

Hidden Courage

Atlantis, prequel

by Christopher David Petersen, 1963-

Published: 2011



Table of Contents

The Flight

Day 1 ... thru ... Day 7

Reconnaissance

The Adventure

Day 1 ... thru ... Day 5

Homeward Bound



The Flight

“You sure you have everything?” Jack heard his dad say.

“I think so,” Jack replied.

This was it: the trip of a lifetime. Most people only dreamed of adventures this exciting. Jack sat in the back, shivering. It was cold in the backseat and the car hadn’t warmed up yet. This time of the year in New England could see temperatures in the twenties and thirties. Even with his fleece jacket on, he still felt chilled.

The backseat was jam-packed with gear, as well as the trunk. His mother had her camera in hand and was snapping photos from the front seat as they made their way to the airport. Jack felt a little self-conscious, but knew this would be that last time they would be seeing him for a while. He ignored his embarrassment and focused on the monumental task before him.

Jack had his checklist out and was going over it slowly. Everything was in bags and pouches so he couldn’t physically account for the items on the list. He closed his eyes and visualized each item as he had packed it away in the days before this morning.

‘Ropes, cams, ice gear, mountaineering boots,’ he thought to himself as he moved down the list. ‘Shorts, deodorant, toothpaste, guidebooks,’ he continued as his dad drove carefully, ensuring a safe ride to the airport.

“Tired, Jack?” his mom asked.

Jack’s eye’s snapped open as soon as he heard his name. He made a mental note of where he left off and replied, “No, I’m just checking my list; making sure I didn’t forget anything.”

His mom nodded her head in understanding and turned her head front. Jack closed his eyes again, only to be startled by a bright flash. He quickly opened his eyes as his mother prepared to snap another photo. This time he smiled for the camera, figuring if he gave her one good photo, she’d slow down a bit.

Thirty minutes and a dozen photos later, Jack could see a low flying plane above the car. It was making its approach to the runway. He watched it as it descended lower and lower, now way out in front of the vehicle.

As he watched, the plane looked like it was going to crash into an elevated bank at the end of the road, but then disappeared just beyond it.

Jack’s stomach was in knots. He was both excited and nervous, and it reminded him of the feeling he had when he stood before the base of El Capitan, in

Yosemite, just before he was to climb it. Things on this order of magnitude always made him feel this way.

"Is that it?" his mom asked, referring to the airport beyond the bank.

"If it's not, that guy's going to be awfully disappointed," Jack replied jokingly.

They made their way around the perimeter of the airport, turning in at a sign that read, *Robertson Airport, Plainville CT*. This was it. Jack looked across the airport apron and located a tiny white floatplane. He tapped his dad on the shoulder and pointed to it. His dad acknowledged and drove slowly in that direction.

His mom's head was busy darting from one plane to another as they drove past. She hadn't ever been to this airport before, let alone a small airport in a very long time, so the quantity and variety of planes, at first, overwhelmed her senses. Jack could hear her from the front seat cry out in excitement, "Ooh, look at that one," with nearly every plane they passed.

As they pulled up to the floatplane, Jack looked on in pride. It was a real beauty: a Zenair, STOL CH 701 kit airplane. This was Jack's plane. He had researched all the varieties of experimental kit planes on the market and chose this one for its all metal design, ruggedness, performance and cost. The 701 was a marvel to behold when Jack was pushing it to the limits of its performance. It could lift off in just under sixty feet and land in a short driveway if need be. It was small, measuring twenty feet long and twenty-seven feet wide, wing tip to wing tip, but it could carry a tremendous load, something that appealed to him during his investigation.

In addition, Jack had elected to add amphibious floats instead of the standard tricycle style landing gear, a move that cost him in weight and performance but opened up a greater world to him in destinations. Painted a simple white with a few blue stripes down the center for contrast, it had an efficient, no-nonsense look about it.

Jack stepped out from the car in front of his plane. Standing next to the engine cowl, he lightly rubbed the fuselage as if he were petting his favorite dog or cat. His mom caught the momentary affection toward the plane and snapped more photos.

Quietly, to himself, Jack said, "Okay, this is it. Don't let me down."

His father was bringing the luggage to the right side of the plane and piling it up just below the door, as Jack was in the middle of 'pre-flighting'. Walking around and inspecting the control surfaces, he looked up at the sky.

"Nice and clear," he said to his dad.

"Hope is stays that way en route," his dad replied. "You sure you want to do this?" he added, half protesting.

"I've been giving it some careful consideration and decided to call the whole thing off," Jack retorted with a smirk.

"Uh huh," his dad replied, not impressed with his son's joke.

"Dad, Mom; I know you're nervous, but everything will be alright. I'm not stupid. I don't take any unnecessary risks," Jack said, trying to ease his parents' concerns.

"I'd say this whole trip is unnecessary. You could just go to the beach or something, but PERU?" his dad said, with a little edge to his voice.

“I need this. This IS necessary, for me,” Jack responded, then added, “We’ve been through all of this before. You know I’m careful. You know I’m smart enough to make the right decisions in a crisis. You just have to trust me.”

Both parents nodded their heads in resignation. There was nothing more they could do or say. Jack had made up his mind and there was no turning him. All they could do now was to support him and not infuse negativity into the situation that would only serve to distract him from his needed focus. Jack had a mission.

More than two years before, Jack had scanned through his climbing magazine, enjoying snapshots of wild and adventurous mountains from around the world. Some photos were exposés of featured climbs and others were simply part of advertisements.

Casually flipping through, Jack spotted an ad that caught his eye; not for the intrinsic value of the item being peddled, but for the mountain shown in the background. It was a majestic looking mountain: snowcapped and rugged. In Jack’s mind, it represented the epitome of the classic monolith that drew climbers from all over the world; mountains like Everest and the Matterhorn. Mesmerized by its beauty, he quickly felt drawn to it, as if it were calling him.

In the days that followed, Jack’s interest in the mountain produced research that revealed it was unclimbed and unknown. From that moment on, Jack was obsessed. He didn’t just want to climb it. He needed to climb it.

On initial planning, he found that his biggest hurdle was its remote location. Buried deep in the heart of the Andes, the trek in would take weeks through rugged terrain, a factor he surmised was the real reason that it had never been climbed before.

Just when Jack thought the logistics to be insurmountable, he found a solution. Inspired by a TV program chronicling the lives of Alaskan bush pilots, Jack decided to put his own piloting skills to the ultimate test. He decided he would build his own bush plane, fly to Peru and land at the base of the mountain. That plan was bold and dangerous and Jack liked it.

Two years later, Jack’s dream had become reality.

Having secured his gear into the plane, there was nothing left for him to do. He hugged his parents, then got into the tiny cockpit.

DAY 1

“Clear,” he called out through the pilot’s window.

His parents stiffened as they waited for the engine to roar to life. Moments later, Jack turned the key and the prop started to windmill. In an instant, all that could be heard was drowned out by the deafening roar of the engine. He immediately focused on his instruments as they came to life and stabilized in the ‘green’.

Jack looked over at his mom. She had her fingers in her ears. He could see streams of tears running down her face. His dad had his arm around her, trying to console her sadness. Jack felt awful at that moment, but knew there was nothing he could do except make the best of it. He put on an enormous, toothy smile for his mom. Instantly, she smiled back and Jack could see that, in some small way,

he had eased her pain. He gave them a vigorous wave and mouthed the words, "I love you."

As he taxied to the end of the runway, he looked back. His parents hadn't moved from their original positions. Standing stoically, they watched as the tiny floatplane rolled onto the runway and came to a stop. Moments later, they heard the loud roar of the engine and knew Jack was under way.

With his heart pounding in anticipation, Jack pushed the throttle full forward and held it. As the tiny plane picked up speed, he adjusted the rudder pedals to maintain the centerline of the runway.

Ten feet, twenty feet, thirty feet...

Jack watched as the airspeed came alive and registered twenty-five knots. He looked down at the oil indicator to make sure it was indicating the proper pressure. Any negative reading and he would immediately abort the take off.

Forty feet, fifty feet...

Jack pulled back on the stick. As if on a spring, the tiny plane popped off the runway. He momentarily lowered the nose of the plane to build some speed. Seconds later, the airspeed indicator registered fifty knots and Jack pulled back on the stick, entering a gradual climb.

He adjusted the trim setting to hold his climb, then looked back over his shoulder. He could see his parents. They looked like ants, waving as he flew away. Jack moved the control stick left and right, rocking the wings in an attempt to say goodbye. Even at his altitude, he could see his parent's shoulders hunch as they resigned themselves to his leaving. With his father's arm still hugging his mother, he watched as they turned and walked sadly back to their car.

"Don't worry, guys. I'll be okay," Jack said to them out loud, as a sympathetic gesture.

Refocusing on his flying, Jack monitored his gauges. His airspeed looked good, as well as the engine instruments. His rate of climb was an impressive 1,500 feet per minute. He checked his GPS navigation system to ensure he was on course, then refocused back out in front of him as he searched for his first landmark to fly to. Checking his flight sectional, the map showed a course that flew to the left of a radio tower.

Jack had flown this area many times before and really didn't need to use the map, or the GPS for that matter, but felt that this trip would require the utmost precision and professionalism and the time to start these would not be at a time of crisis. He decided in the planning stages that right from the beginning of the flight, he would 'fly by the numbers', not giving in to sloth and over-confidence: two killers in aviation.

Watching the towers pass to his left, he made a mental note of his ground speed and altitude. Within a few minutes, Jack was leveling off at his cruising altitude of 8,000 feet. He was on course and gaining speed in his cruise configuration. He trimmed up the plane for level flight and relaxed a bit as his speed increased. Once he reached eighty-five knots, he adjusted the power setting to maintain that speed. He was done with the 'departure' aspect of this route and had now entered the 'en route' part of the flight.

This was the easy part as far as Jack was concerned. He would now be checking his sectional for the next checkpoint and cross-checking it with the GPS receivers.

Looking out over the nose of the plane, he would simply sit back and wait for the landmarks to appear. Every ten minutes or so, a new landmark would become visible and he would simply note this on the map, then look for the next landmark in series.

During the planning stages of the trip, Jack obtained all the maps he required to fly the various routes. He then figured that he had, on average, about three hours of gas for flying time, and one hour of gas in reserve. This allowed him to make each leg of the flight, airport to airport, about 250 miles long. In some cases he calculated that he might have to stretch the leg of a flight into the reserves, but for the most part he maintained the 250 mile rule.

As he made his way along his course of flight, he maintained radio contact with the controlling agencies for the region he was flying in. 'Center', as Air Traffic Control is normally referred to, track all aircraft in their area, maintaining separation by altitude and airspeed and then passing them off to the next controlling agency as the aircraft transition through one airspace to the next in series.

Jack had made contact with 'Center' early in his flight, so in addition to his own ability to stay on course, he had the added assurance of ATC reporting periodic updates of his position. Aside from an occasional alert from Center of an aircraft in his vicinity of flight, the leg he was flying was routine and uneventful.

Before the day of electronic navigational aids, flying was done by visually checking and cross-checking landmarks on the map and comparing them with the landscape below while timing distances between each landmark. It was laborious, stressful, and prone to error. This type of navigation was called 'Pilotage' and 'Dead Reckoning'. With the advent of Loran and then eventually GPS, the need for Pilotage and Dead Reckoning became obsolete, ultimately being replaced by the extremely accurate and reliable GPS, where a pilot's position is located by satellite.

Jack had two GPS receivers in his floatplane, all but eliminating any difficult navigation. He simply pushed a button and got an exact reading of where he was on the map and how much further he had to his destination. He would cross-check it with the other GPS receiver to ensure reliability, then sit back and monitor the engine instruments.

Jack's first day of flying would be pretty much routine, but once he crossed over the Appalachians and into the plains, this would be uncharted territory for him. He had never seen this part of the country before and the excitement of brand new scenery would keep him entertained for weeks.

Jack noted some of the landmarks as he flew southwest: long stretches of forests with spots shaved bare containing little towns and cities; crossing rivers with large factories on their banks; small lakes and an occasional golf course. He could just make out the skylines of large cities with their tall buildings poking up above the horizon. All of these landmarks were familiar types of terrain he had become accustomed to while flying over New England.

Several hours and three airports later, Jack found himself in Knoxville, Tennessee for the evening. This was his planned last stop for the day.

With most large airports, there is a room designated specifically for pilots, aptly named the 'pilots' lounge'. Most have a couch and computer to check the various needs for flying such as weather, airport conditions, etc. Typically the rooms are

empty. Jack decided that he would push the limits of the room's usage and stay there overnight. He figured if anyone questioned him, he would tell them he was waiting for the weather to clear at his next location.

It wasn't his bed, but it wasn't uncomfortable either. As he laid down on the couch and pulled his fleece jacket over him as a blanket, he reflected on the day's flight. It was pretty uneventful; 'Almost boring,' he thought to himself. He smiled slightly, knowing that tomorrow would bring a change of scenery; something he would be experiencing for the first time, something he awaited with nervous excitement and anticipation. He had butterflies in his stomach as he envisioned the new sights he'd be seeing over the next few days.

Unfortunately, as entertaining as his dreams were, Jack was exhausted and couldn't keep his eyes open another minute. While thinking about the future, he drifted off into a deep, sound sleep.

DAY 2

During the planning stages, Jack felt that three three-hour flights per day would be as much as he could handle safely, essentially flying 750 miles every day. With this goal set, he figured he would arrive at his destination in Peru in a little over eight days. If he ran into any foul weather, he'd have to wait it out until the storms passed, extending the length of his trip.

He woke early and checked the weather. He could see that a low pressure front was moving toward his flight path. If he didn't leave soon, he would miss his window of opportunity and the storm front would then block his route of flight. The size of the front looked large, producing heavy rain and fog, something that Jack was not equipped to handle.

'Having to wait out a storm front this size could take days,' he thought to himself.

He leaped from his chair, grabbed his gear and ran out to the plane. Eating a peanut butter sandwich, he laid his map out in the seat next to him, dialed in the data for the next destination and departed.

Soon he was flying over mountains and dense forest. This kind of flying made Jack nervous due to the lack of flat open land he would need in an emergency landing. Without a suitable option for landing, he was left to consider a 'hard' landing in the trees, the kind that could easily produce a fatality.

"What a way to start a morning," he said out loud.

He tried to relax by listening to the smooth sound of the engine. As long as it ran flawlessly, he had nothing to worry about. He checked his gauges often to confirm his feelings.

Pretty soon, the view out in front of him started to become hazy, like a hot August day in New England—only it wasn't August; it was April. Jack new this was the first evidence of the storm front he was trying to avoid. The haze had wispy, finger-like clouds that stretched out from the storm's center, located hundreds of mile away. They reached out and 'felt' their way across the sky as they moved east toward him. He looked down at his chart and recalled the position

of the storm he had read off the computer in the pilots' lounge earlier. The storm appeared to be moving faster than reported.

Looking down at his instruments, he saw he was traveling eighty-five knots at 8,000 feet. He decided to try to improve upon his position by increasing his speed to ninety knots. Looking down at his map, he saw that he could also safely descend to 4,000 feet, hoping to get under the storm's reaches.

Thirty minutes later, haze had become an overcast sky, and he noticed that the cloud's ceiling wasn't much higher in altitude than he was.

Jack had been flying for about three hours now and needed to stop and refuel. This was going to have to be quick. He descended to the regional airport in Columbus, Mississippi, refueled, checked the weather, used the bathroom and departed. He was on the ground no longer than fifteen minutes.

'An impressive turn-around,' Jack thought to himself.

Once airborne, he climbed as high as he dared, almost to 2,500 feet. Looking up, Jack guessed the ceiling had dropped to 3,000 feet. This was a very bad sign. The weather was now deteriorating rapidly.

Checking his map, Jack was happy to see that he only needed to fly another hour to be out of it. He knew that the highest obstruction along his route of flight was only about 1,200 feet high. If he needed to, he could descend to 1,500 feet and still feel relatively safe he would avoid any dangerous obstructions.

Thirty minutes later, Jack was forced to fly lower. The clouds were just above him now at his altitude of 1,500 feet. Below, the heavy green forests that had made the flying uncomfortable were now absent. They were replaced by green grassy plains and brown plowed farmland. He watched dust rise from the middle of a couple of 'rectangles' as he observed farmers on their tractors, plowing their fields.

Suddenly, without notice, Jack's world went white. The cloud bank had descended to his altitude and he was now flying through it. He heard a strange sound from the engine. It sounded as if he had changed his power setting.

"What the...?" he called out, puzzled.

Frightened, he frantically scanned the instruments. In seconds, his eyes locked on the attitude indicator. Jack's eyes widened. Without the horizon to use as a reference, he had inadvertently pulled the control stick toward him, causing the plane to climb higher into the cloud bank. He was losing airspeed rapidly and approaching a stall. If left unchecked, the wings would lose their life, stall and he would spiral down, out of control in a maneuver called a spin. He had practiced the spin before in clear airspace, but he was now in dense clouds and low to the ground, creating a life threatening scenario.

Quickly, he moved the stick to its center position and watched the attitude indicator as the wings began to level. Moving the stick forward, he began to descend as he scanned the gauges rapidly to ensure the control of the plane.

Suddenly, he heard the pitch of the engine change once more. Scanning the gauges, he noticed his airspeed rapidly climbing.

"Dammit, I'm diving," Jack hollered.

He hauled back the stick to slow his descent. Again, the pitch of the engine change. Jack scanned the gauges and realized he was now in a spiraling descent.

"Dammit. Watch the attitude indicator, you idiot," Jack yelled to himself.

Jack hauled the stick in the opposite direction. In seconds, he was now spiraling the other way.

“Focus, Jack, focus,” he called to himself frantically.

He scanned the instruments again, then concentrated on the attitude indicator. He watched it carefully as he made subtle control inputs, leveling off the plane and forcing it into stable flight. Slowly, holding the stick steady, he pushed it forward and began his descent once again, this time ensuring he did not overreact to any further inputs.

Moments later, at 1,100 feet, he popped out below the clouds.

“Phew, that was close,” Jack shouted out loud. “That could have gotten ugly.”

Jack was now flying far below the safe altitude for the region. Anxious and scared, he immediately thought about making an emergency landing in one of the farmers’ fields.

“Hold on, you idiot. Don’t overreact. As long as you can see, you can fly,” he said, trying to soothe his fears.

Jack could see out in front of him clearly now. The only obstruction in the area was a radio tower that he knew he would easily miss. Nervously, he continued on.

“Whoa!” Jack shouted.

Again, without warning, all went white. Jack was now terrified. With flying conditions deteriorating so rapidly, even if he did find clear air again, he had no idea if he would be able to land. Jack’s mind started to race—but he quickly controlled his thoughts and slowed his thinking.

“Think this one through, Jack,” he said to himself. “Slow and methodical. Keep a cool head.”

Through beads of sweat, Jack focused on his gauges. Pushing the stick forward, slowly he descended and passed through 900 feet. This was now a dangerous situation. He couldn’t see anything. His altitude left no room for a planned emergency if his engine quit, and he was flying below the legal altitude allowed for that area.

At 700 feet, he popped out from under the cloud bank. His hands were shaking and he was having trouble controlling the plane. He knew he couldn’t continue on like this. Many had died doing exactly as he was doing at that very moment.

He checked his map for the closest airport to fly to. Everything seemed too far away. Jack realized he would have to make an ‘off airport’ landing in a field below. As he surveyed the landscape, he breathed a slight sigh of relief: the possibilities for landing were everywhere. The land was flat, plowed and without obstructions.

“Okay, how about that one?” Jack said, talking himself through the dangerous decision. “Too soft... maybe that one further up ahead,” he continued.

Jack flew by the first location and continued on to the next possible landing spot. Watching the second location, he spotted what he thought was an even better landing spot even further up ahead.

“Hmm, a grassy field. No furrows to contend with and it looks really flat.”

Jack bypassed the second landing possibility and headed for the third location. As he approached the third, just as he had done before, he spotted an even better landing opportunity further along his route.

Over and over, the selection process continued. With each site he selected, a better one popped up on the horizon in the distance. Disregarding the previous

site and heading for the new promising site, he inadvertently continued on his course.

Fifteen minutes later, still flying and still selective, something dawned on Jack.

‘As long as the farmland continues, so can I,’ he thought to himself.

After a while, Jack noticed that he could fly a bit higher. Pulling back on the stick, he was able to ascend to almost 1,200 feet.

‘Could this be the end of the storm?’ he thought to himself.

As he flew, he kept his eyes on the landing sites around him while he attempted higher altitudes.

1,500 feet, 1,800 feet, 2,000 feet.

Jack breathed a sigh of relief. He now realized he no longer needed to consider an emergency landing. He had beaten the storm and was now in the clear.

“Woohoo! Dodged another bullet,” he shouted out.

A short time later, he landed in Alexandria, Louisiana and refueled. Confirming the weather was indeed behind him, he took off for his last destination of the day: Galveston, Texas.

With all the excitement from the ‘scud running’—a term used in aviation when referring to flying illegally below the clouds—Jack hadn’t noticed that he was now flying over a type of land he had never seen before. It was the high plains of the south. Obstructions, as well as towns, were few and far between. The flying was relatively safe; something he rarely observed in New England with its endless rolling hills and heavy forests.

He’d been flying for quite some time as he crossed over from Louisiana into Texas. He was now near the coast and could see large rivers that ended with gaping mouths to the oceans. They seemed to be everywhere. No matter where Jack looked, he saw something relating to the oil industry: refineries, rigs, tankers, etc. He felt it detracted from the land’s beauty, but was very entertaining nonetheless.

Up ahead, he approached the city of Galveston. With a city of this size, an airport could easily blend in with the roads and landscape, making visual contact very difficult. At previous large airports, Jack had spotted his airport only after flying over it, creating a very dangerous scenario when air traffic was heavy.

Instead of searching for the airport, Jack opted for help from Air Traffic Control in locating his destination. He radioed ATC with his position and within seconds he was being vectored to his destination.

With a second set of ‘eyes’ watching his flight path, Jack felt he could now relax a bit and take in the sights of the ocean and the city. The water wasn’t exactly the Caribbean blue-green color he’d seen in brochures. It was an ugly, dark and brownish color, much like that of the Mississippi river. He could see oil rigs way off in the distance, dotting the horizon.

‘Ugly and disappointing,’ Jack thought to himself as a first impression.

