise to the level of an accident, so I don't think things are going to go to that extreme. None the less, I don't want a ramp hand trying to plug in the ground cart or worse, trying to fix what had happened.

The conference room door opens and a stranger steps in, a bit tentatively. "Ed Collier," he asks.

"I'm Ed," says Collier, rising and walking toward the stranger with his hand extended.

"John Stankowski", says the stranger, shaking Ed's hand. "FAA. I'm the tower chief."

Ed introduces us, getting Joe's last name wrong in the process. Stankowski shakes our hands in turn, a firm, friendly handshake. He's wearing khaki Dockers, black loafers and a white dress shirt, open at the collar, no tie. He has a light nylon windbreaker with FAA – Columbus embroidered on the left breast.

"They called me at home...", he checks his watch, "...about an hour and a half ago. By the time I got in you were already out of your holding pattern and

inbound to the field. I got up to the cab just in time to see you land." He politely doesn't mention the bouncing arrival.

"I've debriefed my guys; just preliminarily. Center handled most of this, until they saw you make your first turn over the marker. Then they handed it off to my folks, who were prepared to pick it up at that point. Since you were filed for here, everyone suspected that's what you'd try to do if you could." He paused a minute, looked at me intently and asked, "What happened up there? We were speculating it was just a radio problem, but when you finally came in you had no lights."

I gave him as full a post-mortem as I could put together off the cuff. He listened intently, shaking his head a little at times, nodding understanding at others. I could see he was riveted. I ended with explaining the decision to sit between the runways at the end, rather than cross 5L or try to taxi anywhere without lights or clearance. He broke a small smile at that point and nodded.

"Well", he said with more of a smile, "quite a night for everyone, wasn't it?" He pushed away from the table, placed his hands on his knees and continued. "I'd say you guys did a great job. We're going to have to do a formal investigation and file a report. We'll need some interviews and written statements from you tomorrow. The NTSB guys may have an interest, but maybe not. Of course Center and Washington will get their two cents worth in too, but from our perspective here at Columbus, we're very pleased with how this was handled, in the air and on the ground. By the way, my night controllers wanted me to pass on their best regards. You had them sweating for a while."

As the FAA man left a few minutes later, Ed rose and said, "That was a hell of a ride. I'm glad you guys managed to work that out." He shuffled his feet a little, then said, "I need to get back out there. We're backed up. Had two departures held up when they closed the field for you. There's another to depart as soon as the traffic backup is cleared, and we have an inbound in about two hours. Have to see to getting your plane unloaded too. You need anything else from me?"

"We need to use the conference room for a while. I want to spend some time making some notes while this is all still fresh. Later we'll need a car or a ride to a motel. Any chance someone can whistle up some reservations for us. Maybe someplace near an all-night restaurant?"

"Sure, sure. We don't use the conference room much at night. I'll call the motel myself once I get things moving out there. It won't be a problem."

"Thanks, Ed."

I rustle up a couple of yellow pads and pens from the outer office for Joe and me. Handing a set to him I say, "Write up everything you can remember, as you



remember it. Don't try to make this a smooth copy. This is just a memory aid for later. Don't spare the details, though, and be critical. There's a lot we can learn from this and others may benefit too. Try to think of what we overlooked, and what we should have done better, or differently. OK?"

A quick nod. He picks up the pen, looks down at the pad of paper, then looks back up at me.

"Boss?"

"Yes?"

"I've been job hunting. I've got an offer from Southwest. I was going to give you notice tomorrow when we got back to Florida." He looks down, then back up at me.

"I've been thinking about it. I'm going to turn them down, if that's OK with you."

Sometimes things just work out. Life is good.

End...