

A trace is ice

I was halfway there, delivering a Cirrus SR20 to its new owner, cross-country from Sioux Falls, South Dakota, all the way to Boston. I had just completed a planned stop in rural southwest Chicago, where the aircraft was subject to a

pre-buy inspection. In the days before this flight, I had flown up and down through the vast overcast blanketing the upper Midwest. In South Dakota, a temperature inversion kept the stratus clouds in place, and a trace of ice that formed during climb melted away in the gorgeous blue skies above. It had been about 40 degrees Fahrenheit at 6,000 to 8,000 feet even though it was freezing below.

It was 3 p.m. and I filed IFR for the long final leg of my delivery flight. It was good VFR below the clouds. Bases were around 4,000 feet and I knew tops to be around 6,000 from my experience earlier in the day. I picked up a trace of ice while descending through the cloud deck into Chicago; so before departure, the airplane was pulled into a warm hangar and thoroughly cleaned of frost and water. A trace of ice is not *really* ice, right?

I was fully aware of the probability of more ice accumulating on my climb to on top, since it would take two or three times longer to climb than it had to descend. I also gave thought to the effect that ice would have on the laminar-flow wing of the Cirrus, compared with the Cessna I was accustomed to flying. Nevertheless, since it was good VFR below, I figured I had a good out if I encountered trouble. I wanted to take advantage of the westerly winds aloft and fly in blue skies rather than the dark, dreary, and slower ground-speeds below.

Upon departure, pitot heat on, I picked up my clearance with Chicago Center in VFR conditions and was cleared to climb to 9,000 feet. No soon-

er did the airplane enter the clouds than a bit of frost started to form on the wings. It frustrated me that ice had formed already. There was no longer warmer air above, and I was thinking about the consequences of wearing ice for the entire trip. The last thing I wanted was ice on my ship before beginning a night approach into Boston.

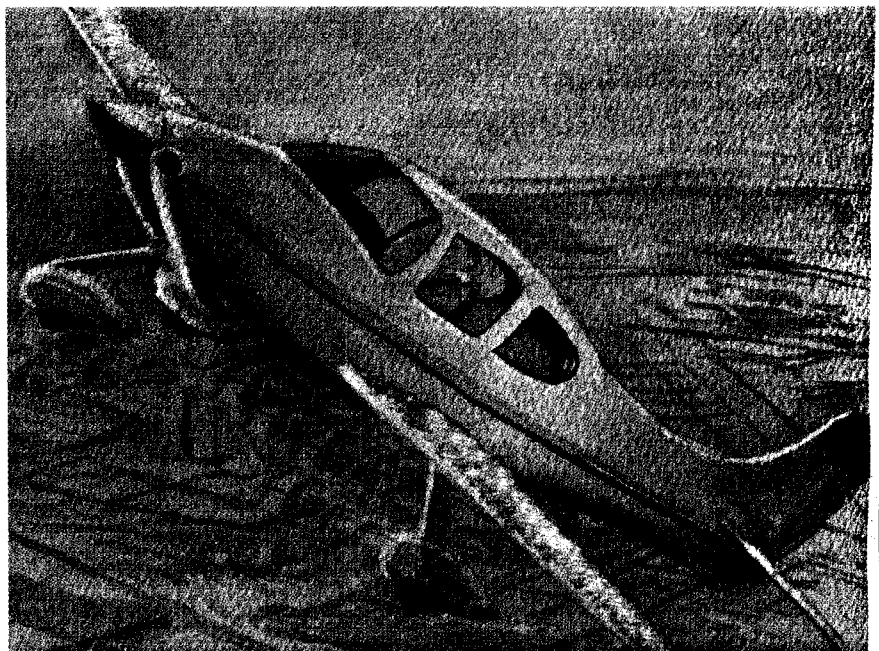
Wanting to get on top quickly, I maintained the best climb attitude, but I quickly lost vertical speed. Now a little more than a trace of ice had formed, and the airplane was acting sloppy at 100 knots indicated airspeed. At this point I could see the blue sky above and wanted so badly to be there. I had less than 500 feet to go, yet the airplane stopped climbing. I tried to cheat by pitching up a