He lined up for his approach to the runway, and moments later he was down. As he taxied along the runway, the control tower asked his destination on the ‘field’.

“General aviation,” Jack replied.

They gave him directions as he rolled across runways and taxiways, until he parked at the Fixed Based Operator—or FBO for short—where general aviation

business was conducted on the field, usually supplying fuel, weather services and aviation-related products.

Day two was now behind him. He found the pilots' lounge, then prepared for the next day's flight into Mexico while he ate another peanut butter sandwich. Once again, having completed his duties, he laid down on the couch and fell asleep.

DAY 3

Jack woke the next morning, excited. This was the first time he was crossing out of the country. Flying the coastline of other countries brought visions of lush tropical vacations that Jack had only seen in magazines. He would be experiencing them for real now. His first destination was Brownsville, Texas, the last city before entering Mexico. He departed before dawn and headed out over the Gulf of Mexico.

Three hours later, having pushed the limits of his fuel, he could clearly see Brownsville. As he flew along South Padre Island, a huge sandbar that sat just beyond the mainland, he looked down at the high rise tourist hotels and beaches. As he descended, he could see people out for their morning walks along the beach, and felt envious that he wasn't staying there also. He then realized the irony of this, knowing that his adventure was bigger than their stay on the island.

Jack lightly touched down on the runway and rolled into the nearby FBO, where he refueled and ate a peanut butter sandwich. He then made his way to customs for last minute advice when crossing into Mexico. With his paperwork in order, he was ready for the 'real' adventure to begin.

Stepping into his plane, he gave one last look around at American soil. This would be the last time he would feel safe for quite some time. He cleared his mind of everything negative he'd read about flying outside of US soil, and concentrated on the next leg of his flight.

Jack rolled to the beginning of the runway and the tower cleared him for takeoff. He added power and lifted off into a slow steady climb. A few minutes later, he was in Mexican airspace and hugging the shoreline of the blue-green waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

Jack chose not to fly at 8,000 feet this time, instead electing to fly at a much lower 3,000 feet. Flying close to the shoreline with floats, he felt that he could land safely anywhere in case of an emergency. In addition, at this lower altitude he could really see the countryside in more detail.

As he skirted the Mexican shoreline, he occasionally found things of interest that caused him to investigate at lower altitudes. The shoreline was essentially a far reaching sandbar, periodic breaks carved out by rivers and bays. Jack marveled at how deserted such beautiful beaches appeared.

"Man, such beautiful beaches and so empty," he remarked to himself.

Jack opened the vents to let in some fresh air and cool down the interior. As he flew south, he could feel the hotter temperatures in this region of the world. He laughed to himself that three days before, he was freezing in the backseat of his parents' car and now, three days later, he was warm and comfortable. As he

breathed in the fresh salty air, he could detect the essence of seawater. It was a wonderful smell to him.

He thought to himself, 'I could get used this.'

The coast was beautiful; everything he imagined and more. The sands of the beaches looked white from his altitude. The blue-green water looked inviting. The beaches appeared to be deserted for the most part, something that appealed to Jack, as he was mostly introverted and preferred solitude to crowds.

As he viewed the rolling mountains in the distance, the vegetation was far different than the oak and pine forests he was accustomed to in New England. From his altitude, the vegetation looked tropical, with ferns and large palms that dotted the edges of the far inland waters.

Time raced by as he flew, fascinated by every turn of the beaches. His next destination, Tampico, was less than a half hour away. He mentally prepared himself for his landing at this next big airport.

A short time later, he was vectored to the airport, just as he had been in the States. There was no mistaking this airport: it was huge. The congested city appeared as if someone had removed a large 'chunk' of the population from it and left in its place blank land - blank, that was, except for a very long runway. As Jack was on his final approach, the tower radioed to him at the last minute to land on the shorter, alternate runway to his left. He broke off his approach, added power and leveled the wings, then flew left to the designated runway. As the runway came up off his right wingtip, he banked hard and dropped the nose, still flying about eighty knots as he descended directly toward the runway. As he crossed the threshold, he reduced his power setting to idle and lowered full flaps, quickly slowing himself down. Seconds later he lightly touched down and was requested to take the first taxi way on his left.

All this happened so fast he hadn't had time to think about it, but as he was now slowly taxiing, he realized that someone in the tower must have spotted his floats and heard his English and realized that he was an American flying on Mexican soil. He would need to go directly to customs.

"Pretty sharp," Jack surmised. "Now the fun begins."

His logic was correct, as he heard the ground controller directed him to the customs.

As Jack taxied to their location, he could see two men in military dress standing in front of the building. They had their rifles slung over their shoulders, but stood menacingly and waited for him to roll to a stop and shut down. Jack started to worry a bit, wondering if this was going to turn into one of those horror stories he had read about. He stopped his plane a few feet from them, composed himself and got out. He waited with papers in hand, anticipating their request.

"Papers, señor," one guard said in broken English. He was all business; no smiles or warmth in his body language.

Jack stiffened and handed him the required papers. He forced a smile to try to break the tension, but the two military men weren't buying any of it. They looked at him stoically, then began to look at his paperwork, occasionally glancing back up at him.

The two military men took the paperwork and circled around the plane, pointing and making notations on their clipboard. After a short conference between the

two, their posture changed slightly. They became a bit more relaxed. They handed back the paperwork and smiled. This was the first time they had done this and Jack took this as he being in the clear.

“Qué es su destino, señor?” one guard said in Spanish.

Jack looked at him, confused. He had picked up a few phrases that he thought would help him on his trip. One of them was ‘I don’t understand.’

“Yo no entiendo,” Jack replied, shrugging his shoulders, telling them he didn’t understand in their native language.

“Destino, señor?” said the other man, using his hands to gesture flying.

Jack then realized what they were asking. They wanted to know his destination. ‘Destino’ must mean destination in Spanish, he surmised.

“Peru, señor,” Jack replied proudly.

“Peru?” they replied back incredulously.

The two military men broke off into heavy conversation. Jack tried to figure out what they were saying, but they were speaking too quickly to pick anything up. They stopped and said something about ‘aqua’. Jack then figured correctly that they were fascinated by the floats and were probably wondering if he had some kind of water destination there in Peru.

“No aqua, señor,” Jack replied, then said in English, “Mountains.”

“Montañas?” they two said to each other, not making the connection between a floatplane and mountains.

“Yes—si, señor,” he replied to them.

The two military men knew that they weren’t going to understand Jack’s purpose of travel and decided just to admire the small plane.

“Muy nice,” one of the two said, mixing Spanish and English, trying to say that the plane was ‘very nice’.

Jack understood now that they were admiring his plane and gave them an ear-to-ear grin.

“Muchos gracias,” he replied back, thanking them for their compliment.

After a couple of moments of awkward silence, they extended their hands. Jack shook them both and they gestured that he was free to go.

As he turned to leave, he then remembered that he needed fuel. He turned and called to them, “Señor, gas, por favor?”

“Si, si,” one of them said. He then smiled and pointed to a building across the parking lot.

Jack thanked him again, then made his way over to the FBO and requested gas for his plane. Fortunately, they spoke English there and he was able to take care of the necessary needs for the next leg of the flight.

Half an hour later, Jack had departed and was now heading south again

Another couple of hours of flying above touristy towns, industrial cities and more stretches of barren, lonely beaches, Jack finally arrived at his destination, Veracruz. It was a tremendous city that seemed to go on forever. Jack decided right away that he wasn’t going to attempt to find the airport on his own. He immediately requested vectors to the airport.

Due to the heavy volume of air traffic, he was vectored outside the city limits for twenty minutes before he was brought back in to land. Jack hadn’t anticipated this delay and worried that he might have to declare an emergency before he ran

out of gas, something that could bring negative repercussions in the aftermath. Thankfully, he was brought in with fumes to spare. He taxied to the general aviation ramp and then to the FBO where he obtained another refueling.

This was Jack's stop for the evening. He found a safe 'lounge' to sleep in for the night and prepared for the next day's legs of the journey.

Having arrived well before dark, he had time to kill. Even though he was tired, he knew if he laid down now, someone would inevitably wake him with questions of his stay. His money was limited and the beach was too far away for a cab, so he elected to wander through the main airport facility, taking in the various tourist kiosks.

The food there was too expensive for his budget, so he ate a peanut butter sandwich pulled from his small backpack as he window-shopped. Being poor didn't really bother Jack. He was just happy to be there, enjoying new worlds and cultures.

'This is really living,' he thought to himself.

As darkness fell, he made his way back to the lounge area, rechecked the weather for the following day, made some notations in his personal journal, then fell asleep on the couch.

DAY 4

Jack woke before dawn. The cheap clock on the wall read 5:30am. He looked down at his watch and noticed it read 6:30am. He readjusted the time, then sat and ate another peanut butter sandwich with some water. He hadn't bathed in four days and even though he hadn't done anything physical to sweat, he felt dirty.

He found the men's bathroom and used it to clean up a bit, taking a sponge bath with paper towels. It wasn't five stars to be sure, but effective just the same. Stripping down to his shorts, he moved as fast as he could, trying to finish before anyone else entered.

Jack leaned over a sink and placed his head under the running faucet. With soap in hand, he washed his hair and face, then began to rinse out the lather.

Suddenly, Jack heard the sound of a man clearing his throat from behind him. Quickly, he stood up and turned around. There, standing in front of him, was an older, distinguished-looking gentleman, impeccably dressed and eying Jack with obvious contempt. Jack smiled feebly, but only received a condescending and indignant stare in return.

Jack searched for something to say to explain his impropriety, but found himself speechless. Realizing there was nothing he could say, he resigned himself to a simple, "Sorry."

The dignified-looking man merely flashed Jack a nod of disgust, then entered a stall at the far end of the bathroom.

'He thinks I'm a vagrant,' Jack surmised.

Jack felt humiliated and ashamed, so he hurried along even faster. Having completed his cleansing, he dried himself with paper towels, then quickly dressed.

He looked down at the occupied stall at the end of the bathroom and said one more time, "Sorry," then headed out to his plane.

Jack entered the tarmac from the bottom of the airport terminal. The warm morning air felt invigorating on his still wet hair. As he walked to his plane a short distance away, he tried to forget his 'bathroom experience', but somehow it forced itself to the forefront of his mind.

"Well, there's a story for the grandkids," Jack said sarcastically.

He stowed his gear in the plane and made his preflight inspection, checking the control surfaces as well as his fuel and oil levels. Satisfied all was okay, he unfastened his tie-downs and removed the chocks for the tires.

Before getting into the plane, Jack gave the airport terminal one last glance before leaving.

"What the heck?" Jack said in surprise.

Standing in the plate glass window above him was the distinguished gentleman, waiting for his commercial flight to leave. As Jack made eye contact with him, gone from his face was that awful stare and in its place was an all-knowing smile. With a simple nod of his head, he bid Jack 'good luck'.

"Huh... I'll be," Jack said to himself in amazement.

Jack gave the gentleman a return smile, then stepped into his plane. He started the engine and moments later taxied to the runway as directed by the Ground Controller.

Being cleared for takeoff, he glanced far over at the terminal one last time and saw the distinguished gentleman still watching as he advanced the throttle. Moments later, he was aloft, heading south over the warm inviting beaches once again, the memory of the gentleman's smile firmly imprinted in his memory.

As Jack flew south, he realized that by the day's end he would be far away from the safety of American soil. He would have to be very careful not to draw attention to himself in this part of the world. He left the ocean and headed into desert plains, his next destination being Salina Cruz, along the pacific coast. He looked down and noticed there were places to land just about everywhere in case of an emergency. Occasionally he crossed vegetated rolling hills and mountains that reminded him of the Appalachians he had crossed in the southern US. As quickly as the mountains appeared, they were replaced again by plains.

An hour later, after passing the halfway mark, the landscape took a dramatic turn. Jack started to see fewer plains and more mountainous areas. They were very rough in texture, unlike their northern cousins, covered with dense, vibrant green foliage.

After a while, the green jagged mountains became just plain jagged mountains, brown and menacing. Any malfunction now would spell almost certain death for him.

Jack monitored his engine gauges carefully and did his best to stay on course. With a half hour remaining, this was the most nervous he felt since he'd started four days ago. Fifteen minutes later, the terrain turned into less harsh rolling hills. He could see the ocean now and the skyscrapers of Salina Cruz. He breathed a sigh of relief. He had made it past the rough and inhospitable land and would now be flying the safe and tranquil coastline of the Pacific Ocean.

Jack contacted the tower at the Salina Cruz Airport and followed a jumbo jet in, using a standard left-handed approach pattern. As he worked his way closer, the blue-green ocean was plainly visible. With his vents open, he could smell the salty ocean air and feel the warm temperature outside as the air rushed past his face. He felt invigorated and excited. As he turned onto his final approach, he could now see the jagged mountains he had crossed and the dry desert terrain that made up the perimeter of the city below.

Jack touched down and was instructed to taxi to the general aviation ramp. Once there, he went through the same exercise with customs that he had gone through earlier in the day. It was uneventful and these two military men were just as pleasant as the last two. After refueling, he grabbed a quick peanut butter sandwich and some water, then went into the FBO to check the weather for his next leg and to ensure all his paperwork was in order to enter Guatemala.

Feeling satisfied, he took off and was now headed east. He hadn't done this since he started flying, and it felt good to be flying a new direction. As he hugged the coastline, he could see that it was lined with sharp cliffs that went on for miles. The beaches were mostly deserted, and were white and beautiful. He flew across a large bay. On the other side, the steep cliffs had disappeared and were replaced by desert plains. The sandbar he was now following looked like the one he followed on the Gulf of Mexico, endless and mostly deserted. Occasionally, he past a few small towns, some looked very wealthy with mansions lining their beaches and in-ground pools attached.

"I wonder what these people do for a living?" Jack asked out loud.

Halfway through the flight, he saw two enormous factories on an inland waterway. He wasn't sure if they were oil-related, but knew these two must be the economic lifeblood of the area for many miles. There just wasn't anything else he could see that could produce an income, except for fishing.

After two and half hours of flying, Jack's GPS receivers were instructing him to turn inland. This was the short five-mile stretch of land between the shore and his destination—Mazatan, the last big city before Guatemala. Banking the plane left and following a straight road that lead to the city, he spotted the international airport with the help of Air Traffic Control. Minutes later he was down and discussing his next leg with customs agents. Having blessed his paperwork, he headed back to the plane and awaited his clearance to depart.

"Cleared for departure," came a voice in broken English.

Jack pushed the throttle full forward and was rolling. He pulled back on the stick and watched the ground drop away from him. The palm trees at low altitude once again became a blur of green vegetation as his climbed.

Fifteen minutes passed and Jack was now in Guatemala, heading east. A while later, he noticed on the map a small town named Xexucab. He looked down and saw a small fishing village with lots of cottages. Strangely, there weren't any roads. This was hard for Jack to comprehend.

"The inhabitants must use their boats to get everywhere," Jack said to himself. "What a pain."

Halfway through the flight, he passed the larger city of San Jose. This town looked like it was entirely supported by the oil industry. Like Galveston, the evidence of oil was everywhere: refineries, oil rigs, as well as tankers in the harbor.

Further on, the coastline was a busy one, with tiny villages and larger cities hugging the beaches.

Then it dawned: 'Guatemala must be a wealthier nation than Mexico.'

The evidence seemed overwhelming. Moments later he crossed into El Salvador. The communities continued. They looked beautiful from the air, with large homes on the water and fancy swimming pools attached.

A while later, as he flew down the coastline, the terrain inland turned rugged and mountainous. The shore became rocky and reminded him of the beautiful Oregon coastline he'd seen in calendars back home. He snapped a few pictures as he flew.

Just like his previous airport, he needed to turn inland to the city of Zacatecoluca in El Salvador. Along the way, he took in the sights of the villages and towns, as well as the road that led to the main city.

"Wow; everything looks rundown," he said to himself.

As he was scanning the horizon for traffic, something caught his attention. Looking down, he could see that the side of a mountain had slid off and wiped out half the town. The devastation looked awful and widespread. He realized then that tragedies happen all over the world and go unreported, something that was obvious but he'd never given it any thought until the moment. Minutes later, he landed at El Salvador International, where he was greeted by two more military-type customs agents who wanted to have a 'talk' with him.

Jack was gruffly ordered to stand clear while the agents made a search of his plane. Even though Jack filed flight plans with every flight he took, something drug traffickers never did, he was still regarded as a possible suspect and treated like one until he was proven innocent after they found nothing. Once cleared, the agents became all smiles and were very helpful. Relieved, Jack accepted their handshakes and asked where the FBO was located.

This was Jack's home for the night. Having taken care of the usual things—gas, weather for the next day and customs requirements for Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama (the next three countries he would be transitioning through)—he was ready for bed.

Unfortunately, Jack's bed for the evening was a broken couch. The pilot amenities in El Salvador were not up to the standards of the US. The couch, if it could be called that, had no cushions. Instead, someone had laid down old newspapers where the cushions had once been to soften the seat. The backrest was torn, dirty and smelled.

"Holy crap, what a freakin' pigsty," Jack announced with dread. "This is a step down even for a skid row bum."

Hesitantly, he laid down for a minute to test the comfort factor.

"You've gotta be freakin' kidding me. On a scale of one to ten, I'd rate this as a negative one," Jack blurted out in disgust. "I'm outta here."

He decided that the passenger seat in his plane would give him a much more comfortable rest. He grabbed his things and made his way to the tarmac.

Inside the plane, Jack moved some things around to allow for the seat to recline a bit. He then placed his sleeping bag on it for cushioning and got in and laid down. The temperatures were mild so he only needed his fleece jacket as a blanket. As he started to fall asleep, he felt a little uneasy as he watched the

occasional pair of soldiers, rifles slung over their shoulders, patrolling the terminal. As he locked the doors to the plane and closed his eyes, he tried to block out the graphic images of unlawful arrests he had read about in past research. Eventually, exhaustion won out over worry and he fell into a deep sleep.

DAY 5

Jack felt heat on his face. With his eyes closed, the sun pieced through his eyelids, causing discomfort and dryness. As he slowly opened his eyes, he could hear the whine of jet engines as they were being started. He sat up and looked around the airport. It was morning, and the international airport was bustling with early morning traffic readying for departure.

He woke hungry, so he grabbed himself another peanut butter sandwich and some water. Finishing breakfast, he got out of the plane and took care of business for the day's flights.

Having checked the weather, he was now ready for the day's events. He would be landing at four different airports, the first leg taking only about an hour to complete.

As Jack departed the El Salvador Airport, he was glad to be out of there. The place felt dirty, rundown and dangerous. As he flew back to the coastline and headed east, his sense of worry disappeared and was replaced with excitement for the day's destinations. El Tamarindo Airport was his next stop, a little over an hour away.

As he flew east, he could see many expensive homes that lined the beaches. The land was flat with an occasional forest far in the distance that Jack took to be jungle. At times the land changed to rugged hills, then just as quickly it changed back to vegetated plains. The narrow beach communities looked tranquil and inviting as he neared the town of El Tamarindo, the last point before Honduras.

Up ahead, Jack could see the enormous bay that protected his destination. Minutes later, he made out the image of the single runway that looked like it ran right into the ocean. He contacted the control tower, which gave him instructions to land from out over the ocean.

As he looked down at the water during his approach, he could see fishermen in their tiny boats, hauling in their nets by hand. It reminded him of Ernest Hemingway's novel *The Old Man and the Sea*.

"Huh, such a simple way to live... I wonder if it's a happier life?" Jack wondered to himself.

Heading straight in to the runway, he crossed over the beach and lightly touched down. He stopped only long enough to refuel and was on his way. As he departed, he could see golf courses and fancy hotels and quickly realized this was a tourist spot. He made a mental note of it as he crossed the beach out into open water.

The huge bay he was crossing was in Honduras airspace. He contacted ATC and was cleared for his route of flight. The bay was enormous, but unremarkable, with

a couple of islands that dotted the horizon. He looked down and could see a tanker and a few small pleasure boats in the distance.

Twenty minutes later he crossed back onto land. This time he was over Nicaraguan soil.

As he flew along their coast, he saw that the beaches were deserted.

'What a waste,' he thought as he looked down.

He thought about landing in the ocean and pulling the plane up onto one of the beautiful white sandy beaches, but knew Nicaragua was one of the more inhospitable countries to fly in.

"Forget about it, Jack. The last thing you need is full body cavity search by some sadistic soldier toting a gun," Jack said to himself. "Better to hurry through as fast as you can."

Two hours later he landed at the Punta Renes airport in Costa Rica. As always, he was 'greeted' by customs. He showed them his paperwork, they made a quick and painless search, then gave him instruction to the FBO on the field, where he gassed up, ate a sandwich and checked the weather further east.

The next leg would take him over the jungle regions of Costa Rica. He was a bit nervous about this. If he had any malfunctions at all, he would crash and be lost forever. He took all the necessary precautions, including a detailed route of flight he filed with the local ATC. With that, he got under way.

The land was as he had read: mountainous, dangerous and green. There was no mistaking this land. It was jungle. He envisioned Tarzan swing from a vine below as he watched the land pass underneath. There were almost no landmarks to check his progress against, except for an occasional road that wound its way through some of the lower level elevations.

Once in a while, Jack spotted a low-level flat valley that held a tiny community.

He wondered out loud, "What would entice someone to live in that kind of isolation? And what the heck do they do for a living?"

The time passed slowly as Jack nervously checked his engine gauges.

At last, the landscape relaxed a bit. The rugged mountains were now rolling hills, still dangerous, but less remote. Tiny villages appeared more frequently. Out in the distance, he could now see water; the Atlantic Ocean. With a little help from ATC, Jack found the little airport and landed.

As he was taxiing to the FBO, he breathed a sigh of relief and realized he was drenched with sweat. It was at that moment that he realized how scary the flight actually was.

He refueled, checked the weather and filed another flight plan with ATC for his next destination—Panama.

Jack departed the tiny airport and headed out over the enormous bay that spanned from Costa Rica through Panama. It would take him over two hours to fly, then another hour over land to Panama. This was going to be another stressful flight.

For the first thirty minutes, Jack could see land and felt somewhat secure knowing he could land in the water and be quickly rescued. As he passed the halfway mark, the land was no longer visible.

"Damn, this is scary. Who signed me up for this, anyway?" Jack nervously joked to himself.

An hour and a half into the flight, he could now make out the distant shore and began to feel better. He could see large ships below as he neared Panama, and felt relieved knowing he could easily be picked up in an emergency by one of them.

