



The New Piper Aircraft, Inc.

by Lt. Gil Miller

Pay the fee, get your ATP. Sounded good to me! There I was, nine years and 2,400 hours into a terrific Navy flying career. Having a blast and feeling salty, too. After all, I'd been fortunate to bounce from two different fleet helicopters into the C-12 program. Just love that light multi-engine stuff. I figured I might as well expand my professional education and pick up another FAA qual.

I signed up for two practice flights and an ATP (Airline Transport Pilot) check ride in a Piper Seminole, a light twin. I arrived bright and early at the flight instructor's office, filled out the paperwork, and drove to the airfield. I could hardly wait to show off my flying skills, particularly when my instructor for the practice flights remarked that he was pretty experienced, him-

self. After all, he already had more than 500 flight hours, and nearly 100 of those were in the very Seminole we were preflighting.

An hour later, we were 15 miles northwest of the city at 4,500 feet. The weather was CAVU, and we had a passenger in the back, who was returning to flying after an eight-year hiatus because the airlines were hiring. He was trying to soak up some atmosphere before returning to the controls.

We had just finished the stall series and were now embarking upon basic instrument work. I was starting to grow accustomed to the "foggles," glasses that removed about 70 percent of your vision to enforce your instrument focus. Approach provided VFR flight-following and gave us a courtesy call.

“Seminole November Four Seven Six Three Six, you have traffic, one o’clock, ten miles. A Seminole at forty-five hundred feet, heading northwest.”

I looked up briefly and asked, “You got ‘em?”

My instructor looked up for a second and answered, “Nope,” before returning to his logbook.

We finished the 30-degree turns and rolled out on an easterly heading. Approach called again.

“Seminole November Four Seven Six Three Six, your traffic is now one o’clock and seven miles. Do you have the traffic?”

I looked up again, squinting through the little opening at the bottom of the foggles as my instructor calmly replied, “Nope, don’t have him.”

Approach called the other aircraft. “Seminole November Eight Eight Nine One Two, traffic is eleven o’clock and six miles. Report traffic in sight.”

A voice from the other aircraft responded, “Approach, Seminole November Eight Eight Nine One Two. Negative contact. We’re looking.”

With this, my instructor remarked, “Hey, that’s the ATP checker.”

“What’s that?” I replied.

“In the other aircraft, that’s Mr. Toughguy, the ATP checker.”

“Oh, OK. Do you have him in sight?” I looked over at my young instructor, who glanced out the window with the same intensity as if he was daydreaming. He still believed in that “big sky, little airplane” concept.

“No, sure don’t.” I was getting a little concerned.

“Well, let’s do the first forty-five-degree turn to the left to get away from him,” I said. “You still don’t have him?”

“Nope.”

Approach called again. There was renewed urgency in the controller’s voice as he asked us to advise when we had the traffic in sight. We were now 4 miles, but I was wrapped up in my instrument scan for the 45-degree turns. The passenger had the instructor occupied with questions about FARs. I heard another negative reply from the other aircraft but saw that my instructor was still concentrating on his logbook. Must have been tallying all 500 of his hours that particular morning.

The fourth time approach called us, the controller took charge of our cavalier attitude toward midairs and said, “November Four Seven Six Three Six, suggest you climb or dive—now!” He screamed the last word. His transmission is probably arriving at Neptune or Pluto right about now.

I looked up at our one o’clock and saw the other Seminole. Pushing the nose over as hard as I could, I felt the shoulder straps dig into my shoulders and my feet leave the pedals. The other aircraft passed directly overhead. They never saw us.

When we leveled at 3,500, I looked over at my instructor. His face was ashen, and he didn’t say a word for several minutes. Finally, I asked, “How about those approaches?” We landed an hour later.

The Seminole is not a complex aircraft, and I was beginning to feel comfortable in it. The most important lesson that morning was clearly beyond a mere aircraft fam. I’ve heard it since flight school, and I’ve said it myself as a NATOPS IP and aircraft commander: Don’t trust the other guy. Even your most competent, best buddy can get you killed. 

Lt. Miller flies with VR-54.

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