little, just a bit to make it. The moment I did, it stalled at 100 knots. Now I knew I was in trouble. I called Chicago Center, saying, "You need to get me below the clouds so I can return for landing. I'm in ice." With no ego left, I started a turning descent. The airplane felt loose and sloppy, like I was practicing minimum controllable airspeed—even at cruise speed with power.

I managed to dial in nearest airports and asked Chicago Center for direct to Aurora Municipal Airport. At about this time, the controls felt stuck. I could not move the elevator.

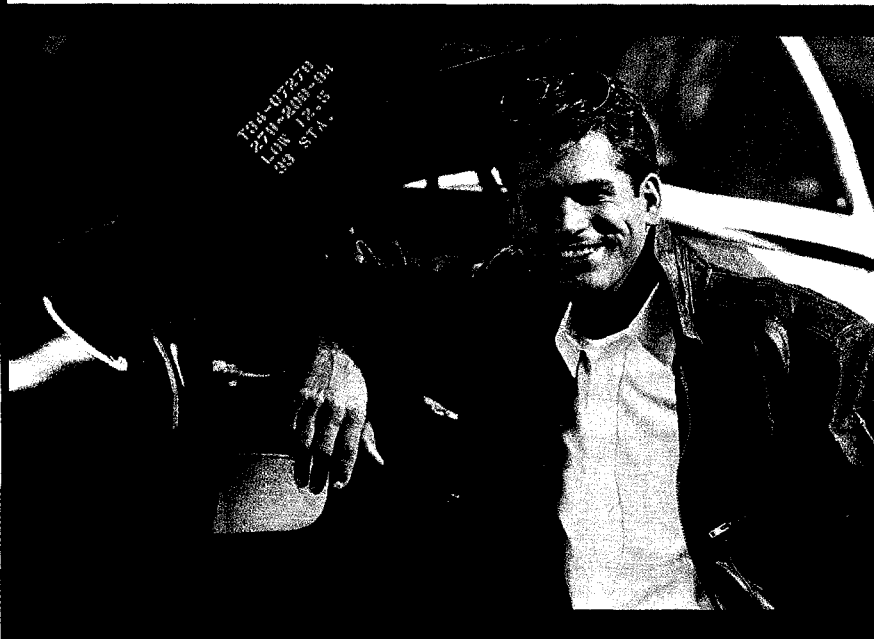
It must have been some residual ego that kept me from declaring an emergency. Pulling and pushing the side control, I feared the consequence of a sudden or abrupt movement on what was already a very sensitive control. The airplane was fixed in a descent rate of 1,200 feet per minute.

Finally, the control broke free. Ice had obviously formed on the tail. Now I was out of the clouds and level at about 2,000 feet. Center called to ask if I had control trouble with the airplane. I responded that now things were OK. Run-



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ning through my mind was the fear that ice could break off from just one wing in the warmer air and cause an imbalance of control. It was clear that I might not survive this flight, and I had time to think about the possible ending. The next 10 miles seemed like a hundred.

Knowing that my stall speed was something close to 100 knots, I was fearful about the landing. Aurora Tower cleared me for a straight in to Runway 36. I thought I'd rather have

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the longer Runway 33, but I was afraid to risk the 30-degree turn to sidestep when I was already lined up on final to 36. Cleared to land, and at 110 knots and no flaps, I was prepared to run off the end. I'm sure the tower controller was alarmed. But I stopped without incident just in time—I think the taxiway was Alpha 85.

Needless to say, my heart pounded and my legs quivered for an hour afterward. I had really thought it was all over. I had just experienced firsthand that "a trace" is ice. **AOPA**

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