Crossing the shore into Panama, the terrain became quickly inhospitable again, much like Costa Rica was on the previous leg. Deep inside the country, the rugged jungle mountains dropped away and Jack crossed over a large lake that took nearly a half hour to travel. He felt better knowing this could be an emergency landing spot if anything unfortunate were to happen.

As he crossed from the lake into land, the vegetation turned heavy again on rolling hills. This was a lower elevation jungle that held tiny communities.

“Man, more villages out in the middle of nowhere. I wonder if they even have running water?” Jack speculated.

As he neared Panama, ATC gave him vectors to follow. They weren’t giving him a straight path into the airport, choosing to route him around the bigger commercial jets. With his fuel running low, he felt nervous and hoped it wouldn’t take them long to get him in. As he circled around, he noticed a bigger river below with a good deal of shipping on it. As he checked the map, he realized it was the Panama Canal.

“Cool; now that’s worth a few photos to show the ole grandkids,” he said to himself, reaching for his camera.

Thirty minutes later, as he crossed the city of Panama and touch down at the large international airport, he looked down and saw his fuel gauges read ‘empty’.

“That was too close,” he said to himself. “I hate when they do that. I wonder if I claimed I was a slow-flying jet, they’d land me first too?”

He taxied to customs for his routine inspection, where two soldiers awaited his arrival. Just as he had experienced so many times before, they inspected his gear and gave him directions to the FBO for fueling.

Jack entered the pilots’ lounge. This time there were ‘real’ pilots utilizing the facility.

‘You’re on my bed,’ he thought to himself, as he saw a couple of commercial pilots relaxing on the couch.

Joking to himself, he said, “Make sure you take your farts with you.”

Jack knew they’d be leaving soon, so he wandered the terminal, eating a peanut butter sandwich and taking in the sights. As darkness fell, he made his way back to the pilots’ lounge. Rounding the corner into the room, he noticed it was empty.

“Ahh, peace and quiet. I wonder if anyone would mind if I placed a *Do not disturb* sign on the door,” he joked to himself.

Jack was thoroughly exhausted from the stressful flights of the day and immediately plunked himself down on the couch and fell asleep. He was awakened a couple of hours later by two commercial pilots discussing the weather and routing of their next flight. They realized they were waking Jack and took their meeting elsewhere. As he closed his eyes and listened, their voices trailed off down the hallway. In a flash, he fell asleep even before their voices were gone.

DAY 6

Jack woke refreshed. He knew that the day's flights would be stressful. Not as much as the previous day, but exhausting nonetheless. Checking the weather, he found clear skies and what appeared to be tailwinds all the way.

The first two legs of the day would take him back out over the Pacific Ocean again. They would be about three hours in length, two hours of it completely out of sight of land. The last leg would take him back over land and across three countries: Columbia, Ecuador and then into Peru. It was exciting to know that, by the day's end, he would be in the country of his final destination.

Jack departed and headed south-east out over the ocean toward Columbia. Just as he thought, land fell out of sight about a half hour along the route. He would not see land again for another two hours. This was the kind of thing his parents worried about. He thought about them briefly. He missed his parents and promised himself that he would call them the next day when he arrived in Lima, Peru.

As he monitored the flight closely, he realized that the tailwinds were stronger than he anticipated. Instead of flying a ground speed of 90mph, he was traveling at a blistering pace of 120mph. This was essentially a thirty knot tailwind. With his faster ground speed, the flight would take only two and a half hours instead of three.

An hour and a half into the flight, Jack spotted land off his left wingtip. He could see the same rolling and mountainous jungles he'd been seeing for the past two days now.

"Man, I am so sick of seeing all this scary terrain. I can't wait to fly again in New England. At least if I die in a crash there, they'd be able to find my body," he joked to himself again.

An hour later he was on the ground in Bahia Solano, Columbia. He looked around at the broad leaf ferns and palm trees and admired the intense green color.

As expected, customs agents—armed soldiers, to be more precise—met him as he shut down. With paperwork in hand, he stepped out of the plane smiling and promptly handed it to them before they had a chance to ask. He could tell they appreciated this gesture and quickly conducted their business.

After finishing their inspection, they inquired about the nature of Jack's visit.

"You plan on 'feeshing', señor?" an agent asked.

"Fishing?" Jack asked, confused by the agent's broken English.

"Yes, senor, feeshing. I see floats. Are you feeshing?" he asked again.

"Climbing," Jack responded.

The two agents broke off and discussed Jack's answer. They seemed confused and continued their inquiry.

"What kind of feesh is this climbing?" the agent asked.

Jack laughed a moment, then caught himself. Not wanting to offend the two agents, he explained the purpose of his visit.

"No fishing... Mountain climbing. I'm flying to Peru to climb mountains," Jack elaborated briefly.

"Montañas? Peru? Ay yi yi. Estás loco?" the agent said.

Jack heard the words 'montañas' and 'loco' and knew the agent was asking him if he was crazy for climbing.

Jack smiled a great smile, then simply shrugged his shoulders in quiet resignation.

“Well, señor, good luck,” the agent said, handing him back his paperwork.

Soon, Jack was back in the air, trying to take advantage of the tailwind as best he could. With this flight, he would be over water most of the route, but would be in sight of land nearly the entire time. As he flew, the GPS receivers were registering his ground speed at 123mph, even faster than the previous leg, and he would need every bit of it. This was the longer of the two legs, measuring about 320 miles. With his high ground speed, he would easily make it with plenty of gas reserves to spare.

As he looked out his window to his left, land could barely be seen. He was about ten to fifteen miles off shore. Two hours into the flight, the land was gone. Jack checked his ground speed to ensure he was still maintaining the necessary speed to make his destination. Nothing had changed so he continued on his route, feeling exhilarated by the ‘gift’ of the tailwind. A half hour later, he spotted land again off his left wingtip. Shortly thereafter, larger cities came into view. He could see oil tankers and skyscrapers around every bend in the shoreline. This was a bustling part of Columbia.

Jack touched down at La Florida airport in Tumaco, Columbia. Just as before, he was greeted by customs, refueled, ate a sandwich and departed.

The tailwind had abated some as he flew south over land. He could see city after city, large and bustling. They reminded him of New York City, a frequent destination for him in New England. He began to have a new perspective for this region of the world. All he had ever heard of Columbia was drugs and jungles. It was plain to see that they had much more to offer than that.

Jack crossed out into open water. At one point he lost sight of land, but shortly, up ahead, land reappeared on the horizon. Thirty minutes later, he was nearing the shores of Talara, Peru: his destination. The landscape had dramatically changed, though. Gone were the vibrant green jungles and in its place were the brown, dry desert plains. He could see rugged cliffs along the shore that fell off into flat rolling dunes.

He contacted the airport tower, who cleared him to land. Finding the airport, he made his standard left-handed landing pattern. He touched down and headed for the FBO on the field. Strangely enough, there were no customs agents waiting for him when he arrived.

He had completed his goals for the day and was tired. As he located the pilots’ lounge, he was pleasantly surprised at its condition.

“Wow, this is like the Ritz Carlton,” he said loudly. “Man, I’d have to give this an eight on a scale of one to ten. They even have a fridge. I don’t know if I can handle this kind of luxury all at once,” he said, then added, “Oh well, I’ll just have to overcome.”

Jack tested the couch with his hands. It seemed new and very comfortable. Looking over at a workstation, the computer looked modern and high speed. He put his water bottle in the refrigerator, checked the weather, then called his parents on the phone in the room.

Jack called his parents collect. Upon hearing the operator’s voice, his mom excitedly accepted the charges.

“JACK! We miss you. Where are you? Are you safe? We’ve been worried sick about you,” his mom said in quick succession.

“Whoa, Mom, slow down. Everything’s fine. I’m at the airport in Talara, Peru—”

“You’re in Peru already? Did you have any trouble?” she asked, cutting Jack off in mid-sentence.

“Well, I was strip-searched and interrogated for a few days in Honduras, tazered and beaten in Guatamala, and spent a week in a jail in El Salvadore, but don’t worry. I made up for all that when I died in Columbia.”

“DIED?” Jack’s mom shouted out in shock.

“Mom, I’m joking. I’m not dead, for crying out loud.”

“Jack, when you get home, you’re grounded... for life. That stuff wasn’t funny.

“Mom, I’m twenty-one years old. You can’t ground me anymore.”

“Watch me,” she returned playfully.

Jack and his parents carried on for nearly a half hour as he detailed his flight down to Peru. With the worst of his flying behind him, he put their fears to rest. Eventually, with little else to discuss, they said their goodbyes and hung up.

Feeling satisfied, Jack hit the soft, comfortable couch and fell asleep.

DAY 7

“Excuse me, senior, but this room is for pilots only.”

Jack slowly opened his eyes. Standing over him were two airport security guards. As his mind started to comprehend, he rubbed his eyes to buy him some time to remember his ‘canned’ response.

“I understand,” Jack replied. “I am a pilot. I’m just waiting for the weather to improve to the south before I take off,” he said, while extending his pilot’s license for the two to see.

“Ah, si, senior. I will hope for your good weather,” one replied in poor English.

“Gracias,” Jack said, now wide awake.

As they left, he smiled to himself in satisfaction that his plan worked flawlessly. He would have to use it again in the future if anyone else questioned him. The only improvement on the plan would be to have his license out quicker next time.

Jack was excited. He was almost there. Today was the last day of flying. Yesterday’s tailwinds persisted nearly all day and now he would be able to fly the last three airports and make his final destination, Junín, Peru, one day early. He was actually happy the security guards woke him early. He would now get to Junín sooner, giving him that much more time to relax and rest up.

He checked the weather for the day. It was perfect: sunny and clear. The temperature would be around eighty degrees. He couldn’t wait to take off. He grabbed his water bottle from the refrigerator and headed out to the plane.

After completing a cursory inspection, checking the gas, oil and control surfaces, he hopped in and contacted the tower for instructions for departure. Ten minutes later, he was aloft and heading south-east, his next stop being Trujillo, Peru, about 300 miles away. The tailwinds of the previous day seemed to be holding, so he figured it would take him a little under three hours to fly.

Flying along the Peruvian coast, Jack was amazed by the landscape. Some of it was plains and other areas were mountainous, but all were brown, dry, desert land. It was beautiful to him. The green vegetated jungles of Latin America represented danger, but the desert coastline of South America meant safety to him. There was nothing hidden. If he had to land, he could easily find a place just about anywhere that would yield a safe landing.

The coastline was dotted with humanity. There were tiny fishing villages with reed fishing boats that lined the beaches, as well as huge cities bustling with modern life. Jack even found what appeared to be lush farming rectangles like the ones he saw in New England. This was a very diverse population, from businessmen to farmers to fishermen. This region was not unlike the US.

A little under three hours later and Jack could see the enormous city of Trujillo. It was bordered by farmland on the north, giving it a wonderful aesthetic transition. To the east and south, though, he could see jagged, dangerous-looking mountains.

Fortunately for Jack, the airport was situated near the farmland just on the edge of the shoreline. As he contacted the tower, they gave him vectors to the airport that brought him out over the ocean, then straight back into the airport, crossing over beautiful white beaches. It was one of the more exciting approaches he had made so far.

After landing, he made his way to the FBO, where he purchased fuel and some water bottles. He ate a sandwich and departed. His next stop would be Lima, Peru. It was a monster of a city, as viewed on the map. It was about 300 miles away, and with the tailwinds holding nicely he figured it would take him about three hours to fly.

Flying a southerly course, Jack watched the heavy mountainous terrain on the horizon to his east. Occasionally he saw snow that capped the rugged peaks. It was exciting to see. The landscape below along the coast was barren desert. It gave him a feeling of extreme isolation; scary, yet exhilarating. He wanted to land and spend a day on one of those beautiful deserted beaches, but felt he needed to take care of business first.

Halfway through the flight, the coastline became very jagged. Gone were the smooth lines of the straight beaches. The coastline now consisted of scalloped bays, jagged and irregular. Just beyond the bays, inland, the land was flat and very dry, almost looking like one large riverbed with enormous drainage 'streaks' in the sand that stretched out for miles. Other times the bays flowed into beautiful green farmland, and still other times the bays were cradled by high cliffs, dangerous and magnificent. Around every turn the sights changed dramatically.

What felt like minutes were actually hours. The coastline was so entertaining that Jack hadn't noticed the time literally flying by. He was snapped back to reality when ATC radioed him to contact the tower at Lima's international airport.

"Wow, that was fast." He said to himself, "I've got to stop there on my way back," referring to the one of the exciting isolated beaches he had just flown over.

As he was being vectored over the city to the airport, he was amazed at the size. It had everything that the large cities of the US had: large parks; sports complexes; huge industrial parks.

"Even a few slums thrown in for color," Jack said loudly.

He could see the Spanish influence clearly as he flew overhead at low altitude.

The airport was directly ahead of him now. His fuel wasn't on empty but was fairly low. Not wanting to take any chances of having a larger commercial plane cut in front of him on his approach, he kept his speed up as high as he dared, nearly ninety-five knots. About a half mile before the runway, he reduced power and slowed to about eighty knots and lowered the flaps.

With his nose pointed to the beginning of the runway, the tower radioed him to 'land long'. Jack was familiar with the maneuver used by tower controllers in order to get a pilot to the end of the runway faster. Their reasoning for the maneuver was that flying the two mile-long runway at seventy knots was faster than taxiing it on the ground at 5mph, thereby freeing up the tarmac for the larger commercial jets.

Jack pulled back on the stick and raised the nose of the plane a bit, pointing it now to the end of the runway. As his speed bled off quickly, he added a touch of power to compensate for the new flying attitude. He was essentially flying straight and level above the runway at fifty feet. Just before the end, he lower the remaining setting of flaps, cut the power and settled onto the runway at the end. He then turned onto the taxiway and awaited further instructions.

"Nice job," the tower radioed Jack.

Surprised by the compliment, he radioed back a "Gracias."

The ground controller gave him directions to general aviation, where he purchased fuel, checked the weather again and ate a sandwich, as he readied himself for his last leg.

His final destination, the point that he had been flying to for the past seven days, was only about an hour and a half away. It was the San Ramon Airport in San Ramon, Peru, just east of Tarma. He would be flying into the heart of the Andes Mountains and would be subjected to all the unpredictable and sometimes violent weather that mountains of that magnitude produce. The weather along his route of flight read clear skies and relatively calm winds, but he knew this could change in an instant.

He filed a detailed flight plan with ATC and departed to the east. He could see the jagged, snowcapped peaks that held his destination. It was very intimidating. The man at the FBO in Lima told him to follow the main highway out of the city and into a valley that separated the mountains. He could see it clearly now.

As he entered the valley, he felt irregular buffeting that made Jack a little nervous.

"Damn, if I'm feeling this now, what am I going to see when I'm deep inside these mountains?" Jack said to himself.

He could see that some of the mountain peaks were above his elevation of 8,000 feet. There was nowhere for him to land as he flew between the ranges. Again, another jolt of turbulence rocked his wings. He stabilized quickly and maintained his course. He tried to keep himself composed as he flew, but noticed his hand kept slipping off the stick.

Looking down, his hands were covered with sweat. He wiped them on his jacket, which was also quite sweaty. He realized then that he was really scared. He checked his engine gauges and the GPS receivers, trying to stay focused.

Moments later, the mountain range relaxed a bit and opened up into a larger valley of rolling hills. He felt a little better as he saw the small city of Tarma nestled inside a 'pocket' of one of the valleys. He had only a half an hour to go.

Shortly after passing Tarma, the rolling hills raised up into larger mountains again. The turbulence was steady now, bouncing the small plane around. Every now and then, Jack had to contend with a larger shot of turbulence that really got his attention, rocking the wings and hitting his head on the ceiling.

He was now in the heart of the Andes Mountains. They were as beautiful as they were dangerous. He could see snowcapped peaks high above him as he flew.

Jack took no chances with this final leg of his flight. He had ATC follow his every move along his course. He radioed them to help pinpoint the exact location of the small airport he was now on the lookout for. It was no more than ten minutes in front of him, but the mountains blocked his view of it. In the previous six days, his GPSs had worked flawlessly during the whole trip, guiding him everywhere he went, but this was not the time for self-reliance as far as he was concerned. He felt a sense of relief to have a second set of eyes guiding him through the mountains.

He flew past a large mountain on his right and a small valley opened up.

ATC radioed him and asked if he had made 'visual contact' yet.

"Still looking," Jack replied.

Jack looked around but still couldn't see the airport. Alternating between his search and his gauges, he frantically searched for his destination.

"Dammit, where the heck is the freakin' thing?" Jack blurted out loudly in frustration.

Moments later, he spotted it: a tiny single runway. Far in the distance was the San Ramon Airport, nestled at the base of a mountain on the far side of the little town of San Ramon.

He reduced his power, and started to circle the city, trying to lose altitude.

"I have visual contact," Jack radioed ATC.

"Roger, proceed at your discretion," ATC responded.

Slowly, Jack descended from 8,000 feet. A few minutes later, he made a standard left-handed approach into the airport.

"WHOA!" Jack yelled.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, a shot of turbulence rocked the plane just as he was about to touch down. Jack threw the control stick toward the left and stomped on the rudder, now banking the wings sharply into the wind.

Jack heard a loud screeching siren.

"Dammit, the stall indicator," he shouted.

Thrusting the stick forward and adding full power, the piercing siren quickly silenced, but now Jack was flying far too fast for the landing. He pulled the power to idle and held a stable attitude while the tiny plane streamed down the runway.

Jack's mind raced. He felt conflicted. He knew he should abort the landing, but something compelled him to land. As he watched the end of the runway approach, he felt his wheels begin to touch down.

One hundred feet, eighty feet, sixty feet...

Jack was running out of runway. He felt sick in the pit of his stomach. He knew he had made a bad decision and was now paying the penalty for it. As the plane's full weight settled onto the tarmac, he frantically stomped on the brakes.

Thirty feet, twenty feet, ten feet...

Jack could hear his brakes screeching as he watched the nose of his plane dip forward. With inches to spare, he came to a stop at the end of the runway. Drenched with sweat, he was relieved his adventure had not ended in disaster.

"YOU FREAKING IDIOT!" Jack yelled to himself. "Next time, go around."

"Having a little trouble, señor?" Jack heard a voice over the intercom.

Jack was stunned. He knew someone in the FBO had witnessed his near-miss landing and was now making good humor of the situation. Jack felt embarrassed. He searched his mind for something to say, but could only think of one thing.

"I was merely testing my brakes," Jack radioed.

After a moment of silence, the man responded simply, "They work."

Smiling slightly, Jack accepted his humiliation as penance for his mistake, knowing the lesson would not be wasted.

Jack shut down his plane. He jumped out, turned it around by hand and jumped back in. As he taxied to the FBO, he realized he had made it. A feeling of euphoria replaced his feeling of humiliation, and he let out a loud whooping yell.

"Woohoo! I made it!"

Jack stepped out of the plane and stood for a moment, looking at the mountains all around him. The air was incredibly fresh and clean. The mountains were green and vegetated at some locations, and brown and jagged at others. The town was actually a city, much bigger than he imagined it to be. This would be his home for the next couple of weeks, and he wouldn't have had it any other way.

Reconnaissance

Jack inspected his plane before takeoff. As he moved from control surface to control surface, his mind nervously drifted off to the larger task he was about to undertake. Realizing his distraction, he forced himself to focus on his preflight walk through.

Finishing up, he stood for a moment and stared at the rugged mountain pass he was about to fly through. His stomach felt as if there were a circus performing deep in its pit. He tried to lower his anxiety with a few deep breaths, but it was of no use. This flight was just too treacherous and risky.

Jack opened the door and jumped in. He laid out his flight map in front of him. This map was much different than the sectionals he was used to looking at back in New England. The sectionals back home were mostly green, showing elevation changes with varying shades of color. For the most part, the shading went almost unnoticed due to the subtle rolling hills that never really made dramatic elevation changes.

The flight sectional for San Ramon, on the other hand, showed wild elevation gains. He could see the low level greens change to high mountainous brown colors

with occasional white patches at the highest elevations signifying year-round snow. The flight sectional he laid out in front of him looked scary.

Jack started his engine and readied himself for departure. He taxied to the beginning of the runway, preparing to take off into the wind. After running through his final checklist, he took one last look around and advanced the throttle to full.

The day before, Jack had secured storage at the FBO for his belongings he'd been carrying for the past week. With everything now removed, the small plane was substantially lighter. With only Jack as cargo, the tiny plane rolled forward a few short feet and leaped into the stiff headwind that blew down the runway. He gained altitude much faster than normal; nearly 2,000 feet per minute. The tiny plane felt like a rocket to Jack as he headed down the valley and into the pass that meandered through the mountains.

The flight sectional had markings all over the route he was flying. Because there were no real landmarks to follow through the mountains, and he couldn't fly over them anyway due to their height, Jack had to find the latitude and longitude of each bend in the valley's floor and plug them into his GPSs to find his way through the mountains to his destination. He had programmed all the data into the receivers the day before, so all he needed to do was to push a button to bring up the next set of numbers to fly when he had passed the previous checkpoint.

Even with this, the flight was still a very stressful one. He needed to continuously cross-check the map with what he was looking at in front of him against the GPS readout to ensure he didn't stray from his course. Any mistakes in mountains of this size could be fatal. He needed to be on course all the time, and doing it in an environment that contained no visual references that could confirm his locations.

Jack's destination was marked with a big 'B' in red ink on the sectional. It wasn't a destination per se, as it was simply a location defined by latitude and longitude. He called it Destination B only because it was an easy thing to refer to it by, as in the routing is from point 'A' to point 'B', the 'A' being the airport he had just departed from.

The winds that flow through mountains cannot follow a straight line as they do in low-level elevations. Instead, they move through, ricocheting off one mountain to the next, finding a path of least resistance until they are through to the other side. This kind of irregular flow creates violent turbulence that can make flying a light airplane through them an arduous task on the best of days.

Jack had his hands full. He was working the stick and rudder in all directions, trying to keep his altitude and course steady, while reading the GPS and confirming with the map. Every now and then he'd receive a tremendous shot from the side that would knock his wings almost vertical to the ground.

Instinctively, Jack added hard opposite stick and rudder, flipping the plane 180 degrees from one side to the other, bringing himself back on course, then hauling the wings back 90 degrees to level flight. This kind of flying wasn't much fun. It was hard and it was frightening. Jack was staring at death by the minute.

