

Leo's Tale

I knew Leo for many years. He'd been married a bunch of times. He told me "Seven...." I reminded him that he'd been married twice since he'd told me that some years earlier. He frowned and told me he didn't really count some of them. Leo used to wire B-17's at Douglas (under contract to Boeing) and loved to fly but never got his pilot's license.

I never met Dutch, but he had been a navigator in B-29's in WWII and never had enough of flying. He and Leo were best friends.

Dutch owned a Cessna 195 with a big radial Jacobs engine that he'd bought in the mid 1960's. It had paint the color of orange sherbet trimmed-in-vanilla ice cream. Dutch and Leo loved to fly into Mexico, to explore the backcountry and sample the local food. They knew many secret places in Mexico that one could reach only by horse, burro, foot or airplane.

While wandering through the desert near a town built mainly of onyx, Leo came across an iron cannonball. He said it looked exactly like a blackened cantaloupe—he decided to take it home

The cannonball was stuffed firmly among the baggage in the rear of the airplane, all the camping gear was stowed and the airplane readied.

Dutch brought the big Jacobs to life and warmed up the oil and did his preflight checks. In a few minutes they were bumping down the dirt runway gaining speed. But Dutch couldn't raise the tail. A little more speed and the tail still seemed glued to the ground. The end of the runway was coming up much too fast and Dutch knew he had to make a decision—fast.

The runway became even rougher as Dutch decided the 195 simply wasn't going to fly. Dutch slammed off the throttle and stood on the brakes. This brought the tail up, put the nose into the dirt, and the cannonball came roaring from some secret hiding place in the tail—smashing through the instrument panel—and missing Leo's head by an inch.

It was a long time before the big Cessna got back to the United States.