

A MIRACLE IN MEXICO

By Capt. Dick 'Wiley' Adair

(Reprinted from the May 2009 FARPA newsletter. Thanks to Ace Avakian, may he rest in peace, who said I could reprint anything from the FARPA Newsletters as long as I gave him credit.)

One day as I was looking at one of my old pilots logbooks, I saw an entry dated December 31, 1946. Aircraft NC 54408, a twin engine Cessna (the military called them UC 78)! was going from San Diego to Guaymas Mexico. As I pondered over this entry in my logbook, I decided to write a story of this horrific flight. In 1946 I was employed with Swift Air Service at Lindbergh field in San Diego California. They offered charter service and flight training. On December 31, 1946 about 1:00 pm three gentlemen came into the office and wanted to charter a plane to Guaymas Mexico. They said their wives were already down there and had planned a New Year's Eve party and wanted them to fly down. It was customary when we flew into Mexico that the boss would go to the bank and purchase pesos, which made it easier to give to customs, to buy gas in Mexico. He said I would have to land in Mexicali to clear customs, and to be on the safe side we'd have to refuel in Hermosillo, then on to Guaymas. He inquired about the facilities in Guaymas, they told him they had 100 octane and a dirt runway near town. I had no aeronautical charts to navigate with the exception of a road map. I was excited to go, I headed home to pack my suitcase. By the time we were all ready to go it was about 3:30 pm.

We took off on runway 27, climbed to 7000 feet to clear the Laguna Mountains east of San Diego. The weather report was partly cloudy. We landed in Mexicali. It took a while to clear customs and by the time we took off it was later than I had hoped for.

We flew over the northern end of the Gulf of California dropped down over the water about 200 feet and could see a school of dolphins coming out of the water and diving down again swimming the same direction as we were going; it was quite a sight. Then I climbed to about 1000 feet. A little later it started to sprinkle and I could see some very dark clouds over toward Hermosillo. The closer we got we could see a large thunderstorm over Hermosillo which prevented me from landing to refuel. I told the guys it may be dark when we arrive in Guaymas and that there are no lights on the runway or around the airport. It would be safer if I landed on one of the dry lakebeds and continue in the morning. They did not want to do that; they said they had to be in Guaymas tonight. So against my better judgment we continued on. When we arrived at Guaymas it was dark. I circled over the town hoping to find the airport, or at least a place that I might land.

My three passengers were very apprehensive and nervous and said what are we going to do? I said please stay clam, I planned to fly out over the edge of town and find the beach and then turn inland a safe distance and make a 180-degree turn and land on to ground heading out towards the bay, so we wouldn't collide with anything. I said I have to save this airplane so please keep your seatbelts fastened and stay clam; we can make it! I circled out over the water about that time two red lights came on above the fuel gages. Indicating about 10 minutes of fuel left. I turned back over land and it looked as though I could make 180-degree turn and touch down on land before we hit the water. I lowered the landing gear turned on the landing lights came over a little knoll, almost hit a cactus and touched down. Rolled over some brush and finally came to an abrupt stop. The aircraft pitched up on it's nose then plopped back down. We were safe; thank you Lord. When we stepped down off the wing we sunk into mud above our knees. We got our gear out and about that time we heard the locals hollering at us. . .Quicksand!!! A couple of them cameover with flashlights and escorted us to dry ground. They put us on a flat bed truck and hauled us to the hotel.

I was so thankful to be in the hotel. The driver of the truck was also a driver at the hotel. He met me in the restaurant and said he would help me with anything and to just let him know. I was glad to meet someone who spoke a little English and I could communicate with him. His name was Ricardo. After dinner I walked down to the ballroom in the hotel where they were celebrating New Year's Eve. There were a lot of people and they were all amazed we had survived the crash. They had seen the airplane circling over the city and thought sure it would crash somewhere. The wives of the three gentleman were so excited and thankful for their safety. They embraced me and thanked me many times. Also a lot of people came over to congratulate me on a safe landing. They treated me like Charles Lindbergh. I was so thankful we were all safe.

The next day was New Year's Day and everything was closed. Ricardo knocked on my door and asked

how I was. I asked him to take me out to the crash site. When we arrived I was very happy to see that the only damage was the nose of the aircraft which was dented a little. When it pitched forward on it's nose, it dented slightly. The wheels were buried in wet sand. Believe it or not the props were horizontal and not damaged at all. In looking at the location of the aircraft there was no way we could get any equipment to attach to the tail and drag it back to solid ground.

I asked Ricardo if he could find a few good men to help lift the plane a little at a time and push it to solid ground. He said he thought he could.

In a couple hours he came back with 12 men. I said I would pay them, they spoke no English and I didn't speak Spanish. I gave instructions to Ricardo that we had to be careful where we put our hands. I explained they could put their hands on the leading edge of the wing and push. This aircraft has a wooden wing covered with fabric, and the fuselage was fabric as well. So I showed them exactly where to lift and push. They were so helpful and we finally were able to move the airplane a few inches at a time to dry ground. Ricardo had a few tools and I had some in the plane.

I took the lower cowling off and cleaned the mud between the cylinders and the cowling. The men cleaned the wheels and landing gear. I cleaned the props and rotated them by hand. I dip sticked the fuel tank and knew I had enough fuel to take off and fly to the dirt landing strip, also known as the "airport". We cleared away the brush and cactus where I had touched down to make room for take off. We cleared enough area where I could taxi down and make a 180-degree turn and head out over the beach and water. After spending hours of getting the airplane ready to fly, I was a little apprehensive but I had no other choice.

I started the engines and they were running very well. I taxied back over the ground we had cleared. I decided not to stop and made a 180-degree turn and advanced to full throttle. It seemed like forever until I could get enough speed to rotate. Finally, I had the minimum speed for takeoff. I pulled back on the yoke and was airborne, only about two feet off the ground and over the water. I climbed to a safe altitude and flew over to the landing strip. I called my boss and he could hardly believe what had happened. We stayed a couple of days and then went back to San Diego. This is my story of my miracle in Mexico.