Nervous and sweating, Jack followed one valley east for about fifteen minutes. He then banked hard and turned down another, heading south. He followed this nondescript valley as the GPS directed him to do so, while cross-checking the

map. With more turbulence and even higher mountains, he negotiated his way though until he came upon the end of the valley. It was blocked by a saddle between two larger mountains, and Jack felt a sense of dread as he stared at it. The saddle blocked the end of the valley like a dam, and its height looked to be at least 12,000 feet, the adjacent mountains much higher and capped by snow.

“Holy shit,” Jack yelled out in surprise.

He advanced the throttle to gain altitude. He’d been flying at about 12,000 feet already and had hoped that the pass would be slightly lower, but the map was correct. If he continued on at that altitude, he would crash into the saddle and die.

He slowly climbed to 12,500 feet. It wasn’t a comfortable clearance, but it would be enough, he felt. As he neared the saddle, the turbulence kicked up and flowed like a river over the top of the saddle and back down into the valley on the other side.

“What the HELL!” Jack called out in surprise.

Suddenly, Jack got caught in the downward flow into the valley. He flashed a look at the altimeter and realized he was losing altitude as the wind pushed him lower. At the rate he was descending, he knew he wasn’t going to clear the mountain pass. Jack surveyed the narrow valley behind him. He thought about turning around and flying back down the valley to gain a higher altitude, but realized that there wasn’t enough room to do so. The valley just wasn’t wide enough for him to make a U-turn.

Frantically, he pushed the throttle to full power and pulled back on the stick. At that high altitude already, the performance of the tiny plane was unimpressive. With only a minute before impact, he was still losing altitude. He looked at the side of the mountain on his left. There was less than 200 feet between his wingtip and the rocky face.

Carefully, he entered a shallow bank toward the mountainside, hoping to find a spot with less of a downdraft. While fighting the turbulence to keep his wings steady, he looked down at the altimeter and noticed it had stop descending. Holding his position, he watched as the altitude slowly inched back up to 12,000 feet.

“Come on, baby, climb, CLIMB,” Jack yelled out, as fear raged inside him.

He was so close to the saddle that he could now see the high elevation scrub brush that dotted the top, as well as several large boulders. Jack watched in horror as he closed on the ridge.

“Oh no, I’m gonna hit,” Jack exclaimed in disbelief.

In his panicked state, he searched for a location that would yield the softest impact. On the right side of the saddle was a ragged cliff and some boulders. On the left side of the saddle, he spotted some dense looking bushes hugging the steep upward sloping terrain. This was it. If he was going to crash, the brush would be his only chance for survival.

As he flew along the left side of the mountain, he banked slightly right toward the saddle and headed for the brush. Suddenly, he caught a slight updraft. Looking out in front of him, he was now moving slightly higher than the saddle.

Jack saw a glimmer of hope.

Jack knew that, on his present course, he was going to impact the mountain. His chance of survival was practically nonexistent. His only hope for survival was

the slight updraft he was now flying in. He calculated that if he continued on his course and banked sharply toward the saddle at the last possible second, he might clear it before the downdraft forced him to impact the mountain.

Jack was mere feet from the side of the mountain, his wingtip nearly touching it as he flew. He could see he was a couple hundred feet above the saddle and inching higher. It was now or never.

In one fast movement, he snapped the stick full right and stomped on the rudder, breaking his flight path off right at the last second of impact. He was now out of danger of impacting the mountainside, having cleared it by a few feet, and was now skimming across its side as he headed into the downdraft.

Jack stared directly at the saddle. It formed a U shape, where the tops of the U were the mountaintops and the bottom of the U was the bottom of the saddle. He was rapidly descending from the left side of the U into the saddle, with less than one hundred feet of clearance. The further he moved into the downdraft, the faster he descended.

Frantically, Jack searched his mind, hoping to find another solution that would yield a safe outcome—but there was none to be had. He wasn't sure if he was going to clear the saddle. It was going to be close.

As Jack began to enter the saddle, he watched the ground race up toward him. He glanced at his gauges and took note that his altitude was temporarily holding.

With his floats just feet above the rocky land, Jack worked the controls and anxiously waited for impact.

As he crossed the apex of the saddle, he could see the needles of the tiny pine trees that sparsely lined the top of the ridgeline.

Suddenly, the plane's floats caught one of the bushes, causing it to slow and pitch slightly forward.

"Shit, noooo!" Jack blurted out.

Jack, quick in reflex, felt the sudden deceleration and instinctively pulled back on the stick, hard. As the momentum of the plane forced the floats through the brush, he heard the sickening sound of branches against metal.

Jack's reflexive input on the controls raised the nose just in time to clear the ground. The floats broke free from the brush's grasp as the saddle now began to drop away, down the other side of the valley.

The plane, having slowed from the soft hit, was now descending again, but descending down into the valley.

As the land began to fall away, Jack allowed his altitude to descend as he kept his nose low to build airspeed.

Moments later, the tiny plane had built up enough speed for Jack to raise the nose. He was now gaining altitude and in the clear. Far out in front of him, the valley now opened up and spread out wide before him.

"Yesss!" Jack yelled out in exhilaration. "Made it!"

Jack stared briefly at the broken twigs that clung to his floats.

"Wow, I don't think I could get any closer without dying," Jack said to himself.

Jack retrained his eyes on the valley ahead of him. With a sudden gasp, he saw it: Destination B.

"Oh my God, there it is!" Jack exclaimed.

Looking off to his right, he gazed upon the majestic mountain that had been the object of his dreams for over two years now.

Destination B was the highest mountain in the area, soaring 17,254 feet above sea level. The shape of the mountain was that of a pyramid, and it sat on a flat plateau like an altar. From a distance, it appeared as if something had scraped the snow off the mountain with a rake from top to bottom, creating long vertical furrows in its faces. The approach to the mountain looked difficult and the climb itself looked even harder due to the long, icy, fluted trenches that spanned the entire height of the mountain.

As Jack neared the mountain, he started to gain altitude. The maximum altitude the tiny plane could climb to was roughly 13,000 feet. It would take some time to get there, so he made large sweeping circles around the mountain as he inched higher. Thirty minutes later, he had finally reached the limit of the plane's ability. He could fly no higher.

The valley around the mountain was as beautiful as it was rugged. There were deep canyons and rivers, as well as high snowcapped mountains that filled Jack's field of view. At the lower elevations, he could see lush green forests and tiny rivers. At the higher elevations, the forests became sparse and less green, taking on a more brownish color due to bare ground showing through and becoming more visible as the vegetation thinned. Still higher, vegetation was limited to patches of scrub brush that dotted some mountaintops and passes. The elevation above 12,000 feet contained heavy snow and ice, a condition that remained all year long. As he circled Destination B, he marveled at its magnificence. Nowhere in the US could this kind of dramatic scenery be found. Jack was in awe of his surroundings and snapped dozens of photos as he flew.

By the time he leveled off, he had spotted a point of interest on the eastern side of the mountain. Even though the fluted trenches covered all sides of the mountain, there were two ridges, nearly 180 degrees apart, that rose up from the plateau below and connected to the mountain higher up. If someone were inclined to climb this magnificent beauty, they could eliminate half the arduous task of climbing from the bottom by traversing the easier terrain along the ridge, then continuing from the halfway point to the top.

At the base of the main mountain, and cradled between the two side ridges, sat a snowfield no bigger than a football field. It was relatively flat, but dropped off dramatically 3,000 feet or so below the plateau, then gradually descended over rough, rocky terrain to the valley floor below. As Jack flew slowly by it, he mentally etched it into his memory. Checking his altitude, then scanning back to the snowfield, Jack estimated that it sat at an elevation of nearly 10,000 feet.

"Wow, that's over seven thousand feet of climbing from the plateau to the top of the mountain," Jack said to himself. "That's a butt load of climbing."

Rechecking his gauges, Jack noticed his fuel level at the halfway mark. He'd been flying for almost two hours and decided that he wasn't going to take any unnecessary chances in such a hostile environment. With the push of a couple of buttons on the two GPS receivers, Jack dialed in his return route to the airport.

"A gas gauge is only accurate when it's on empty," Jack said, coining the old aviation adage.

He glanced back at the snowfield, then the ridge, and worked his eyes up the fluted snow cliffs to the summit, taking in the striking profile of the mountain one last time for the day.

“Amazing,” he said to himself.

As he turned to fly out of the valley, he looked nervously at the saddle between the two mountains that had nearly killed him only an hour earlier. Now flying at 13,000 feet, he was well above the danger zone and he breathed a sigh of relief. He made a mental note not to repeat the same mistake the following day when he returned.

Flying back, passing from one valley to the next, he was filled with euphoria. He had finally seen the unnamed mountain he had spotted in a magazine, and it was even more impressive than anything he imagined. Fighting the turbulence, he lost himself in the memory of Destination B.

The Adventure

DAY 1

Jack examined the skis where the floats once sat. During the design phase of his plane, he knew he would need to be able to swap out the floats for skis, so he created a mechanism for quick disconnect. He was able to quickly remove the floats and attach the skis with a single bolt and cotter pin, a procedure that took less than ten minutes to complete. With the skis and tires in place and with a flick of a lever, he could transition from tires to skis and back to tires again in an instant.

Jack stood back and looked at his plane. He had neatly repacked most of his gear into it, leaving only the pilot's seat empty. Having checked the weather for the next few days, he found that a slow moving low-pressure front was moving in through the area and would prevent any travel by the following day.

Jack's nervousness pierced through varying degrees of severity. He could almost see his heart pounding through his fleece pullover.

“Well, Jack, this is it. It's time to grow some nads,” he said to himself, hoping the humor would relieve some of his anxiety.

He took one last look around the airport, exhaled deeply and hopped into his plane. With his flight sectional laid out on top of his gear next to him, he scanned the map one more time for completeness.

“Stop procrastinating. you idiot. You didn't fly all this way to admire the view,” Jack scolded himself once more.

“Clear,” he hollered out his side window.

Jack reached down and began to turn the key. He watched the propeller windmill momentarily, then the engine came alive. Immediately, he glanced over to

the engine's gauges. Everything was in the green and operating normally. With a quick check of the area around him, he added a touch of power and began to roll.

Jack taxied to the beginning of the runway, then ran through his checklists to ensure he hadn't forgotten anything. A few minutes later, he stowed the lists and crept onto the runway, lining up with the centerline.

Looking up into the clear skies, he checked for any aircraft that might be flying near the airport. There were none. Jack hesitated momentarily, second guessing his plans, then slowly advanced the throttle forward.

With a full load, the tiny plane moved forward slowly, then, after a few feet, started to pick up momentum. Nearly seventy feet down the runway, he had reached his departure speed and pulled steadily back on the stick while adding a slight bit of rudder to keep the plane from drifting off-course.

Jack's climb rate was about 1,200 feet per minute—nowhere near the 2,000fpm he experienced the day before when the plane was empty. He was climbing to 13,000 feet, the maximum height he had reached while flying around Destination B. This would ensure he cleared the deadly saddle that almost claimed his life the day before.

At the higher elevations, Jack's engine performance was greatly reduced. He could only expect about three hundred fpm above 10,000 feet, and much less above 12,000 feet. In all, it would take him at least forty-five minutes to climb to 13,000 feet, almost the exact time it would take him to get to the saddle. If he arrived too soon, he wouldn't have the altitude to clear the ridge. He decided to circle the small town while climbing, ensuring he would have the altitude well before he reached the saddle.

After fifteen minutes of circling, Jack had climbed to the 10,000 foot level. With only 3,000 feet left, he knew he would clear the saddle with time to spare. With that, he exited the valley to the east, following the directions displayed on both GPSs.

Forty minutes of light turbulence later, he could see the saddle in the far distance. Apprehension swept over his body as his eyes locked on the spot he almost gave his life to the day before. He was about 1,000 feet above it, and still lower than the snow-covered mountain tops that suspended the saddle between them.

As he passed over the ridge, right on cue, the wind that was being driven over the top of the saddle like water over a dam caused him to lose altitude as the downdraft forced him lower. He watched as his altitude unwound from 13,000 feet down to 12,700, clearing the ridge by 700 feet. He learned his lesson and felt good because of it.

"Oh yeah! Jack, two; saddle, NOTHING," Jack said out loud, mocking the inanimate mountain pass.

As the valley opened up in front of him, he no longer needed the flight sectional to guide him. He headed for the northern side of Destination B, where he had spotted the snowfield and the two ridges. Working his way around to the 'front' of the mountain, looking out the right passenger window as he flew, he watched as the football field-sized snowfield came into view, the two ridges bracketing each side.

Jack's heart started to pound. He had butterflies in his stomach as he moved in for a closer look. As he flew closer, he lowered his flaps to the halfway point, allowing him to lower the nose of the tiny plane without picking up unnecessary airspeed. He now had a commanding view of the mountain through the windshield as he descended.

Minutes later, he judged his altitude to be a thousand feet above the snowfield. He reached down, pulled the throttle control and reduced his power to idle. Jack's heart was now pounding and his hands were wet with sweat, as he thought of landing under such extreme conditions.

As he descended, he took a hard look at both the ridge and the snowfield. Aside from a couple of exposed rock climbing pitches that looked easy, the ridgeline looked like an easy snow hike. He looked down toward the field. It looked flawless, without a single depression or bump along its entire surface.

"Wow, this is unbelievable," he shouted to himself over the roar of the engine. "How lucky can I get?"

At about 250 feet above the field, he could tell that it was much bigger than a football field; twice as big, if he had to guess. Pretending to land, he flew over the snowfield and straight at the mountain. With a quick glance down at the snow below, then back to his altimeter, he determined that the field sat at an elevation of about 11,700 feet.

"Ok, fun's over. Time to get the hell out of here," Jack said to himself as he stared at the imposing mountain in front of him.

He added full power, banked hard left and circled out away from the mountain as he slowly climbed.

"Climb, baby, climb," Jack shouted out as the engine strained in the rarified air.

Keeping an eye on the field, he flew away from the mountain until he was a mile or so away. As he reached 12,200 feet on the altimeter—500 feet above the field—he started to slowly bank back toward the mountain. Coming back around, he stared at the snowfield.

"Damn, that thing looks smaller than my mom and dad's backyard," Jack said, his anxiety now peaking.

With as much determination as he could find, he took a deep breath and headed to the right side of the tiny snowfield.

Jack reduced the power to almost idle and lowered the flaps to the final setting. He pushed the control stick forward and lowered the nose of the plane, once again drawing in the impressive view.

Heading for the ridgeline on the right side of the snowfield, Jack examined the ragged cliff that rose up from its base. He could see massive blocks of rock and ice that had fallen off the wall and landed at the base of the cliff.

"Holy shit, some of those blocks are as big as a house," he exclaimed.

The sight of such a powerful and dangerous environment sent a chill through his body. Wiping the nervous sweat from his hands, he regripped the control stick and focused intently on his descent.

Now stabilized and descending at five hundred feet per minute, Jack checked his speed and heading: fifty knots and heading exactly west as displayed on his gyroscopic compass.

The excitement and fear sent Jack's heart pounding wildly. He could see his jacket expanding and contracting with each pulse.

Once again, his hands trembled and became slippery with sweat. He wiped them off on his pants and then shook them out in the air, one by one.

Jack could see that the winds were blowing to the north, as the tiny plane drifted off-course with the wind. He turned slightly into the wind to counter the drift, finding a heading that kept him moving in a straight line. The altimeter continued unwinding, now down to 11,950 feet; 250 feet above the field.

Jack sharpened his focus further now, scanning the instruments, then the field, back to the instruments and then back to the field again in an unending cycle that resulted in precision flying.

Wiping the nervous sweat from his brow, he noticed his speed had dropped slightly below fifty knots. Jack added two hundred rpm of power, stabilizing the speed at fifty. As he flew lower, he was continuously buffeted by turbulence that forced him to 'work' the throttle in a constant struggle to maintain his proper speed. It was exhausting and stressful work.

Jack peered out the pilot's side window. Looking down, he was no longer flying over the frightening and treacherous valley that led up to the snowfield. He was now directly over the snowfield and flying up its right side.

He looked back at his altimeter. He was now 200 feet above the field and less than 1,000 feet away from the mountain.

The mountain in front of him, Destination B, towered 5,500 feet above him as he stared at it through his windshield.

"Holy shit! That thing's big," he said as his slowly banked left into the wind.

Jack looked to his right. He had now descended below the northern ridge. Suddenly, he was hit by a burst of turbulence from the south, striking the plane broadside on the left and shoving it dangerously close to the ridge and drifting closer.

"Whoa!" he cried out in fear.

The plane immediately drifted to less than a hundred feet from the cliff. He could see the plane's shadow cast onto the mountain's face as he inched closer. Jack instantly reacted by adding power and banking into the wind to steer away from the deadly rock face. With his eyes glued to the ridgeline, he nervously watched as the tiny plane turned and began to distance itself from the impending crash.

"Damn, that was close," Jack called out as he breathed a moment of relief.

Jack's relief was short-lived. Refocusing on his task at hand, he quickly looked out his window to monitor his progress. He was now a hundred and fifty feet above the ground and still descending. As the tiny plane flew away from the ridgeline, he stopped his turn and now lined up, heading directly across the snowfield.

With the great mountain on his right side, he now stared out his windshield at the other ridgeline directly in front of him. Lined up in the center of the snowfield, he estimated the ridgeline to be only five hundred feet away. He cut the power completely, rapidly accelerating his descent.

Jack looked out his side window, down at the snow below. He could tell by the ski that he was close; about twenty feet from the ground now. Then it dawned on him. He hadn't lowered the skis below the tires yet. Quickly, he grabbed a lever

and lowered them, while he watched the skis instantly drop below the tires and lock in place. In the time it took him to do this, he had dropped a few more feet. He could see the skis casting a shadow on the snow below. He was close.

Looking up across the field, there was now only 300 feet left between him and the other ridge. It was going to be close.

Jack reached down and turned off the key, cutting the power to the engine.

“This is it. No turning back now,” Jack cried out to himself.

Jack was now committed to land. With the engine off, flaps lowered and the skis fully extended, there was nothing else he could do but wait and watch the end of the field race toward him. Looking down at the skis again, he was now inches above the ground. The speed was now rapidly bleeding off as he started to flare the nose.

Forty knots, thirty-five knots, thirty knots...

Jack felt it first as a tiny vibration—then the whole plane started to shake. He immediately glanced out his side window. He was now touching down and skidding across the field.

With his speed falling below twenty-five knots, the far end of the field was no longer far. It was a mere one hundred feet away and closing. He pulled hard back on the stick, trying to raise the nose of the plane as high as he could, using the bottom surface for aerodynamic braking.

Without warning, the tiny plane slid down into a small depression, then back up the other side, slowing it further, but launching it into the air several feet. Instantly, Jack held the stick back as far as he could to soften the drop. It was the only thing he could do on short notice.

The tiny plane hit the soft snow with a loud, jarring thud that scared Jack. He was sure something must have broken on the hard landing. Holding back the stick through the series of bounces, the tiny plane shuddered and creaked as the speed began to bleed off.

Slowing to a stop, Jack flung open his door and leaped out of the plane to inspect for damage. To his surprise, he immediately sunk up to his knees in soft snow.

He looked back at the struts the skis were attached to. Relieved, he saw no damage. Stepping back, he reached up and grabbed a wing. Pushing it up and down, he rocked the wings and listened for anything unusual. A slow smile spread across his face as he realized he came through the landing unscathed.

“Phew, dodged another bullet,” Jack joked to himself out loud. “Just a walk in the park.”

He looked up at the mountain in front of him, then over to the ridges that cradled the snowfield. As he listened to the wind whistling past him, he suddenly realized just how alone he really was.

“Six thousand miles from home, no one around for a hundred miles and buried deep in the heart of the Andes... What some people won’t do for a little peace and quiet,” he joked again, downplaying the seriousness of his situation.

Moments later, Jack set up his camera on a makeshift tripod of snow and snapped a photo of himself with the plane and mountain in the background. He reviewed the photo with pride as the enormity of his feat finally hit him.

As if speaking to an audience, Jack chronicled the details of his trip out loud: “I built a tiny airplane that carried me 6,000 miles from home and landed at the base of an unknown and unclimbed mountain I found in a magazine, on a tiny snowfield that no one has ever landed on before.” With a sarcastic sigh, he continued, “It’s the little things in life I love most.”

Jack felt proud of his accomplishment. He felt if he could do this, he could do anything. Looking up at the mountain, he laughed at how silly this statement was.

“Not so fast, hotshot. The real work hasn’t even started yet. You still have to climb that damn mountain and fly home. Let’s not jinx it by celebrating too soon,” he scolded himself loudly.

Realizing the truth in his words, he tamed his vanity and headed back to the plane in preparation of his next adventure: climbing the 5,500 foot icy cliff that towered high above him.



Jack stood by the propeller of his plane and looked up at the mountain. His eyes followed from the base, all the way up to the summit. Racked with apprehension and fear, he felt slight nervous tremors throughout his body. He took a deep breath of air and exhaled as he struggled to gain his composure.

Jack could see the deep fluted grooves carved into the face of the mountain very clearly now. They looked even more intimidating at his close range. Even though this wasn’t nearly as difficult a climb as some of the other climbs he had accomplished in his earlier climbing career, it carried its own dangers that in many ways surpassed even his hardest accomplishments; the most obvious danger being the remote location.

Jack’s climbing career consisted of trips to Yosemite Valley in California, the Grand Tetons in Wyoming, as well as the Cascade Mountains in Washington State. They were much more technically difficult than Destination B. But if he ran into trouble in the US, a rescue could be mounted in a matter of minutes—not so in Peru. He was on his own in this part of the world. He knew if got hurt, even just a broken leg, he would almost assuredly die. It was just that simple.

The other glaring danger was the fact that Jack was climbing alone, truly alone. With his other adventures, even though he was alone, he really wasn’t alone. He had hundreds of people around him climbing close by and further out, and there were thousands in the nearby surrounding towns and cities. He could count on their support to a large degree, but in Peru, a hundred miles from civilization in the remotest of rugged locations, there was nobody. Jack’s life was literally hanging by thread. Every problem would be life-threatening.

