

A Hundred Things

by Bryan Quickmire

The Music Of The Night

The Zlin 142C with flaps fully extended slides down a rather steep slope to a gentle landing at Lake Simcoe Regional. I taxi to the ramp and shut down beside the pumps.

This is day one of the research for an article I'm writing for Aviation Quarterly magazine. The piece is to focus primarily on the Zlin's aerobatics capabilities but it will also explore the airplane's versatility in other areas.

Zlin Aerospace, the North American distributor of the Czech airplanes, apparently has nothing to hide. They've given me carte blanche to take their airplane off by myself and fly it as much as I feel necessary for the project.

The 142C is powered by a supercharged six cylinder 210 hp engine and is certified in the aerobatic category for +6 and -3.5 G's. It has the potential to do some fairly serious aerobatics.

Zlin markets this two-seater as a trainer, for ab initio through commercial and instrument students. Unlike conventional trainers, the 142C is also used to teach full aerobatics and emergency manoeuvres courses. Some operators offer "thrill of a lifetime" flights and air combat simulations as well. Of course you don't have to be a flying school to own one, they're often acquired as personal airplanes.

Today I'm delving into the airplane's overall handling characteristics and its ability to perform recreational aerobatics. Examining the regime of competition aerobatics will come later.

After the pit stop I head back out for a few last whifferdills before dark. Check trims, flaps, fuel selector, supercharger, prop and away we go. The Zlin climbs readily towards the setting sun.

At 3,500 feet trim for level flight and check for traffic. Then it's a half roll to inverted to allow loose objects to come out of hiding and to check straps. If the straps aren't done up it's traditional to omit the half roll back to upright in favour of falling out through the canopy.

Ready! Steep turn. Spin. Inverted flight. Loop. Aileron roll. Slow roll. Half Cuban. Half Reverse Cuban. Split S. Immelman.

The eager Czech airplane performs the repertoire of recreational aerobatics easily and well, even at the hands and feet of a pilot not yet familiar with its nuances. I do each figure two or three times, all the while looking for subtleties and making copious mental notes.

Now for a Hammerhead. Pull 5 G's to vertical. We go straight up until nearly stopped, then put in full right rudder to pivot around the wingtip. Oops! We wallow around drunkenly until I can get the nose pointed back down.

Out of habit I used stick inputs opposite to what is required to supplement the rudder. This is a consequence of the propeller rotating in the opposite direction to the North American airplanes I usually fly. The next hammer is an improvement but still not a ten. Better work on this tomorrow!

The Zlin is truly delightful. It has very light, responsive controls. The whole airplane exudes competency and quality, not a trace of cheap plastic anywhere. It's a bit like a personal fighter.

The sun is gone, only a few minutes are left before it's officially night. Although virtually all pilot reports are written based upon daytime flights, in the real world people fly airplanes after dark. I decide to spend some time doing just that.

Back at Barrie it's right traffic for runway 25. Taxi and landing lights on. Around the pattern we go. Engage the supercharger and set the prop to max rpm in case of overshoot. Cross over the road, pass the red displaced threshold lights and skim the green runway end lights.

There's just enough daylight left to make out the surface of the runway. Throttle to idle, flare and the wheels touch softly. With only light braking there's still lots of the 2,100 foot runway in front of the nose. Pirouette around the left wheel, backtrack and take-off for another circuit.

This time in the flare all that's visible is the white runway lights and the portion of the surface in the beam of the landing light. Now it's truly night.

Circuits are a great way of practising precision flying. Practise precise speed control during climbing, level and descending flight, including climbing, level and descending turns. Practise precise attitude and power adjustments. Practise precise configuration changes.

There's kind of a rhythm to going round and round in rectangles. After six circuits it's time to move back to Lake Simcoe Regional for a change of scenery. On the way I realize that panel and cockpit lighting haven't even crossed my mind. I haven't once squinted into a dark shadow or reached for the flashlight. The lighting inside the Zlin is excellent.

Little Lake passes underneath, the surface just discernible. It's mostly frozen, with a splotchy coating of snow, and deep, dark, liquid water in the center. The rolling farmland is mostly black, only the occasional light denotes a house or barn. Conical beams reveal the presence of cars on the roads below.

Ahead and to the right the moon illuminates a swath across the mouth of Kempenfelt Bay. Lake Simcoe itself is faintly visible, surface glimmering softly. The Zlin slices through the night, not demanding attention but responding immediately and proportionately to my requests.

The airport's rotating beacon is not visible, maybe it's wired into the ARCAL system. Key the mike seven times. A few miles ahead the airport lights up like a Christmas tree being plugged in. The runway end identifier lights blink in unison.

Lake Simcoe's runway, at 5,000 feet, is quite a bit longer than Barrie's. Paralleling it on downwind gives the impression of there being ample room for a 747. Of course a real 10,000 foot runway at night seems to go on forever. (Unless you're flying a 747!)