Jack had folded the wings of his plane, a feature that caught his eye when he was researching the plans of hundreds of experimental planes. The wings were unlocked, rotated backward on a pivot point at the cockpit and then secured to the tail. In such a hostile environment, it was essential to break the lift of the wings by securing them in that fashion. If he left the wings extended, any wind that flowed over them could cause the plane to literally fly away and crash.

With the wings stowed and the plane anchored with ropes to the snow, he was ready to begin the climb. He lifted his enormous pack onto his back, the weight nearly knocking him off his feet. Jack’s solo climb required him to carry

everything: ropes, climbing gear, food, water, fuel for boiling snow, cooking stove, shovel, sleeping bag and many more heavy items that created a load on his back weighing in excess of 80lbs. It was a crushing amount of weight to carry, especially at 12,000 feet and above, where the air was thin.

Jack started for the ridge to the north. With each step he took, he sank up to his knees. This was a laborious task.

“Dammit, I wish I’d brought my skis,” Jack lamented.

Like snowshoes, mountaineering skis spread the weight of the traveler out over the snow, allowing him to glide on the top. Unfortunately, the plane could not handle the length and extra weight of them, so they were left home in Connecticut.

After an hour of ‘post holing’—a term that refers to sinking up to one’s knees in snow—he arrived at the northern ridge. It looked smaller as he looked up at it, but he knew from flying over it that it was pretty high; at least 1,000 feet at its highest point.

Looking up at the profile of the ridge, he could see the route he needed to take. Some of it looked icy and steep, with small stretches of steep, blocky rock faces. Having stripped down to a t-shirt early in the hike across the snowfield, he was now getting a slight chill as the breeze blew against his wet clothing.

He quickly pulled off his pack and retrieved two ice axes and his crampons (crampons are plates one straps to their boots that have sharp points extending out to aid in climbing on ice) in preparation for the steep icy sections he would need to negotiate. He sat down and snapped the crampons to his feet, then hauled the pack onto his back and headed up the ridgeline.

Prior to his trip, Jack had spent months training for high altitude climbing. He routinely hiked steep hills in New England with a pack weighing in excess of 130lbs. Although the training made him strong and agile, the effects of high altitude still slowed him down. With each step he took, he needed to take a breath of air. He would step left, breathe, step right, breathe, then step left and pause to rest under the heavy weight he was lugging on top of him.

Two hours had passed and Jack had ascended 300 feet up the ridge, occasionally needing his ice axes to balance him over the steeper sections. In front of him was the first of a series of rock and ice walls. They were short; about twenty-five feet high and looked relatively easy, so Jack removed his pack and decided to climb them without placing any protection in case of a fall. He tied a rope from himself to the pack and started to climb.

The rocks were very blocky, making the climbing easy and quick. In rock climbing, the difficulty scale is measured with a range between 5.0 to 5.14, where 5.0 is easiest. Jack estimated the ease of the pitch to be 5.1 in difficulty; relatively easy.

Twenty feet up, with his ice axes dangling from his wrists by lanyards, he could see the last portion was ice that had flowed off the top of the pitch, completely covering any exposed rock. He needed his ice axes and crampons to get over this five foot section.

Jack’s ice axes looked like miniature pickaxes. The pick of the axe was a curved plate that was sharpened so that it could pierce ice without shattering it.

Holding an axe in each hand, he reached above with his right hand and drove the point into the ice. It held firmly as he tugged on it as a test.

His crampons had two points extending out beyond the front of his boots. He lifted his right foot and drove the points into the ice. Pulling on the ice axe above for balance, he stood up on his right foot as the two front points held him in place to the ice.

Immediately, he drove the front points of the left boot into the ice, creating an artificial platform for him to stand on. He then drove the left ice axe higher, tugged on it and now drove his right axe and right front points higher at the same time, moving higher with each placement.

The cycle of climbing ice is a repetitious one: the right appendages move higher and the left moves up to match their level. Then the left appendages move higher and the right moves up to match their level. Over and over the cycle repeats itself as you gain altitude. This pattern can change as conditions change, but the concept is usually the same from climb to climb.

Jack pulled himself over the top of the icy bulge and stood on a tiny platform of snow. He grabbed the rope and struggled as he hauled the heavy pack up the short twenty-five foot section he just climbed.

He slowly hiked up the steep snow slope in front of him until he ran into another short rock and ice pitch. He climbed this one as he did the last, hauling up his pack when he finished the section.

Three hours and four more sections later, Jack stood at the top of the ridge and looked down the 1000-foot wall he just ascended. He'd made good time and felt exhilarated.

"Woohoo, a thousand feet down and only five thousand to go," Jack shouted out, jokingly

He looked down onto the snowfield at his tiny plane. It looked very small from his vantage point. He could just make out his footprints in the snow that stretched across the snowfield, eventually becoming too small to see. Aside from the plane, his footprints were the only evidence that he was there.

He looked at the half mile of ridgeline he would have to traverse to meet the main face of the mountain. It was a knife-edge, a term used in mountaineering to describe a narrow ridgeline that steeply drops off on both sides. The knife-edged ridge that Jack was staring at was no wider than two feet at its widest point. Any misstep would result in a tumble down the 1000-foot face on either side, resulting in his death.

"What a lovely little spot for a picnic," Jack joked to himself, then added, "Too bad I'm all out of truffles."

Jack looked down at his watch. It was late in the afternoon and he figured he had only about three hours of light left to the day. He knew if darkness fell before he finished his crossing, the consequences could easily be fatal. Considering that even a gust of wind could knock him off the narrow path, he felt he would need at least two hours to cross the ridge safely.

"Man, that leaves me with only a one hour safety factor," Jack said to himself. "Not good."

Jack looked down at the 1,000 foot face below him. Shaking his head, he said resolutely, "No way am I rappelling down and reascending that whole friggin' thing again tomorrow. Besides, how bad could it really be?"

Staring across the narrow knife edge, Jack swallowed hard, then headed off across the ridgeline, carefully placing each step as he walked.

With the 80lb load he carried on his back, he felt clumsy. In addition to the heavy load, Jack battled with his footing. A common problem for climbers wearing crampons is that the spikes under them catch on boots and pant legs, causing a climber to trip. Jack had to be extra careful to place each foot exactly where he wanted it go, to ensure this wouldn't happen. It was physically demanding to be that deliberate when he walked, and he used all his muscles to accomplish this slow motion action. An hour later, Jack felt tired.

"Well, thankfully the winds are light," Jack said to himself as he stopped to rest a moment.

Occasionally, Jack experienced stronger gusts of wind that nearly rocked him from his stance. Quickly, he would plant an ice axe for balance and stabilize himself. When the gusts subsided, he moved on. Jack was like a machine, focused and undeterred from his task.

As he looked across the ridgeline, he could see he was halfway to the other side. He looked down both sides of the steep faces, looking for some way off in case of an emergency. Unfortunately, there was none.

Jack's legs hurt with cramps from the constant foot placements he was making. He wanted to sit and rest for a moment, but knew that the only way to do this at his location was to straddle the ridge with his legs dangling over each side of the steep cliff faces. It would be like sitting on a tree limb 1,000 feet off the ground. He could do it, but then he'd have to contend with standing up and then, while balancing himself, sling the 80lb pack over his shoulders. It was hard enough to put it while on standing on flat ground. It was quite another thing to do this where he was standing.

Ten minutes later, Jack encountered the narrowest section of the ridgeline. It was less than a foot wide, forcing him to walk with one foot directly in front of the other, as if he were on a balance beam. In a desperate act to keep his body stabilized, Jack held his arms out at shoulder height and shifted them up and down for balance as he fought to stay on the ridge.

Jack's fear and anxiety were now raging. He was balancing on the edge of death. With his legs aching and his body trembling from exhaustion, he repeated to himself over and over, "Just keep going, just keep going."

Foot over foot, he moved along the ridge. With each gust of wind, he crouched slightly and concentrated on his stance, frantically trying to place his ice axe for stability. As the wind let up, he continued on his path, watching each foot as he moved forward.

Jack felt the extreme ache of his calf muscles in overload. With each step, they screamed for relief that would never come.

Sweat poured off his hands and face and he felt the sting of salt in his eyes. His sleeves had long since waterlogged and all he could do was shake his head for relief.

Over and over, Jack continued his mantra: "Just keep going, just keep going."

Looking up from his feet, the narrow strip seemed to go on forever. Jack put his head back down and continued his task.

"Just keep going, just keep going."

Forty-five minutes went slowly by as he shuffled his feet along the ridge. Suddenly, Jack stopped. He looked up at the ridgeline in front of him. It had widened.

“Holy shit! When did this happen? It’s nearly two feet wide. I could almost throw a party up here,” he said to himself. “Talk about extreme concentration.”

For the first time in almost an hour, Jack placed his feet side by side and rested. He could feel the blood flowing through his calf muscles as the pain started to ease. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a cloth and wiped the stinging salt from his eyes.

“Ah, I really needed that,” Jack said loudly. Focusing on the ridgeline up ahead, he added, “I could almost run on a path this wide. Phew, I’m glad that’s over with.”

As he stood and rested, Jack could see the mountain’s 5,000-foot vertical face looming in front of him. Taking advantage of his perspective, he scanned its entire length for the easiest route to the top. Shifting his weight slightly, he shuffled one of his boots forward to gain a better look.

Suddenly, Jack’s crampon hooked the side of his boot. Immediately he fell forward on both knees. For a split-second he was okay and balanced—but then the momentum of his pack caused him to roll off to the left side. Immediately, Jack flung his right leg over to the right side of the ridge in an attempt to counterbalance his weight.

The counter-balancing act only worked for a moment. With his weight concentrated mostly over his left leg, the heavy load caused the snow to collapse underneath him.

In slow motion, he started to slide off the edge of the ridge.

Instinctively, he tried to dig his toes into the snow, but found nothing to hold him. As his chest fell below the ridgeline, he knew this was it. He was about to fall to his death.

In one last desperate attempt to save his life, Jack flicked the ice axe into the palm of his hand and, with intense focus, swung and planted the pick into the snow in front of him. His arm went taut, slowing his accelerating slide. Instinctively, he drove the front points of his crampon into the snow below him. They held for a moment, then broke loose. Scrambling as his arm went taut again, he drove his front points into the hard packed snow once more. As his left foot gave way, his right foot broke loose, then held.

Jack was in a desperate struggle for his life. His heart was pounding harder than he ever felt it. He envisioned his parents weeping at his funeral. His grip on the ice axe was slipping. If he could just release his pack, it would fall the 1,000 feet below, making him light enough to climb out of this awful situation. Unfortunately, he’d have to let go of the ice axe to do this: not an option.

Slowly, delicately, he worked the left front points of his crampons into the snow. He was barely breathing, trying to limit his movement. He tried to put weight on his left foot. It felt firm. Jack felt his sweaty hand beginning to lose its grip on the ice axe. Frantically, he looked down to inspect his foot placement and spotted the ground a thousand feet below. Panic swept over his body as he realized how close to death he was.

Battling his fear, he went for broke. In one short, swift burst, he pulled his left front points away from their placement and drove them further into the snow.

With his hand nearly sliding off the end of the ice face, Jack weighted his left foot. It held.

As his right hand began to slide off the end of the ice axe, Jack lunged with his left hand and placed it on the axe handle above his right. As delicately as he could, he pulled on the axe with both hands and, little by little, he slid them higher. Sweat poured from his brow as he tried to control his frantic breathing. He knew if his axe pulled out, he would tumble backward to his death.

Inch by inch, his hands moved slowly up the shaft of the axe. He carefully pulled out his left foot and replaced it higher. It held. As he pulled on the axe, he transferred his weight to his left foot, then moved his right foot up to match his left.

With his head and chest now above the ridge, he could almost see down the other side of the cliff face.

Jack felt his right foot starting to give way. This was it. He had run out of options. With only one ice axe marginally placed and his left foot bearing the full load of his body and pack, he knew one or the other would break loose at any moment. Anxiously, Jack looked at the ground a thousand feet below. Desperation was his only card left to play.

Jack's right foot finally broke loose from its purchase. As he felt the ice axe beginning to move, he pulled hard on it with both hands and lunged upward. Frantically, he threw his right leg up on top of the ridge.

As the axe tore through its placement, Jack released his grip and thrust his right hand over the opposite side of the cliff, digging it into the hard packed snow. He pulled hard and forced his right leg over the other side of the cliff.

With one leg dangling over the left side and the other dangling over the right, Jack was now straddling the ridge. He exhaled deeply and fell forward, resting on his stomach. He was safe... for the moment.

"Oh my God, what the hell am I doing up here?" Jack whispered through labored breath.

Hyperventilating and feeling light-headed, Jack concentrated on slowing his breathing. As he regained his composure, he sat up. He now had a new problem. His pack was heavy and unwieldy. With his strength nearly depleted, he knew he would not be able to handle the weight of the shifting pack. If he tried to stand, he would lose his balance and fall off the cliff.

Looking at the remaining length of the ridge, Jack decided to slide along the rest of the way as he sat. It would take him a little longer, but it was safer.

He weighted his hands in front of him, dug his feet in and slid himself forward a few inches while focusing on keeping the heavy pack balanced. Taking a short rest, he shook out his tired arms and legs and repositioned them for another attempt.

Placing his hands in front of him again, he pushed hard with his legs and shuffled along further than the first attempt.

"Okay, that one was nearly a foot," Jack said to himself. "Five hundred more of these and I should be safe."

Jack quickly disregarded his humor and became serious. With darkness only an hour away, he knew his situation was still life-threatening. Placing his hands in front of him, he pulled and pushed himself along.

Over and over, he repeated this series of movements, sliding forward a foot at a time. Nearly an hour passed and the width of the ridge expanded from two feet to four. Still too tired to stand, Jack hoisted his legs up on top of the snow and crawled the rest of the way along the ridgeline.

Clear of the danger, Jack unbuckled his pack and stood up. He felt shaky and exhausted, but somewhat euphoric from relief. He turned around and looked back at the spot that almost claimed his life.

“Damn, that was close,” he said out loud. “This is really becoming a habit.”

Scanning the base of the mountain, he knew he would have to find another route down for the descent. With less than fifteen minutes remaining of darkness, he snapped a few pictures, then donned his headlamp as he made camp for the night.

Two hours later, Jack had melted snow for his water bottles, ate some Ramen noodles and dug out a mini-cave in the side of the vertical cliff to sleep in for the night. He was tired as he laid snug inside his sleeping bag, sipping hot raspberry tea. With a full moon high in the evening sky, there was no need for a headlamp. His eyes had adjusted perfectly, and he took in the distant valley as he sipped his drink. The winds were relatively light, making his stay enjoyable, and he listened to the sounds of distant spindrift avalanches as the falling snow worked its way down the fluted trenches.

The delicate sounds had a calming effect on Jack, the same way the sounds of ocean waves have on others. A short while later, exhaustion finally overtook him. He took his last swallow, pulled the sleeping bag over his head and fell asleep.

DAY 2

Jack sat up. He heard a thunderous roar from above that sounded like a tornado. In the early morning light, he peeked his head out from his tiny cave to investigate the noise. He looked in the direction of the sound, but saw nothing. The sound became deafening and he felt the area around him vibrate. Frightened and in reaction, he pulled his head back in. The sound and vibration intensified, then quickly stopped. Jack poked his head out again and still saw nothing.

“What the HELL was that?” he shouted out loud.

Jumping out of his sleeping bag and quickly putting on his mountaineering boots, he ran over to the ridgeline. Down in the snowfield, he spotted it: a snow boulder the size of a house. Much higher up, it had somehow broken loose and fallen, coming to rest in the soft snow at the base of the mountain, intact.

Jack looked up and saw the path of the snow boulder it had taken on its way down. It resembled the shape of the fluted trenches.

“Huh... falling debris. So that’s what made those trenches,” Jack surmised. “Dammit, this is not good. If they’re falling over there, then they gotta be falling above me, too.”

Jack stood back and studied the long mountain face directly above him. Even in the low light, he could make out the path of the trenches. Some were deep, some

were shallow. Jack deduced that one of the shallow trenches would be a safer route up the mountain.

Suddenly, Jack heard a loud cracking noise from above. Looking up, he saw a large boulder of ice tumbling down one of the larger paths. Quickly, he moved far off to the side and watched it impact the snow a short distance from him.

Looking up at the shallow trenches, Jack knew right away he was making the right choice.

“Oh yeah, definitely safer,” he said confidently, then added, “If ever there was an argument for the ‘path less traveled’, this is definitely it. Well, Mr. Frost, I hope it ‘makes all the difference’,” Jack said to himself, coining several phrases from Robert Frost’s infamous poem *The Road Not Taken*.

Having been ‘rudely awakened’, he worked quickly to prepare for the day. In his earliest plans, he had considered lugging his backpack all the way to the top of the mountain, then climbing down the other side. It would be a difficult chore but he had plenty of supplies and the descent would be easier due to his choice of rappel routes.

After his realization of the dangers from above, he deduced that speed was more important than the luxury of an easy descent. He decided to make his tiny snow cave his base camp for the climb. He intended on taking just the necessities and stowing the rest in the cave.

As he stood and examined the route, he figured he needed little or no rock climbing gear. There were some difficult icy sections, but for the most part it looked like steep snow. It was hard to tell from below, but he guessed he could climb without ropes and protection over more than half the route.

Jack figured that by moving quickly, he could probably climb the 5,500-foot face in two days. In his pack, he would be taking only the absolute necessities: ice gear, food, water, two ropes, two ice axes and a bivy bag (a waterproof, breathable, uninsulated bag to sleep in). In all, the weight of his backpack would now be no more than 20lbs, a far cry from the 80lbs he lugged up the ridge. He could easily climb fast with that little amount.



With an ice axe in each hand and his pack on his back, Jack stared up at the snow face above. The route was steep, but not enough for him to consider the use of ropes. He would be hiking nearly upright as he ascended. Unfortunately, if he slid or fell he would not be able to stop himself, so even though the route was relatively easy to climb, it was also deadly if he made a mistake.

Jack could see up as far as 1,000 feet, but then the pitch of the slope lessened a bit and became hidden from view. He could also see the last slopes to the top and guessed those to be about 1,000 to 2,000 feet high. It was now simple math to estimate what was hidden from view, and he guessed it to be 2,000-3,000 feet high and relatively easy, due in part to it being less steep.

The fluted trenches he would be climbing looked to be about thirty feet wide on average, and nondescript. Upon reflection, he likened them to the furrows in a farmer’s field, except that these were vertical. He was glad for this. Even though it was steep, it wasn’t technically challenging—at least the lower section, as far as he could tell.

Taking it all in, he went through a wide range of emotions, mostly fear and anxiety. The unknown was the worst. He had never done anything on this scale before and just didn't have a feel for what he could expect above. He knew he was strong and skilled, but sometimes that was not enough. If he ran into a situation that was beyond his abilities and climbing down was impossible, he would die. This was a paralyzing thought. He stood for a moment, unable to move. Finally, he pushed through his self-doubt and moved to the slope in front of him.

"Okay, man, don't psyche yourself out before you even started," Jack said to himself. "You can do this. Just keep moving forward."

Jack started up one of the fluted trenches. The snow was hard from the lack of sunshine on the northern side, so his crampons grabbed the top surface without breaking all the way through. He knew that once the sun hit the slopes above, it would soften and he would probably sink to his knees on every step. He decided to take advantage of the climbing conditions by moving as fast as he could.

As if climbing a tall ladder, he worked his feet up the steep face, occasionally placing his hands on the snow in front of him for balance. He started off slow, stepping up, matching his lower foot to the higher foot, resting, then stepping higher, continuously repeating the cycle.

As he climbed, he fell into a subconscious routine, moving higher as if on autopilot. After a short time, his muscles loosened up and he began to feel his strength and confidence build. He changed his routine from stepping up and matching feet to taking full steps above his feet as if he were walking up a set of stairs. This greatly increased his speed, as he stepped one foot above the other, over and over.

Almost in a trance as he climbed, his mind drifted off from the sound of his heavy breathing and his footsteps as he kicked his feet into the snow with each placement.

In his mind, he began to play the simple chorus of a familiar song. Over and over, he replayed the chorus. After a while, as he breathed out, each note in the chorus corresponded with each exhale of breath, in essence subconsciously creating a metronome. His pace of climbing became matched with the beat of the song, a phenomenon common in climbing that made the hours of long, hard work pass more quickly and painlessly.

Nearly three hours passed and Jack's repetitious hard work was paying off. He had ascended nearly the full 1000-foot face, a monumental task. He looked down and saw the small platform he left from, then worked his eyes out across the dangerous ridge he had crossed the day before. Inside the long fluted trench, his view of the snowfield was blocked. The most he could see of it was that portion leading up to the ridgeline.

He was nearly 2,000 feet above the snowfield and the huge blocks of ice that sat below the ridge looked like pebbles. He was really high up. If he slipped, even a little, he would tumble all the way down to those ice boulders and to his death—a very sobering thought. With a couple hundred feet to go, he made sure there were no mistakes.

A short time later, the steep slope relaxed a bit and Jack could now climb without the need of his hands for balance. As he crested the top of the slope, he found a narrow platform that meandered around the mountain. Measuring fifty

feet at its widest point, it resembled a wide sidewalk that created breaks in the fluted trenches.

Jack stopped for a moment on the walkway, drank some water and ate a peanut butter sandwich, then walked around from the north side to the east side of the mountain. He stood at the edge of the 'sidewalk' and looked down into the snowfield for his plane. At first he became scared, unable to find it. Concentrating his focus on the area at the bottom of the south ridge, he spotted it; it blended in with some of the larger rock and ice boulders.

Jack looked up at the sky. There were thin clouds forming overhead. He remembered the weather forecast from the previous day: a low-pressure front moving through the area. He had hoped that it wouldn't impact his climbing, rationalizing that the Andes range would form a barrier, preventing the weather from passing through, as he had heard was the case in the Cascades of the Pacific Northwest. He looked at the fast-moving clouds and accepted the reality that the weather could become a problem. He took a mental inventory of his gear and concluded that he had three days of rations if things got bad, two days more than he needed. It was not a comfortable surplus, but it was adequate. He turned and hurriedly headed back to his route.

The next 1,000 feet or so looked to be the same kind of climbing that he had just completed, only not as steep. He breathed deeply a few times, trying to repress the anxiety that was building inside him again. He started off up the slope, this time moving faster than before. He was happy that he still hadn't run into anything technically difficult, although he still could not see the upper slopes that still lay hidden from his view.

As he climbed higher, he could feel a cool breeze blow against his face and into his nostrils. He judged that the temperature was about thirty-five degrees. Still climbing, he looked down at the zipper on his jacket that held a mini-compass and thermometer. He read it: thirty-three degrees.

"Good guess," he said out loud, longing to hear a human voice and settling for his own.

Nearly two and a half hours later, Jack was now cresting the 1,000-foot slope he'd just ascended. He felt relieved that a third of the climbing was under him. As he gazed up at the wall in front of him, his relief was overcome by worry and dread. There, in front of him, was a wall of ice. It was steep and it went on forever. He estimated it was over a thousand feet high.

Before the climb, he figured he was going to run into some short pitches of ice here and there, the same kind he found while climbing the north ridge. This extended cliff of ice, on the other hand, he did not figure on.

In climbing steep ice, just like in steep rock, you must place protection into the ice periodically in case of a fall. As you ascend a pitch of ice, you drive in or screw in tubes of metal called ice pitons or ice screws. With the help of a carabineer, a climber would clip his rope into the ice protection and continue climbing. If a fall were to occur, a climber would drop the length he climbed above the carabineer and then that same length below it, essentially falling two times the length of unsupported rope.

Jack recalled from past experience that he could climb steep ice at a pace of seventy-five feet per hour, which included climbing, placing protection every five to

ten feet, rappelling back down, then climbing back up and 'cleaning' the protection out of the pitch. Looking up at the steep icy face above, he calculated that it would take him fifteen hours of continuous climbing to reach the top. If it were higher than 1,000 feet, it would be just that much more, something he wasn't sure if he had the provisions for.

He pulled back the sleeve on his red North Face mountaineering jacket and checked the time. It was a little after 2pm. There were only about five more hours of sunlight left. He looked to see if there was anywhere to bivouac higher up. There was none. The wall above was a blank wall of ice.

Jack would have to consider three options: he could make camp and start at daybreak tomorrow; he could start climbing immediately, and before it got dark bivvy on the wall of ice, suspended from his ice axes and ice protection; or he could climb through the night with his headlamp.

For Jack, the decision was a 'no-brainer'. He took off his pack and rested it on the ground in front of him. Opening up the top portion, he pulled out his headlamp and strapped it to his climbing helmet. He was going for it, making the decision to climb through the night. He felt that he just didn't have the food and water for any other choice.

With ice axes in hand, he started off. He climbed slow at first, until he found a routine, then moved quickly up the ice face, hammering in ice pitons and clipping his rope into them as he climbed higher. Just as he did on the ridge, he would drive the pick of his right ice axe into the ice, then drive the front points on the toe of his right crampons into the ice. Pulling on the now embedded axe and standing on the points of the crampon, he then would drive the pick of the left axe into the ice higher and drive the points of his left crampon higher. Over and over the cycle repeated itself, gaining altitude slowly as he worked.

Two hours later, Jack had climb to the end of his rope, rappelled back down and climbed back up, cleaning the pitch of all equipment. Getting ready to start his next pitch, he noticed a few snowflakes. This was nothing unsurprising on a snowy mountain. There were always snowflakes blowing about while he climbed. These flakes were slightly bigger than he normally observed, though.

He looked up into the sky and immediately blinked as snowflakes entered his eyes. He covered them and looked again. To his horror, the sky was a mass of grey swirling clouds, and it was now snowing steadily. Not wanting to descend, he rationalized that the snow was lightly falling and that there was really no need for alarm. He swung his ice axe and planted it in the ice above him, starting the next pitch of the route.

The pitch of the face had steepened somewhat, making this part of the route more strenuous. Thirty minutes into the pitch, Jack could feel occasional droplets of sweat running down his neck and soaking his shirt under his jacket. He wanted to climb without his coat, but knew that that was a dangerous idea. If he fell and became hurt, his chances of dying due to hyperthermia would be very high.

'Better to sweat and live than to not and die,' he thought to himself.

The temperature started to drop and the ice was becoming more brittle because of it. An hour into the next pitch, he swung his ice axe and heard a sound like a dinner plate cracking. At the point where the axe entered the ice, tiny circular cracks fanned out from the center of the pick. He pulled lightly on the axe, and a

thin, circular chunk of ice, the size of a large dinner plate, popped off the icy face, his axe coming with it.

The event by itself wasn't anything to worry about; it just meant that now Jack needed to be more observant of deteriorating conditions, something he was already on heightened alert about with the snow falling. If more 'dinner plates' started to appear, he would need to slow down and make more careful placements. This could be time-consuming. Jack was already pushing the limits of his stay. If the ice was becoming more unstable, he might have to consider a retreat, a word that really wasn't in his vocabulary.

He swung his axe into the same spot as before. This time it held nicely. As he climbed higher, he noticed the snowflakes were looking slightly larger. They weren't coming faster; just larger.

An hour later, Jack reached the end of his rope and had completed the standard routine of rappelling and reascending the pitch. He was now ready to start the next, when he noticed the snow was now falling much heavier. He looked down at the temperature: it read twenty-four degrees. With all the overheating from the previous pitch, he hadn't noticed the temperature drop. It was getting cold.

He looked at the pitch above and could see that it looked just as steep as the previous pitch. With an hour or so left of daylight, he knew that he would be finishing this one in the dark. He looked down at the snowfield far below. He was a long way up now. He guessed he was now nearly 2,300 to 2,400 feet above the previous night's bivy.

With the wind whistling in his ears, he started up the next pitch.

Higher and higher he climbed, placing ice protection every few feet now due to the steepness of the face. Feeling the day's exhaustion, he took a small rest while hanging off his ice axes, then continued. Thirty minutes into the pitch, near dusk, Jack hit another large dinner plate of ice. It popped off and hit him in the leg.

"Shit!" he cried out in pain.

The dinner plate was a very large chunk of ice that landed edgewise in the middle of his thigh. If he'd been wearing shorts, it would have cut his leg. As it was, the impact would probably leave a black and blue welt for days. Again, Jack swung the axe at the same spot, now ignoring the pain in his leg. The placement held but sounded strange to him. He thought about trying a different location, but decided to trust it. He placed his weight on his left foot and weighted the axe. He was now ready to move higher with the right ice axe.

He quickly searched for a good spot and found a slight bulge in the ice face above him. He took aim and planted the pick on the top part of the bulge. It looked and sounded like a good placement. Jack tugged on the axe to test its strength. As if in slow motion, he watched as the placement 'dinner plated'—only this time it was no ordinary fracture. The entire surface in front of him, an area the size of a coffee table, lifted off, taking out his other ice axe. With his hands still clinging to both axes, he fell backward as the block of ice slid down the face and landed on his mountaineering boots, severing their connection to the mountain.

In less time it took to blink, Jack went from being securely attached to the cliff face to free-falling down the mountain. The speed that he fell was blinding. In less than a second, he fell eight feet past his last placement of protection. As the rope ran from below, up through the ice piton and back down to Jack, it became taut.

The load on the piton was too great for the strength of the ice holding it. The instant the rope became taut, the piton popped out and the ice shattered all around it. Jack continued free-falling. As he fell past the next point of protection, once again the rope became taut. This time the ice protection held.

Jack had fallen more than twenty feet, a tremendous distance in ice climbing, the entire fall taking less than a second. He came to a rest hanging by his waist harness, inverted, his head dangling below his legs. He lay unconscious from impacting the wall on his way down.

The snowfall had increased in intensity and was no longer a flurry. With the billions of snowflakes falling, the sound as they made contact with the mountain had grown dramatically louder. The loud hissing noise was only broken by the rush of tiny spindrift avalanches as the snow accumulated in depressions higher above, breaking free under its own weight and sliding down the vertical face, thousands of feet below.

Further out in the valley, as the weather front moved through, the winds howled as they raced through the irregular terrain below. Higher up, in the fluted trenches on the northern side of the mountain, Jack was relatively protected from the force of the wind by the long, deep furrows etched into the mountainside.

Jack blinked. The snow melted as it landed on his eyelids. It mixed with his sweat and seeped into his eyes, the salt causing a burning sensation. He blinked hard in reaction.

Coming out of his unconscious state, his head throbbed and his vision was blurred. As he tried to gain his bearings, he looked around and noticed the world was upside down. With the blood rushing to his head, he had trouble seeing. His vision came into focus and he started to recognize his surroundings, finally becoming coherent as more snow melted and streamed into his eyes. The previous traumatic events flooded his mind and snapped him back to reality.

“Oh my God. I fell,” Jack mumbled.

Fear was the first emotion that struck him as he realized he was hanging upside down. Frantically and instinctively, he tried to right himself. With his head throbbing, he reached higher for the rope. His hands had trouble working at first, but finally found the rope and he was able to right himself. He checked himself for injury, starting with his extremities and working his way through his limbs. Aside from soreness in his shoulders and hips, caused as result of impacting the wall on the way down, he had sustained no real injuries.

“Phew, that was close...” Jack said, as he breathed a sigh of relief, then added, “Man, I gotta stop saying that.”

Jack’s fall could easily have been fatal. Not by blunt force trauma, but by any small injury that could have prevented him from climbing higher or descending lower. Without the ability to move, he would eventually die a slow death in that very place he came to rest, from hyperthermia or shock, suspended thousands of feet above the ground. In this remote part of the world, the likelihood of ever being found would be zero. He would eventually become a frozen, icy bulge on the mountain face, undetectable even if someone climbed over the top of him. The only evidence of his existence would be his tiny plane that might be uncovered during a rare warming spell.

Jack's head was pounding, but the feeling in his hands was now coming back. This was a relief. He wasn't sure how long he'd been out, but knew it was longer than a few minutes due to the fact that his hands had fallen asleep as they dangled below his head. He shook them out, trying to regain the feeling in them once again.

He looked around him. Darkness was almost upon him as he switched on his headlamp. The snow was falling heavily now and started to accumulate in his lap. The fall had shaken him psychologically. Self-doubt toyed with his subconscious.

Looking above, he could barely make out the upper slopes near the top of the mountain. It was a long way away. He looked down toward the ground. It, too, looked equally far. He sat for a moment, thinking about his dilemma. Suddenly, it dawned on him. He realized that he was only being held to the mountain by a single point of contact. With the kind of force a fall can generate, there was no telling what kind of condition the anchor was in.

"Holy shit! What the HELL are you doing?" Jack called out in fear. "You're not out of the woods yet. Get moving, you idiot."

He rotated around and faced the mountain. Swinging his axes above, he planted them solidly into the ice, then stabbed the front points of his crampons into the ice too and stood up. He felt sore all over from the fall and was shivering from the cold. Prior to the fall, he had been sweating profusely while working his way up the steep face, but as he hung unconscious, the sweat cooled his body down to an uncomfortable level. He knew if he didn't start moving soon, he would run into a hypothermic situation. He started back up the face, forcing the moves through pain and soreness.

A few minutes later, he had reached the ice screw that had been holding him. It was still solidly placed.

"It looks like it could hold a building," Jack said to himself in relief.

He looked up and saw the spot where he'd fallen from, five feet above. He looked down to reevaluate his situation, and realized that darkness had now overtaken him. He hung there for a moment, realizing that this was the moment of truth for him; the moment that would define him for the rest of his life. If he quit now, he would always wonder if he could have made it, but if he continued, he could be climbing into a deadly situation.

Jack didn't need to think about it any further. He raised his axe and swung it above his head. He decided that he wasn't going to give up. He was going to dig deep, like he had done so many times in the past few years, and try to succeed.

Minutes later, with only the light of his headlamp, he moved past the huge scar in the ice left behind from where he fell. He moved a little higher and screwed in another ice screw. He looked down into the blackness, then continued.

Jack climbed the next three pitches at a slower, but safer pace, figuring that there was no rush after choosing to climb through the darkness. The snow had been falling steadily, but had not increased in its intensity. He was relatively warm, and the soreness he felt many hours before was now completely gone. Looking down at his watch, it read 2:15am; he'd been climbing for nearly seven hours straight since the fall.

The steep icy face had now turned into a gentle hill, easy to climb without the use of his hands or equipment. He surmised that this must be the top of the 1,000

foot face and that he was now nearing the section of the climb that was obstructed from view the previous day. What lay ahead, Jack could only guess.

DAY 3

Jack set off into the darkness, aided by nothing more than the light from his headlamp. An hour after leaving the icy face, the pitch of the hill increased, but not enough for the use of ropes and ice protection. With his confidence growing, so did his pace.

Higher and higher he climbed through the snow, as the pitch of the mountain became steep once more. He needed his hands now for balance, as well as the use of his ice axes on several short bulges of ice, but he was still making great time.

Hours had passed since Jack had stowed his gear. He had anticipated the need for their use higher up on the mountain, but strangely, the difficulty level was little more than a strenuous hike.

On mountains the size of Destination B, when visibility is obscured by either darkness or foul weather, it is conceivable to climb to lower 'false summits', thereby missing the true summit entirely.

Jack began to worry about the route he was taking and the possibility that he wasn't on a line that would lead him to the top. He checked his watch again. It read 6am. With daybreak just around the corner, he decided to continue on until it was light.

As the dawn broke, Jack tried to search the upper slopes, but had trouble seeing through the falling snow. It had slowed quite a bit, but not enough to allow for a visual sighting of the summit. As he pressed on, his anxiety began to build and the worry about his direction became more intense.

A few hours later, tired and thirsty, Jack stopped for a moment as he reached another flat area just beyond the steep climb. While sitting in the falling snow, he drank more water and ate a peanut butter sandwich. At his elevation, his body hadn't quite acclimatized to the altitude, and he was now feeling its ill-effects.

Jack had been climbing for more than twenty-four hours. He knew his body craved energy, but the altitude sickness he was feeling made the thought of food repulsive to him. He knew better than to trust the false feeling, and he forced the sandwich into his mouth anyway. As he was finishing, the snow dramatically slowed.

Instantly, Jack could see the peaks of other mountains extending high above the clouds. He'd seen this sight before when he climbed up above the clouds on Mount Rainier in Washington State. The cloud bank extended from ground level up to the exact point that he was sitting. A few feet below him it was snowing, but at his location, the sun was out and it was clear.

Jack immediately realized that if he could see other peaks, then he could probably see the one he was climbing. He turned around and there it was: the summit of Destination B. It was a beautiful sight.

Excited, he stood up and shouldered his pack. He could see the summit and the final slope leading up to it. Scanning the upper regions, he quickly spotted several routes to choose from.

Although climbing straight up the face in front of him seemed to be the shortest distance, he could see several pitches of ice that would need to be negotiated. They would be time-consuming and dangerous.

Off to the right, Jack located a ridgeline that led to the summit. While it, too, was difficult and dangerous, it wasn't nearly as bad as the ridgeline he'd crossed the day before. It appeared wider as well as shorter, and didn't seem to have any appreciable ice buildups.

Leading up to the ridgeline were a set of high angle slopes. They seemed devoid of any ice and would be easy to negotiate. Without further delay, Jack headed off across a series of fluted trenches on his way to the upper slopes and ridgeline.

At Jack's altitude, moving fast was harder to do. The lack of oxygen meant that for every step he took, he'd needed to take a breath of air. Jack's conditioning was paying off. Even though he needed more breaths of air, he still felt strong and was moving up the final slopes quickly and easily.

After a while, Jack stopped for a drink of water. He hadn't estimated the duration of the technical climbing accurately, and as a result, the extra work translated into a higher consumption of food and water. He pulled out his water bottle and drank the last drop. He knew it was going to be a long time before he had any more and he grabbed some loose snow and filled the empty bottle in hopes that his body temperature would melt enough to satisfy his thirst later on.

Looking up, he estimated he was only 500 feet from the summit. At the pace he was moving, he figured he'd be standing on the top in less than two hours—that was, if the knife edge went well.

An hour later and 400 feet higher, Jack had climbed the final stretches of the upper slopes. He was now standing at the final ridgeline. Like the one he had crossed below, it had a narrowly ascending 'catwalk', about a foot wide, that he would have to balance himself on for nearly a hundred feet. He knew if he fell, instead of tumbling a thousand feet to his death, he would be tumbling in excess of 5,000 feet. The thought was psychologically far more intimidating.

Jack scanned across the ridge and tried to find a better solution for its crossing. Suddenly it hit him. He decided that instead of the scary balancing act, he would stand just below the top, facing it, and shuffle sideways with his arm dangling over the other side and his body slumped over the top. It wasn't pretty by any stretch of the imagination, but it was much easier and safer.

"I just hope no one sees me doing this," Jack lamented. "How embarrassing."

Swallowing his pride, he started his sideways shuffle up and across the ridge, taking care not to catch his crampons on anything. He clutched his ice axes in both hands and readied them at the first sign of trouble.

Little by little he worked his feet and body toward the summit. Looking down over the other side of the ridge, thousands of feet below, sent waves of anxiety throughout his body as he fought to control his fears.

"This sucks," Jack said to himself under his breath. "...And me without an extra pair of underwear."

Fifteen minutes later, Jack completed the traverse and pulled himself up onto the final hill that led to the top.

“Oh yes, you're almost in my grasp!” Jack said, as if speaking directly to the mountain's summit.

As he walked to the peak, he could see the mountains all around him. They were still covered in clouds but at a much lower elevation. The weather now slowly started to clear out.

The sky above the clouds was a brilliant blue, and the sun's rays made the snow crystals sparkle. Jack was tired, not having slept in a day and a half, but felt alive as adrenaline pumped through his body.

A few steps later, Jack had finally achieved his goal. He was now standing on the coffee table-sized summit of Destination B.

“Woohoo!” Jack shouted out at the top of his lungs. “Made it... on top of the world.”

Jack felt the pride of accomplishment. He felt that, from that day forward, he could face anything anywhere and succeed. He sat at his lofty height and dreamed. Life had new meaning for him. He felt like the world was his, and he couldn't wait to get home to have it.

An hour later, having snapped some photos, he headed down.

The descent consisted of many rappels. Where there was snow, he placed in special anchors called ‘flukes’, rappelled down to the end of his rope, set up another fluke and continued rappelling. On ice, he did the same, placing ice screws and rappelling. If he could walk down safely, he did so. The descent carried into darkness, taking more than twelve hours in all to descend to the first night's bivouac just above the northern ridgeline.

Looking at his tiny snow cave, he said affectionately, “Home, sweet home.”

Jack had been climbing for nearly two days straight and was delirious with exhaustion. As he pulled the rope down from the final anchor, he crawled on his hands and knees to the backpack he had stowed two days before. He rolled on his back and rested a moment. He knew he needed water, but all he wanted to do was sleep.

Through his exhaustion, he said, “Okay, let's get the show on the road.”

Jack rolled over and reached for the pack inside the mini cave. He reached in and pulled out his stove, pot, bivy bag and his sleeping bag. With what little strength he had left, he managed to melt some snow while he placed his sleeping bag inside the bivy bag.

At his exhaustion level, even the simplest of tasks were difficult. What should have taken ten minutes took thirty. Having already gotten inside his bag, Jack turned off his cooking stove and drank the melted snow from the pot, nearly burning his lips and fingers in the process. The drink was as satisfying as any he had ever had, and he finished the entire contents. With that chore accomplished, he dropped the pot where he laid and threw his head back.

His sleep came fast; nearly the instant his head came to rest. There were no dreams. He did not move. He slept deeply, as his body desperately fought to heal itself from the ravages of exhaustion.

DAY 4

Jack woke the next day as the sun's rays beat down upon his face. He was still exhausted, but couldn't continue his rest with the brilliance that radiated off the snow and pierced his eyes.

He sat up and leaned against the side of the mountain, trying to clear the fog from his mind. Severely dehydrated and thirsty, he lit his stove and melted more snow for water. In his pack he found a stick of pepperoni he had forgotten and made quick work of it while he quenched his thirst.

As he sat and rested, he took in the magnificence of the mountains around him. Aside from an occasional light wind that streamed on by, the silence seemed thunderous. There were no characteristic sounds of humanity anywhere: no machinery or voices. The sound of animal life and nature were equally nonexistent, as there were no barking dogs, chirping birds or leaves and grasses that rustled in the wind. Jack sat and heard nothing. It was very peaceful, yet somewhat unsettling.

An hour later, Jack felt stronger and awake enough to descend the last 1,000 feet to the snowfield below. He repacked up his gear, then scouted for a safe descent route.

The northern ridgeline, with its snowy face, was too risky to descend from. Jack worked his way around to the eastern face, directly above the snowfield. He found an area more suitable and descended by rappel. The descent was non-eventful and, three hours later, he was down on the snowfield and crossing to his now snow-covered plane.

The previous day's weather left more snow on the snowfield. As Jack trudged across, his boots sunk in up to his knees, and the sun's rays bore down on him, forcing him to strip down to his t-shirt to stay cool. As the tiny speck of a plane grew in size, so did Jack's motivation. He picked up the pace and muscled his way through the deep snow. Soaked in sweat and exhausted from post holing for two hours, Jack finally reached his plane.

Just as the snowfield was covered under a blanket of fresh new snow, so was Jack's plane. Using a climber's shovel, Jack carefully removed all the snow as he prepared it for his flight back to the small airport in San Ramon. The day's chores ended late.

It was nearly 5pm when he finished. With only two hours of sunlight left, there wasn't enough time to fly back safely. He would need to stay another night.

DAY 5

The following morning, Jack woke ready for his next adventure: the flight off the snowfield. He didn't waste any more time melting snow for water or preparing anymore food. He figured he could treat himself to those luxuries back at the airport.

Finishing his preflight, he jumped back into the plane and ran through his checklist to start the engine. With everything set, he turned the key and waited for the sight of the propeller windmilling and the engine cranking. He heard nothing. Looking down at the key, he turned it to off, then back to 'engage' to start the engine. Still there was nothing but dead silence. Frantically, he turned the key back and forth several times, hoping there was just a bad connection—but again there was only silence.

Jack sat thinking. He could hear the sound of his breathing in the quiet cockpit.

"Shit, the freakin' battery's dead!" he exclaimed, coming to grips with the reality of his situation.

Jack decided to try hand-starting the propeller—'propping', as it is called in aviation jargon. He left the key in the 'on' position, loosely tied his door open, then came around to the front to 'prop' the propeller.

He spun the propeller slowly around a couple of times to loosen things up inside the engine, then grabbed the top blade of the propeller and pulled down hard on it. As the propeller rotated down half a turn, nothing happened. The engine sat quiet.

"It's a lawnmower engine... can't expect it to pop on the first try," Jack said to himself.