On final the white lights of the precision approach path indicator tell me I'm higher than necessary. Left to my own devices I tend to go with a steeper approach with little power rather than dragging in on a shallow approach with lots of power.

After touchdown I taxi to the run-up area to reflect for a few moments then take position back on the active. The dip in the middle of the runway is revealed by the pronounced curvature of the two strings of lights. Barrie's runway has a hump in the middle. Between the two airports, the average runway is level.

Runway lights on a clear night like this have an intense brilliance. Right now we have a bit too much of a good thing. A few clicks on the mike turns them down. Magic stuff this ARCAL!

After a last circuit it's time to take the Zlin home to Barrie. Going the long way, we arc south and west out over the bay. The engine purrs like a contented tiger, there's no 'auto rough' as the water surrounds us.

To the right the lights of Barrie wrap around the head of the bay. To the left Highway 400 carries a solid mass of commuters and cottagers north. The headlights make a stripe three lanes wide which undulates over unseen hills and dales from its source in Toronto.

There's no airborne traffic though. A 270 overhead approach to touchdown and we taxi over the snow covered grass to shut down between a Cessna 206 on amphib and a 185 on wheels.

I like to sit undisturbed for a time after the last flight of the day. It helps the transition from sky to ground. The Zlin's gyros whine as they spool down ever so gradually. In my Skybolt I would sit and listen to the engine tick as it cooled. In my Challenger I sit enveloped in silence. Anyone interrupting or trying to rush me from this reverie is in grave danger.

This pleasant excursion into the dark triggers memories of night flights past. At home, in front of the fire, I leaf through logbooks reading remarks written long ago. The opening notes of "The Music Of The Night" come from the stereo.

The Phantom of the Opera sings: "Night time sharpens, heightens each sensation. Darkness wakes and stirs imagination."

At night I'm somehow more alert, more aware, maybe of necessity since many things just don't come as casually as during the day. As well, perhaps because the visual clutter is reduced, there is greater appreciation for that which can be seen.

"Slowly, gently, night unfurls its splendour."

After the sun has gone to bed and the earth is long since black, the sky still resists surrender. Even after the burnt orange band on the horizon has gone the sky retains for a time a wonderful rich, dense indigo before finally yielding to the blackness.

Cities, which during daytime are merely locations, at night become splendid carpets of twinkling jewels. Towering skyscrapers seem more than three dimensional. Runways, which during daytime are merely drab gray slabs, at night are lightscapes of brilliant, clear white and green and red and blue.

"Hard as lightning, soft as candlelight, dare you trust the music of the night?" asks the Phantom, somewhat rhetorically.

Sunset often heralds a calming of the atmosphere as the heat of the day no longer mixes up the winds aloft. While the air may seem wonderfully smooth, the night has many moods and I've learned never to take it for granted.

Sometimes it is open and truthful. When the moon is full and the earth is blanketed by snow, night is but an imitation of day, albeit painted from a different palette.

Sometimes the inky blackness holds surprises. The first warning you may get of unforecast precipitation is when the wingtip strobes reveal sparkling diamonds rushing by in the opposite direction.

Sometimes the dark can't keep its secrets. Lifting off from Key West, Florida, on a moonless night we turn right as soon as able to avoid getting too close to the Naval Air Station.

Everything outside goes black. The ground lights are behind, there's nothing in front but sea and sky. Both are the same shade, no horizontal line separates the two. It's technically VFR but in reality instrument conditions prevail, there are no external references.

Everything outside goes white. Lightning strokes out the bottom of a thunderstorm nearby. Several are scattered about the area, sitting virtually motionless. Each periodically flashes its electric warning sign, now exposing a bolt, now veiling a bolt inside itself. Like lighthouses marking dangerous reefs, very dangerous reefs.

“Open up your mind, let your fantasies unwind, in this darkness which you know you cannot fight.”

The night may afford us fresh angles on familiar scenes. One night, crossing Montreal to land at St. Hubert, traffic is scarce so Dorval Tower allows a detour over the Olympic Stadium. The Expos are playing the Dodgers and I get a blimp’s eye view through the open roof.

The players are figurines on a cloth of Irish green, watched by a sea of heads. The batter must have connected, the figurines scurry about after a ball I cannot see. There’s no way to second guess the umpires from up here, especially not while circling so steeply.

The night may also contain unexpected magnificence. After a take-off from 24R at Toronto International the clouds engulf the airplane before the wheels are in the wells. Set climb power, synchronize the props. ATC vectors us around, back towards the city, to send us off on our journey east.

Emerging from cloud into the clear there is no moon, no stars. We’re between layers. No moon, no stars, yet it’s not dark. The clouds below are glowing, backlit by the urban sprawl beneath, and this soft glow is reflected in the clouds above. We seem to be suspended in an enormously proportioned candlelit cavern.

The Phantom concludes: “You alone can make this song take flight. Help me make the music of the night.”

Okay Phantom, I agree, night *is* a special time. Meet you tomorrow at sunset!