He grabbed the top of the blade again and pulled down hard, rotating it a half turn through its cycle. Still the engine sat silent. He repeated the process many more times over the next fifteen minutes, each time becoming more frantic in his actions.

Reality began to set in. He was not going to be able to start the engine; the battery was dead and there was nothing he was going to be able to do to change that fact.

"No way. This can't be happening," Jack said out loud.

Jack stared out at the valley far in front of him. He knew that the only option he had was to hike out of the valley to civilization. That could take many days and the trail that led into the valley would be difficult to find, due to the fact that he never used it to come in by. It was small and meandered at the far end of the valley somewhere. It could take days to find and he had only enough food for maybe two. To make matters worse, he would have to hike for many days without food. This had now turned into a life-threatening situation. He wasn't sure if he could last a week without food while hiking through the treacherous terrain.

Jack pulled nearly everything out of his pack except for food, water and a rope for emergencies. If he was going to have any chance at survival at all, he'd need to go as light as possible. He shouldered his pack, took one last look at his plane and began the long hike out of the valley.

A few minutes later, he got to the edge of the snowfield. Looking beyond it, the terrain dropped off rapidly, at one point becoming nearly a sheer cliff to the valley floor. Jack estimated the vertical drop to be more than 2,000 feet. He stopped for a moment to find a way down the steep slope. He thought about sliding down on his rear end to the bottom but reconsidered, thinking that he would probably slide out of control. As he stood there trying to take that first step from the mountain, an idea came to him.

"What a minute... How about..." Jack said to himself, stopping in mid-sentence while thinking.

After Jack built his plane, he was required to test and record the performance as a requirement toward certification. During testing, he had experimented with various flight characteristics. During one of his tests, he needed to see at what speed the engine would restart if it had quit while en route. The test began with Jack slowing the plane at a high altitude, then cutting the engine. He then pushed the nose over and gained speed. As he descended, the speed rapidly increased until the propeller started to rotate by the force of the wind. Eventually, the spinning propeller started the engine on its own and he notated the speed that this happened. It was seventy knots.

Jack looked down into the valley below. He figured if he could get his plane to the edge of the cliff, push it off and jump in, he might have the altitude for the plane to gain the speed to start the engine and fly out of the valley. It was a long shot, but so was him making it back to civilization without food or water. He ran through the various scenarios with each plan for survival. One ended in a quick death and one ended in a slow death.

“That’s it. I’m flying the plane off this mountain or I’ll die trying,” Jack said resolutely.

After considering his options, he actually felt fairly confident that his plane would start before hitting the ground. He was also fairly confident that the chances of finding his way out of the valley and back to the civilization were slim at best. Heading back to the plane, he was frightened to his core. He felt nauseous with each step he took. In an hour he was either going to be dead or flying home.

The plane was relatively heavy and took Jack a couple of hours to push and pull it to the edge of the snowfield. Toiling hard and deep in concentration, he missed the slight decline in the slope. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the plane began to inch toward the cliff under its weight. As Jack moved from the tail to the wing, he spotted the movement, but only too late. The plane hit a momentary decline and picked up speed.

Jack grabbed the wing and dug his heels in, but the weight of the plane was too great and he was pulled from his stance and dragged along the ground behind it. Jack could feel the speed slowly increasing. He knew he needed to act fast or all would be lost.

Frantically, he jogged beside the plane, opened the door and pulled out his ice axe. He then ran back to the tail and grabbed the tie-down rope that trailed behind it. He clipped the rope into a carabineer, then onto the ice axe. In one quick move, he dropped to the ground and thrust his ice axe into the snow. As the ice axe plowed through the snow, Jack rolled on top of it while digging his boots in for added advantage.

“Come on, baby; slow,” Jack hollered.

Jack fought desperately with his axe and boots, digging in further with each passing step. He began to feel the plane’s momentum slow. He held his position and angled the axe for greater penetration. Suddenly, abruptly, the plane came to a halt. Jack didn’t move. He didn’t breathe. He waited for any sign of movement. There was none.

“Phew, that was close... again. I’m gonna need to buy stock in underwear before this trip is through,” Jack said, in comic relief.

He stood up, ran to the door and pulled out his other ice axe. Running around to the other side of the plane, he clipped it into the tie-down that hung from the wing. He then buried the axe in the snow and took up the slack in the rope, creating an extra anchor point to hold the plane steady. Placing his hands on the wing, he rocked it slightly and watched both anchors, ensuring they would hold.

“Okay, minor crisis avoided,” Jack joked again.

He walked to the front of the plane and built large mounds of snow in front of the skis, creating barricades to keep the plane from sliding. He then repositioned the ice axe from the wing, closer to the pilot’s door, creating a quick release when he was ready to leave.

Walking back to the tail anchor, Jack nervously loosened it from the snow. As he pulled it out, he watched to see if his barricades and wing anchor would hold. The plane lurched forward momentarily, then stopped abruptly, held in place by the wing anchor. He disconnected the tail rope and ice axe and stowed them in the plane. Jack was now ready.

“Okay; this is it. Sayonara,” he said to himself.

Jack took one last look around. He shuddered as he thought that he might be dead in less than a minute.

With the plane positioned for release down the mountain, there was nothing left for him to do. Jack jumped into the plane. Nervously, he hesitated a moment, then pulled the rope that held his ice axe, releasing the anchor and allowing the plane to slide forward. This was it. There was no turning back now.

Jack looked out his windscreen. He was two hundred feet from the edge of the cliff and gaining speed. The ride was bumpy, but acceptable. As he slid closer to the cliff, he started to pull back on the stick in anticipation of the drop. His heart was pounding. Fear and anticipation racked his body as he watched the plane gaining speed as it slid closer to the edge.

Jack anxiously monitored the distance out his windscreen to the edge of the cliff.

180 feet, 160 feet, 140 feet...

He was picking up speed, but not nearly as fast as he needed. He looked down at his airspeed indicator. It was still registering zero.

120 feet, 100 feet, 80 feet...

Jack was closing fast on the edge of the cliff. He need more speed. He needed twenty-five knots to control the plane. It was that simple. He thought about jumping out and pushing, but realized the foolishness of this idea. He checked his airspeed again.

“Airspeed alive,” Jack shouted.

His indicator was now beginning to move. With his mind racing, he frantically scanned between the cliff and his instruments. He knew without airspeed over the wings, he wouldn’t be able to control the plane over the cliff. He knew things would end disastrously. He desperately needed twenty-five knots.

Slowly, painfully, his airspeed began to climb.

Five knots, eight knots, twelve knots...

“Come on, FASTER!” Jack yelled out loud.

The edge of the cliff was close. Jack could see well over it and down into the rough and wild valley below. He was scared—damn scared. His hands sweated profusely and he wiped them off on his pants repeatedly.

The cliff loomed closer.

Sixty feet, forty feet, twenty feet...

“Come on, FASTER, God dammit!” Jacked yelled again, slamming his hand on the dashboard in frustration.

Nearing the cliff, the plane picked up more speed. Jack’s eyes were glued to his airspeed indicator.

Fifteen knots, eighteen knots, twenty-two knots...

Jack watched in horror as the cliff moved under the plane. Instinctively, he hauled the control stick back and held on. As the plane rolled over the cliff edge, he glanced down at his airspeed: twenty-five knots.

“Holy shit!”

The drop was frightening and it instantly took his breath away. One minute he was slowly sliding along the ground, the next he was free-falling. Jack’s stomach felt like it was in his mouth as he quickly dropped. The speed of the plane immediately accelerated from twenty-five to fifty knots in a flash, barely touching the descending cliff before becoming airborne.

As the airspeed increased, the tiny plane wanted to fly, but he pushed forward on the stick and pointed the nose of the plane toward the ground 2,000 feet below. As the ground dropped away, Jack could see the vertical cliff out of the corner of his eyes. It was frighteningly steep and had a shear rocky face at its bottom.

Jack watched his airspeed.

Sixty knots, sixty-five knots, seventy knots...

Halfway down the cliff face, Jack had reached his target speed. He had descended the first 1,000 feet faster than he anticipated and now he had 1,000 feet left to start his engine. With the ground racing up toward him, he had very little time left.

This was it: the moment of truth. The propeller started to windmill and Jack prepared himself for roar of the engine. He looked down at the valley floor he was descending to. He looked at the windmilling prop and then back at his airspeed, now registering eighty knots.

“NO!” Jack shouted out in horror. “This isn’t right. It should be running. The engine should be running!”

Jack was right: the engine should have been running by now. He looked down at the bottom of the cliff rushing up at him. He could see the branches of the trees below where the bottom of the cliff ran into the valley floor. Frantic for a solution, he looked at the gauges and instruments to see if he could determine the problem. He looked down at the flaps lever to ensure he had lowered them to their maximum setting, paramount for a takeoff like this. His eyes raced across the cockpit.

Then he saw it: the key was in the ‘off’ position. His knee must have hit it in the bumpy ride over the cliff.

Quickly, his shaking hand fumbled to grab the key. Staring out his windscreen, he frantically watched the ground rushing up at him, less the 200 feet away. Jack’s sweaty hand found its purchase and turned the key to ‘on’.

Instantly, the engine roared to life.

Immediately, he hauled back on the stick and held the throttle full forward.

Jack felt sick as he watched the trees grow larger in his windscreen. He started his engine, only too late. With full power and his control stick pulled all the way back, all he could do was wait for the impact.

Mere feet from the trees, Jack felt his descent slow and the nose of the plane begin to rise.

“Whoa,” Jack shouted.

Suddenly, the tiny plane was struck by a dramatic updraft that roiled above the trees. Instantly, the plane’s descent stopped and the updraft forced the plane higher.

Jack held his breath and watched the trees race by his skis. The plane’s attitude angled up and Jack was now climbing.

He cleared the trees in the valley with less than a few feet to spare. Thrusting his plane into a steep climb, his airspeed dropped from ninety knots down fifty-five as he struggled to climb out of the valley. At the high altitude he was flying, his climb rate was unimpressive: only 800 feet per minute. He could only hope that he didn’t run into any downdrafts as he climbed.

Ascending higher, he very slowly circled about the valley floor, searching for the most nondescript terrain to fly over in order the limit to possibilities for turbulence. Clawing for every inch of elevation, he kept his eyes on his airspeed and on the route out of the valley. He needed to climb to 13,000 feet to clear the deadly saddle he’d nearly crashed into a few days before.

As he climbed through 12,000 feet, he started to breathe a little easier. His heart was still pounding but his nervous shaking had subsided.

Twenty-five minutes later, after narrowly escaping death again, Jack approached the saddle. His altimeter read 12,900 feet. As he prepared himself for the inevitable drop over the saddle, he took one last view of Destination B. It was an absolutely beautiful sight. Beaming with pride, he snapped a few more photos, then refocused on his task at hand.

As he crossed the saddle, like clockwork, the altimeter started to unwind. Clearing the saddle with altitude to spare, he headed through the twisting valley between the towering snowcapped mountains. An hour later, Jack landed safely at San Ramon airport. If he never did anything else exciting again, the previous day’s events would be enough to carry him for the rest of his life.

Fortunately for Jack, he would not have to rely solely on the previous day’s events. He still had the flight home to look forward to.

Homeward Bound

Jack switched from skis back to floats during his stay at the airport. After a few days’ rest and some ethnic foods, a reward to himself for a job well done, he was ready to start back home.

His routing home would take him the same path he arrived from up until he reached Columbia. At that point, instead of traveling up through Latin America, he would turn east and fly up and along the Columbian and Venezuelan coast line until he reached the island of Trinidad. From there, he would island hop up through the Caribbean Island chain to Florida, and from there he would follow the east coast shoreline home. In all, Jack estimated the route would take more the 6,000 miles and at least three weeks to fly.

He stood in the middle of the airport and snapped some photos. This would be the last time he would ever see that airport again.

“Okay, now the vacation begins.”

After one last look around, he got into his plane and departed, heading west to Lima, Peru.

Jack spent the next few days working his way up to Columbia. He took his time enjoying the barren coastline of Peru and the jungle coastline of Columbia. With each stop he sampled the local culture and cuisine. At times he slept in the pilots’ lounges; other times he slept in his plane.

Once he made Bogotá, Columbia, he headed north to Santa Maria, Columbia instead of flying northwest, the route he arrived from. This was new territory for him. The coast turned from jungle to rugged mountains. They were exciting to see, but very dangerous and relatively remote.

Over the next few days, from Santa Maria he flew east, skirting the coast when practical, traversing inland when necessary. As he entered Venezuela, he stopped at several coastal cities along the way: Coro, Caracas and Cumana. The coast changed as he flew. At times it was rocky, at others it was flat farmland with beautiful beaches. Like the other countries he entered, he was inspected by customs, cleared and sent on his way.

Twelve days after leaving San Ramon in Peru, he touched down in Arouca, on the large island of Trinidad at Piarco International Airport. He was now leaving South America. This marked a significant point in his adventure: in essence, the hard flying and hard climbing were now complete. This was the point that Jack felt he could relax. His life would no longer be in danger; danger from flying in hostile countries, danger climbing, and danger being so far from home.

The past two weeks, he’d been enjoying himself at the cities he’d been visiting. It was fun, but there was always an element of danger associated with them. He knew that once he left Trinidad, aside from flying over open ocean, he would become a welcomed American tourist, safe on any island he landed at. No longer would he be looking over his shoulder, as he had been in Latin America, or worried about the armed soldiers meeting him at every airport. He considered this part of the trip his vacation, free to fully relax.

Jack woke early, excited for the next week’s destinations. He liked Trinidad. It was an enormous tourist city with a lot to offer, but it still fell under the influence of a part of the world that was a bit unstable. His research of the area suggested that once he cleared the island of Barbados, the rest of the island chains north fell under North American influence.

He finished his breakfast, a day old roll he purchased from a bakery at a bargain and some peanut butter. The roll was delicious, but after living off of peanut butter for almost a month, he was starting to get sick of it. Jack couldn’t

afford to purchase bottled water, so he filled his empty water bottles with tap water and brought them to a local park where he boiled them with his stove and a large pot to kill the germs. He refilled his bottles and readied the plane for departure. Shortly after, he departed the large airport and headed north over Trinidad's forested countryside. Ten minutes later, after crossing the jagged and rocky coastline, he flew out to sea.

Prior to departure, Jack checked the weather as he always did for the next leg of flight. The weather station in the area reported clear skies throughout the region. As he flew over open ocean, the skies were not only clear, but the visibility was fantastic. He could see thirty miles in every direction, something that he found unusual in areas near water. His route would take him over Grenada, the Grenadines and St Vincent, and he would land at St Lucia, about 250 miles away.

A half hour after losing sight of land, he picked it back up again in front of him. Fifteen minutes later he was flying over the large forested island of Grenada. With an altitude of 10,000 feet, Jack couldn't determine the terrain, but assumed that it was jungle like he had seen in other countries at that latitude. Once he made land, he breathed a sigh of relief, knowing that from there on out his flights over water would always be in sight of land. He had read about storms that could develop quickly throughout the Caribbean chain, so it came as welcome relief that his high risk flying was now behind him.

As Jack flew over the Grenadines, the chain of islands between Grenada and St Vincent, he could tell they were relatively flat and surprisingly populated. Being a pilot, one of the first things he looked for were airports. As he flew, he noticed very large airports on every island. It was comforting to know that at his altitude, he could easily glide to safety in an emergency.

Jack saw beautiful vacation spots all along his flight. He was getting excited by the thought of spending some time on beautiful white sandy beaches and great surf. As he flew over St Vincent, he considered landing and starting his 'vacation' early, but decided to press on to his stop for the day, St. Lucia.

Twenty minutes later, he landed at the Hewanorra International Airport in Vieux Fort, St. Lucia, on the southernmost end of the island. After a brief discussion with customs, he refueled, then prepared his backpack for an overnight stay on a lonely stretch of beach just beyond the end of the runway.

Instead of heading into town and sampling the culture, Jack was intrigued by the bay; he'd crossed it while landing. The water took on a wonderful green-blue color and the waves looked inviting. It looked to be a short hike to get there, instead of a long, expensive ride into town. For Jack, the decision to spend time there was an easy one to make.

Two hours after landing, Jack was swimming in the warm clear water, enjoying the waves and relaxing. This was the memory he had longed to build since seeing tourists on the beaches in the Gulf of Mexico and beyond. He ate when he got hungry, drank water when he was thirsty and rested when he felt tired. He unsuccessfully tried his hand at fishing, not being phased at all when he came up empty. He was just happy to be there.

As night fell, he broke out his sleeping bag and fell into a sound sleep, soothed by the sound of the pounding surf.

The following morning, he woke fairly well rested. During the night, he experienced some visitors: sand fleas. After some careful application of bug repellent and zipping up his bag all the way to his nose and mouth, he managed to rid himself of the pests. He ate some bread and peanut butter, drank some more water, then took one last swim. By 9am, he was back at the airport and ready for departure.

Over the next six days, Jack created similar experiences on each of the islands in succession: Martinique, Dominica, Guadeloupe, Montserrat and St. Kitts.

Each island had its own personality. In Martinique, it was obvious that it still had a good deal of French influence. It also had an extinct volcano that produced black sandy beaches, which were in complete contrast to the white sandy beaches in the south.

In Dominica, Jack hiked to the second-largest boiling lake, essentially a volcano cavity that was filled by the frequent rain. He also visited the various areas of rainforest and, of course, he enjoyed the surf.

The beaches of Guadeloupe caught Jack's eyes as he flew overhead and circled the island. Just as he had done on St. Lucia, he packed his backpack for an overnight stay at the nearby beach and enjoyed himself in the sun and surf. Jack marveled at the beauty of the beach. It looked like a picture taken straight out of a magazine, replete with palm trees that came right up to the water and beautiful fans and ferns that punctuated the white sand.

Montserrat was easy to spot with its smoldering volcano: it left a trail of smoke for miles, a sight easy to see from 8,000 feet. While there, he hiked to a couple of ancient monasteries that were perched on rugged mountain cliffs.

Jack landed at St. Kitts and Nevis later in the week. Just like the other islands in the chain, he visited the beaches, hiked the rainforests and meandered through a couple of the tourist traps, happy to sample some of the indigenous foods. He stayed for a couple of days, then departed to the west for the Virgin Islands.

The flight over water was the last big open water crossing he would make on his way home, the distance being about 140 miles. Even with the weather relatively clear, Jack still flew for nearly an hour before he caught sight of land. With land in sight, he relaxed, knowing that he had made it. He decided to spend his first night in St Croix. Over the next couple of days, he bounced from St Croix to St Johns and then to St Thomas, each time trying to experience something unique about the culture or geography.

As Jack headed west from the Virgin Islands, he flew to the San Juan International Airport in Puerto Rico, his next stop for refueling. As always, he landed, checked with customs, sampled the local culture and color and was on his way, his next stop: El Portillo airport in the Dominican Republic.

Flying along the coastline, he observed the beautiful beaches that held sprawling vacation resorts. He envisioned himself swimming in the luxurious pools and sipping unique tropical drinks while lounging under one of the many colorful umbrellas. He reached down and jingled the change in his pocket and quickly remembered his slim budget for spending.

"Eh, maybe another time," he chuckled to himself.

A short time later, he landed on the single isolated runway of El Portillo airport. With little to see, he checked the weather, quickly refueled and departed to the north on his way to Providenciales airport in the Turks and Caicos Islands.

The two-hundred and fifty mile flight between the Dominican Republic and Turks and Caicos would take him nearly four hours to fly, yet most of it was within sight of land. As he flew away from the coastline, he kept his eye on land the first hour after departure. Eventually, the tiny speck of land disappeared and Jack was once again, flying alone in the middle of the ocean.

Although he felt apprehension, the inviting turquoise water, calm and serene, helped to distract him from his thoughts of isolation. Looking down, he spotted varying shades of blue that signaled the change in depths of the ocean floor. For a while, the shade was very dark and he knew the ocean's depth was several thousand feet deep. Thinking about what lurked beneath the surface sent butterflies through his stomach.

Looking farther up ahead, he spotted the change in water color that marked the shallower sea depths. Looking down once more, he envisioned the landscape beneath the darker and lighter elevations. In only a few miles, the ocean's floor rose up several thousand feet.

"Take away all this water and those would make some pretty interesting mountains to climb, I'm guessing," he thought to himself.

The further he flew, the more the water color changed. Soon, he began to see the lighter turquoise color that indicated the shallower depths. Flying at nine thousand feet, he could just make out a sliver of land that marked a tiny sandbar out on the edge of the horizon.

He took out his binoculars and scanned the area in front of him. Sighting the small sandy island far in the distance, he guessed it was no more than a few hundred feet long. He considered making a quick landing on it, but reconsidered due to its remote location.

Entertained by the sights through the binoculars, he continued to scan the ocean's surface, hoping to see some form of marine life as it swam below. Moving his view from the sandbar in closer, he watched the glassy water that barely shown a ripple.

He now looked directly below him. Seeing straight down into the water, he thought he could almost see the ocean's floor.

"Man, that's got to be pretty shallow," he said, as he continued to stare through the glasses.

Suddenly, a flash of light darted through the water. Losing it momentarily, he quickly pulled the binoculars away and searched for the object with his eyes. Instantly, he saw a glow emitting below the ocean's surface. Looking through the binoculars once more, he located the light and tried to determine its source.

"What the hell?" he said under his breath, puzzled by the strange anomaly.

Turning his head as the plane began to fly past, he had trouble sighting the object. Putting down the binoculars, he quickly turned the plane around while keeping his eyes on the point below. Now flying in the opposite direction, he picked up the glasses and stared at the light once more.

"What is that?" he said to himself aloud.

Under normal circumstances, Jack would routinely see flashes of light reflected off the ocean. Most of the time it was the sun's rays refracting off the waves. On occasion, he would spot a piece floating debris, a subtle reminder of waste left behind by humanity.

Staring intently through his binoculars, he quickly realized this was neither a reflection by the sun, nor a piece of trash. The beam of light barely changed in intensity and never moved from its location.

"I've got to see this," he said to himself, his mind now only concentrating on that single purpose.

He pulled the power and shoved the nose of the plane over, entering a steep dive, all the while never losing sight of the bright light. For several minutes, Jack spiraled down from his cruising altitude of nine thousand feet until he leveled out at two hundred. Continuing on past the light, he flew straight ahead, setting himself up for a water landing. Moments later, he made a one-hundred and eighty degree turn and cut the power.

With the light source guiding the way, he skimmed just above the water as his speed bleed off. Holding the nose of the plane high, he felt a slight bump, then another as the floats made initial contact with the ocean. Instantly, Jack felt the tug on his seatbelts as the plane plowed through the water, slowing it rapidly. Large plumes of water rushed out from under the floats, momentarily blocking his forward vision. In seconds, the planes speed slowed to a near stop and now became a boat. With a slight touch of power, he created a small amount of thrust and moved forward toward the light that was now less than fifty feet ahead.

Jack looked around him and noticed his isolation. As far as his eyes could see, there was only water.

"Wow, this is wild. Talk about hanging it out on the hairy edge," he said to himself, now considering the seriousness of his activity.

With the plane inching forward, he lined it up to pass just beside the light. Looking down into the water, he could just make out the shadows that indicated the ocean's floor below.

Jack reached into the back and pulled out a collapsible paddle. Quickly, he unfolded it and readied it for use. With his camera around his neck, he opened the door and stepped out onto the float. Holding the wing strut, he grabbed the paddle and closed the door. Slowly, he worked his way to the front of the plane where enough of the floats extended to allow him to stand freely.

The beam of light continued to shine just a few feet ahead of him. Jack stood on the float and began to paddle. Alternating from side to side, the plane continued its forward path. Just as he was passing over the light, he quickly back-paddled, causing the plane to stop directly over the light. With a few more corrective strokes, he now stared at the object below.

"Wow, what is that?" he said to himself again. "Looks like a triangle, sort of."

Taking his camera, he began to snap photos of the strange lighted phenomena. When he'd taken enough, he recorded video, all the while trying to identify the object. There were moments where the water was nearly glass smooth between the floats and Jack could see perfectly through the clear water. The shape and color of the mystery item were striking.

“Man, what the heck is that? It looks like a hunk of gold down there,” he said to himself loudly, now growing excited.

He continued to stare at the golden light, hoping for better resolution through the water.

“It can’t be more than fifty feet to the bottom. I’m betting I could swim down quick and get back with plenty of air,” he thought to himself.

As nervous apprehension churned his stomach, he looked around him and realized the danger in attempting the dive in such a remote location.

“Dammit, that could be Spanish treasure down there,” he grumbled loudly.

He dipped his hand into the water and tested the temperature.

“The water’s nice... refreshing,” he reconsidered once more.

Suddenly, as he concentrated on the golden object, the beam of light instantly vanished. Then, just as suddenly as it was gone, it reappeared once more, shining brightly back up toward the surface. Something below had blocked the view, as it swam by.

“Whao! I ain’t going down there alone... not without a spear gun anyway,” he shouted loudly, his skin tingling from fearful goose bumps. “What the HELL was that? A freakin’ shark?”

Jack looked around him. His mind began to visualize hundreds large predators waiting beneath the surface. The reality of his thought sent a wave of fear through him.

“Treasure or not, I’m outta here,” he said decisively.

Immediately, he worked his way back to the cabin, avoiding eye contact with the water just below him. Climbing back into his seat, he closed the door and breathed sigh of relief. With one last look down at the golden light, he turned the key and the engine roared to life.

With calm water and no reason to delay, he simply applied full power and started his takeoff run. The plane surged forward and in less than a minute, the floats were skimming high along the surface. Jack pulled back slightly on the control stick and suddenly, he was airborne.

“Man that was easier than I thought. I’m going to have to do that again,” he said to himself as he climbed higher. “Minus the man eating predators,” he added.

Within a half hour, he had climbed to his cruising altitude and spotted land in the distance. One hour after that, he set up to land at the Providenciales airport in the Turks and Caicos Islands. With the approaching landing occupying his mind, the thought of buried treasure quickly faded.

On his approach to the eastern end of the runway, Jack spotted a tiny crescent-shaped deserted beach, not more than two hundred yards from the airport. There were wealthy residences nearby and signs warning against trespassing, but as he had done in the past, he planned to quietly slip onto the private beach and enjoy a day lounging by the water. A half hour after landing, he packed a small backpack and headed across the airport in search of a relaxing memory.

Wading across the water to a sandbar a hundred feet from shore, Jack made his way out to an area populated with a few palm trees and many bushes. The foliage gave him perfect cover and privacy. He spent the day enjoying the wonderful surf and sand.

By mid-day, he grew hungry. Under the shade of a palm tree, he ate a peanut butter sandwich and reflected on the golden light he had seen that morning. With a knowing smile, he said to himself, "I'll leave that to another adventure."

Later that evening, as darkness fell, he decided to spend the night there on the sandbar instead of the airport lounge. With a full moon illuminating the bay and beyond, he sat up most of the night, watching the light refracting off the calm surf far out in the ocean. He was filled with peace as he sat, thinking about his life and his dreams for the future.

In the morning, the tide had gone out and the water that had created his isolation on the sandbar disappeared. The white sands of the beach spanned through where the water once sat and now continued onto 'his' sandbar, allowing others easy access to it.

As dawn broke, early morning 'visitors' moved through the area as part of their daily exercise routine. Jack was spotted, and before they could protest his trespass, he quickly packed his belongings and hurried across the sands under their watchful eyes and obvious remonstrations. With that, he headed back to the airport.

Jack left the island early and was now on his way to the Bahamas. He was nearly at the end of his Caribbean adventure and had only two stops before he made the mainland of the United States. Having been gone for over two months now, he felt a bit homesick. Even though he was still enjoying himself and the thought of home meant hard work and school, he was starting to feel like a bum.

The flight over the Bahamian island chain was very interesting. They all were inhabited and even some of the vegetated sandbars had signs of life. About halfway through the chain, Jack was intrigued by the brilliant blue-green waters, the shallow bays, the sandbars and the boats that he watched as they sailed around them.

One sandbar caught his eye in particular. It was crescent-shaped and about 200 feet long. Unlike other sandbars in the chain that were closely linked together, this one was isolated. It sat a few miles from anything, quite unusual.

With his curiosity piqued, he decided to investigate at a much lower altitude. He descended from 5,000 feet down to about 200 above the water, and slowed to about forty knots. The winds were light as he neared ground level. With plenty of gas, clear weather and his destination airport so close by, he decided to test his floats and land in the ocean.

He circled out to sea, then made his way back, perpendicular to the sandbar. Flying only about 100 feet above the water, he could see that there were relatively no waves. He lined up parallel to the mini-swells, no bigger than a foot high, and lowered full flaps to allow for an even slower speed.

Water landings can be tricky if the water is glass-smooth, due to the lack of depth perception, but today there were tiny whitecaps associated with the miniature swells. 500 feet from shore, he looked down and could tell that the water was extremely shallow; less than ten feet deep. The closer he flew to the sandbar, the shallower it became. He knew that he needed to be careful. Running aground out here could be disastrous, almost certainly flipping the plane over.

Two hundred feet from shore, he could see the water looked to be five feet or less in depth. Further out, he had established a very shallow descent rate of 100

feet per minute. He was now only about twenty-five to fifty feet above the water and his speed was just hovering above stall, around thirty knots. Slow and methodical, Jack worked the power for speed and the stick to control his descent. 150 feet from shore, he was mere feet above the water. He could see spray from his floats as they touched the whitecaps. This was it. Carefully, he relaxed the stick and allowed the plane to settle into the swells.

At first it was felt like a small jolt, then a series of heavier jolts as the floats crashed through the tops of the whitecaps. Jack reduced his power and allowed the plane to settle fully into the water. As the floats made full contact now with the water, the drag became tremendous, slowing it quickly, thrusting everything forward, including Jack. As the plane slowed to a near stop, about fifty feet from shore, he added a touch of power to keep the momentum of the plane moving forward. As the plane stabilized, it took on the characteristic of a boat.

Jack lowered the water rudders and taxied slowly until the floats lightly ran aground, fifteen feet from shore. He was down.

He grabbed his ice axes and some ropes and anchored the plane to the sandbar as he went ashore. Looking around, there was nothing on the horizon. The sandbars he saw a few miles away weren't visible at ground level, giving the illusion of total isolation. He grabbed some food and water, his bivy bag to sit on and set up in the middle of the fifty-foot wide by 200-foot long sandbox. Sitting, eating and taking in the magnificent blue-green water, he listened to the sound of the tiny swells lapping the side of the floats on his plane. The sea air smelled fresh and clean, unlike the areas around civilization he'd experienced over the past couple of weeks.

"Amazing," he said loudly, knowing he was the only one to hear this for miles away.

He reveled in his isolation. After lunch, he walked several times around the tiny island, trying to memorize its characterless shape. He snapped some photos, then, feeling a little tired, took a small nap in the middle of paradise.



"Hey, wake up."

Jack felt himself being shaken. As he slowly opened his eyes, he saw the silhouettes of several figures standing over him.

"Wake up."

Jack thought he was dreaming at first. Quickly, reality hit him. He wasn't dreaming. He had several men standing over him, their faces and bodies in shadow as he looked at them through the sun. Instinctively he sensed danger.

Quickly he rolled over and jumped to his feet, leaping between two of them, his mind still in a fog. As he ran toward the end of the sandbar, he realized the futility of his attempted escape. Twenty feet from the water, he stopped and turned, hands up, ready to defend himself.

Jack saw the four men moving in his direction. It was afternoon and the sun was still in his eyes, making identification difficult, but in the seconds after he turned to face his assailants, he could see they were wearing very light clothing.

'I thought the bad guys wore black,' he jokingly thought to himself, then caught himself, realizing this was no joke.

“Whoa, big guy. Settle down. We just want to talk,” one of them called out.

Jack focused on their white clothes again. They weren't just any old white clothes. This was a uniform. Then Jack saw it. A large sixty-foot ship, moored out beyond his plane a couple hundred yards away. It was far enough away that his plane almost blocked it from his view.

“United States coastguard,” the smallest man announced loudly.

Finally, Jack snapped out of his fog and was now wide awake and sharp as a tack. A big toothy smile crossed his face and instantly put the four men at ease.

“Man, you guys really gave me a scare,” Jack said, now in a relaxed stance. “Isn't there some rulebook that states you're not supposed to wake someone up while their sleeping on a desert island?”

Without missing a beat, the biggest man replied, “Yes, there is a rulebook that holds that very law. Problem is, this isn't classified as an island; it's a sandbar.”

Smiling even harder now, Jack simply replied, “Apologies.” A moment of silence later, he continued, “So, I'm guessing you guys aren't here to play cards. I'm betting you're looking to investigate what a good looking guy like me is doing in a tropical setting like this, correct?”

“Bingo, sir,” smiled the smallest man.

“I'm an American, from Connecticut. I've got all the paperwork in the plane,” Jack replied.

“Sir, if you don't mind me asking, what are you doing out here? You do realize it's kind of risky to land out here, don't you?” one of them said.

“Only for the inexperienced and the inept,” Jack replied, still joking. Then he pointed to the plane and said, “The papers are this way.”

Jack produced all the necessary paperwork. At the sight of his passport and the stamps from the countries he had passed through, the young coast guardsmen, all about Jack's age, were impressed. They inquired more about his adventures, not as part of their job, but simply as intrigued human beings. They didn't believe the story about the landing and takeoff on the snowfield. With that, Jack produced one of the skis. The four men were dutifully impressed.

As the five men talked and joked, the tide had gone out slightly, a phenomenon Jack never thought about. One of the men noticed that the floats were pivoting on the sand under the water. As they went to investigate, they realized that the plane was stuck and Jack was going to need some help getting back out to sea. With five men lifting and pushing, they made short work of the problem.

Shortly thereafter, they all shook hands and wished Jack good luck. They stood back on the sandbar and watched as he lowered his water rudder, started the plane and began to slowly move to deeper water.

Jack could see the coastguard Cutter that was moored in deeper water. The crew of the Cutter had been radioed by the one of the four on the sandbar that Jack checked out and was now leaving. The crew lined the bow of the ship and, with binoculars in hand, watched as he prepared to depart. It wasn't often that they got a glimpse of an experimental floatplane departing from a remote sandbar this far out at sea. They also needed to be there for Jack's safety, as part of their job.

The water still had tiny swells. The takeoff would be short, but still quite bumpy. Jack ran through his checklist, then lowered the flaps to their full position

as he slowly taxied out to sea. With all eyes watching, he radioed the coastguard Cutter as a joke.

“Coastguard Cutter, experimental floatplane requesting clearance for departure,” he said, trying to sound very official and professional.

“Do you want me to call your mommy and ask if it’s okay with her?” a voice came back immediately.

He had an authoritative tone about his voice. Jack looked at the Cutter and realized it was the commanding officer who was joking with him. He could see the handheld radio pressed again his ear while he stood on the bow, holding the railing.

“Well, now that you mention it, while you’re on horn with her, tell her no more starch in my underwear,” Jack retorted, hardly able to contain his laughter.

“Good luck, son. Be careful,” the commander said in with genuine concern.

“Thank you, sir,” Jack replied.

He looked back at the four who were still standing on the sandbar, then back at the men lining the Cutter. He advanced the throttle to full power. Slowly the plane glided forward, parallel to the swells. Jack pulled back on the stick to keep the nose elevated slightly. As the plane gained speed, the airspeed indicator came alive.

Twenty knots, twenty-five knots.

The floats elevated out of the water and rose up on the step, a portion of the floats that allowed Jack’s plane to break free of the surface of the water sooner. Gliding along on the step, moving faster now, he worked the rudder pedals to help steer the small plane between the swells.

The ride was rough as Jack worked the stick to keep the plane on the step. He looked down at the airspeed indicator; it registered thirty-five knots. Suddenly, the rough ride was gone. He looked down at the floats. They were no longer creating a wake behind them. He was airborne.

Jack lowered the nose of the plane to gain more airspeed before he entered his climb. At fifty knots, he hauled back on the stick and launched the plane into a steep climb. He then retracted half the flaps and the water rudder and stabilized the climb.

“Nicely done, son. Have a safe trip home,” Jack heard the commander announce as he flew by the Cutter.

“Will do,” Jack replied.

He then rocked his wings aggressively, and all that were watching waved back.

Climbing out, he felt a sense of pride. It was a good feeling to have a man of high status recognize his abilities.

Jack flew northwest to the George Town airport and refueled. His next stop was Nassau International Airport, on the little island of Nassau. As he flew, he felt completely secure. Land seemed to be everywhere. Two hours later he was given vectors to the airport by air traffic control. He parked his plane at general aviation, then took a cab to a casino with \$20 to spend. This was all he would allow himself to lose.

The casino was exciting. He envisioned himself winning thousands of dollars, but knew he’d probably be done in minutes, losing his money quickly due to his

complete lack of knowledge of gambling. This being Jack's first time, he wasn't sure what to play and eventually he settled on blackjack.

The casino was crowded and noisy, something that made him feel a little uncomfortable. As he wandered through the seemingly endless rows of gaming and slot machines, he finally found a table he could afford. He sat down at a table as another got up, beating out still another individual looking to try his luck at a bargain price of \$5 per hand.

As predicted, in less time it took to use the bathroom, he lost \$15 of the \$20. A little annoyed at how bad his luck was, he decided to play the slot machines. Wandering to the other end of the casino, he passed high rollers with colored chips that he guessed were \$10,000 apiece. He stopped and watched as they gave away their money as if they were betting with pennies. Disgusted with the waste, he continued on.

He found a row of \$1 slots. They all looked the same, so Jack picked the first one on the row. He changed his \$5 chip to \$1 chips, allowing him five plays in total. He dropped the big silver chip into the machine and pulled the handle. With much anticipation, he watched as the spools of fruit turned. One by one they slowed to a stop. He waited for something to happen, but the sound of dropping coins into a tin container never materialized. Undaunted, he dropped in another coin. Again, nothing happened. Disappointed, he played two more times with the same results.

In frustration, he got up to move to the machine in the middle in one last desperate attempt to win. Just as he got there, an elderly woman cut him off and sat down to play, almost falling off the chair in the process. Settling herself, she blandly looked over at him, inserted her coin and lost.

"Hmm, penance for rude behavior," Jack said out loud as he turned back to his still empty machine.

As he sat down, the elderly woman retorted, "First come, first serve, poor sport."

Her remark demonstrated her total lack of manners and etiquette. Irritated by the selfish old woman's response, he thought about leaving the area, but sat down at his previous seat. The more he thought about it, the more her presence irritated him. He dropped his coin into the machine and pulled the handle. Seconds later he heard the silence of the tin container. Getting up from his chair, he saw the old woman smugly eyeing him. She had an arrogant smile that cut through Jack, but then her smile changed. Her whole expression changed instantly to a blank stare.

Then Jack heard it. 'Clink' was the tinny sound the coin made as it dropped into the pan under the slot machine.

Clink: Jack heard it again.

Turning from the distasteful old woman, he spotted the yellow light at the top of his machine flashing. Clink, clink, clink came the sound of dropping coins into his container. He looked up and tried to figure out how and what he was winning. The display had three rows of characters. There were fruit and numbers locked in across them. He saw the middle row had three 7s displayed. Distracted by the miserable old woman, he had overlooked this winning combination.

The coins kept falling. He watched in disbelief as the bottom of the metal pan began to fill up. Ten seconds ticked by and still the money kept dropping.

Jack's eyes were glued to that metal plan. Twenty seconds later and still more coins dropped. Nearly thirty seconds later, the machine went quiet. He stared in at his newfound fortune. He knew it wasn't a lot of money, but it was a lot more than he had ever won in his life. He collected his earnings, a total of \$234 dollars, and stood up to leave, not wanting to push his luck and lose any of it.

As he was leaving, the old woman jealously glared at him. Jack thought for a moment, then said, "What comes around goes around. Have a nice day."

He turned as a scowl crossed the old woman's face. Walking quickly out of earshot, he left her in her petty world, muttering something in retaliation.

With his newfound fortune, he decided that he wanted to have a decent meal, something he hadn't had for over a month. The only way Jack could afford this trip was on half a shoestring, eating peanut butter sandwiches morning, noon and night, occasionally spending a couple dollars here and there to experience the local cuisine—but always the cheapest thing he could find. Now, after winning, he had enough to actually afford anything he desired.

He wandered into one of the fancy seafood restaurants and ordered the biggest thing on the menu: surf and turf. He gorged himself on baked stuffed shrimp and prime rib for the next hour. It was of the finest quality and Jack thought his taste buds were in overload, barely able to comprehend the exquisite flavors. After paying the \$55 check, he was so full he felt like he was waddling like a duck as he window-shopped through the city.

This marked his final night outside the US. He made his way to the beach and sat and watched the sun set. He felt sad that his adventure was nearly over. After the sun had set, he took a cab back to the pilots' lounge at the FBO where his plane was parked. He settled in for the night, completely sated from the fantastic food and the recollection of the wonderful memories he had built.

The day broke and Jack woke from a comfortable night's sleep. He took some of his winnings and ate a big breakfast at the airport restaurant. He then made his way out to his trusted friend, his floatplane. He looked at it with pride, but also a sense of thankfulness. It had carried him so far and through so much without a single problem. Together, they had flown through oppressive heat, freezing cold, and balmy tropical temperatures. It had cradled him while he slept at dangerous airports in unfriendly countries and landed without protest in locations that most wouldn't dream of attempting.

Jack ran his hand down the back of the plane affectionately, like he was patting the beloved family dog. He jumped in, called "Clear," and started the engine. An hour and a half later, after skirting Cuban airspace to the north, he caught sight of land out on the horizon. Excitement and disappointment filled Jack's emotions. Thirty miles ahead was Miami. He would finally be in his own country and the adventure would be over. Ten miles out, he could see the skyline and the skyscrapers that marked the big city's location. Ten miles out, he was now in contact with the tower at Miami International Airport.

Crossing from the ocean to the beach, flying the vectors requested by the tower controller, he looked down at the fancy tourist hotels and the brightly colored buildings marking the Latin culture, dominant in the area. It looked like the many tropical locations he had landed at in the past month. It was nice to know that if

ever he longed for that experience again in the future, it was just a short flight away.

Jack was home, back in the United States. It would take him another three days to fly up the coast to New England. Along the way, he took in the sights from above, the terrain and geography completely different than what he'd been living and seeing for the past two months.

He crossed Long Island Sound and into Connecticut. Thirty minutes later, he saw the enormous 1500-foot radio towers that marked the location of home, true home—Robertson Airport. As he made his approach to landing, he looked down and saw two small figures standing beside the runway. He recognized them right away: his mom and dad. His mom was jumping up and down, excited at the first sight of the floats, the most distinguishing feature about his plane. His heart started to race. He had missed his parents terribly.

Moments later, he touched down and taxied to the FBO. This time there would be no need for fuel. Grinning ear to ear, he jumped out of the plane, nearly tripping over the float. He ran to his waiting parents.

“Welcome home, Jack,” his tearful mother said, racing to him and hugging him.

She didn't let go and his father had to cut in on the mother's moment.

“Can the ole man get a hug over here?” he said, grabbing Jack and hugging him now.

Jack's eyes welled up with tears as he hugged his parents. It was one of the most emotional moments of his life. He didn't want it to end.

His dad finally brought everyone back to Earth, saying, “So what's your next big adventure? Finishing school, I hope,” he said jokingly.

“School first, the Caribbean second,” Jack dryly replied.

“Liked it down there, huh?” his mother asked, second guessing his meaning.

“You might say that,” Jack replied cryptically.

Jack's mother stared at him momentarily and thought about his response. With her intuition gnawing at her, she said, “I know you too well, Jack. What are you up to this time?”

“It's nothing, Mom. Just buried treasure,” he responded with a forced chuckle.

“You're serious aren't you?” she asked, now growing worried.

“Well, I did see something intriguing under the water while I was flying between the islands. I can't be sure, but I think it looked like a hunk of gold.” He paused a moment, then added, “But don't worry guys, I plan on finishing school first... then I'll plan my next adventure.”

“Well, just make sure you do it after we're dead. We've had enough worry and stress to last us a lifetime,” his dad said, rubbing his shoulders.

Getting into their warm car, he looked back at his plane. “Thank you,” he mouthed to the tiny floatplane, now sitting alone on the tarmac.

His parents were chattering back and forth, asking endless questions, so excited they didn't even wait for the answers before they asked another. Jack sat in the backseat, watching his tiny plane get smaller and smaller as they drove away. As it finally dropped out of sight, he finally turned and happily began to answer the barrage of questions before him.



