

## THE MALLARD

The Mallard is an honest airplane in cruise. It has no quirks to overcome and behaves as a pilot would expect. But to achieve the nirvana of cruise flight, it is necessary to perform a takeoff. Mastering the water takeoff is an endeavor I shall never forget.

Performing a takeoff in the Mallard is like riding a psychotic rodeo bull. I did not realize this in training, for the bull is lulled into a state of relaxed contentment when the cabin is empty and the center of gravity is forward. With only the two pilots aboard, the airplane is docile and smoothly climbs out of the water onto the step, accelerates to liftoff speed, and breaks free of the surface with a thrilling kick of acceleration as the water drag suddenly vanishes. Like the bull, I am lulled into a state of relaxation. This flying is not difficult at all.

When I first flew a revenue trip with a full cabin and an aft center of gravity, I met the bull for the first time. Mable has graciously allowed me a takeoff, and I am anxious to show him what a skillful pilot he has accompanying him today. Throttles open and the Pratt & Whitney 1340s roar to full power, converting massive quantities of aviation fuel into a deafening thunder of noise as the propellers slice the air, pulling the craft in an ungainly posture through the water and sucking hundreds of gallons seawater through the props, drenching the engine, eroding the prop blades, and providing first-class entertainment for anyone watching.

The nose slowly climbs out of the water. The bull has stood up, groggy but awake. As the moment of transition from ploughing through the water to planing on the step, the bull considers his mood. He decides he is not at all pleased with his new rider and must buck him off. He snaps his head down and the nose of our plane slams against the water. I pull back on the controls, and the bull snaps his head up suddenly. I push forward. Mable tells me to pull back. I pull back but the bull bucks again and the nose pitches down. We are traveling across the water in a series of increasing oscillations, bouncing out of control across Christiansted Harbor. I push. I pull. The bull is infuriated and he bucks and kicks with all the fury he can muster. Finally Mable has had enough. He takes the controls and makes an almost imperceptible control movement that immediately tames the bull. We are planing now, making a graceful takeoff.

Mable is a magician - I am certain of it. With little more than a brief thought, he has broken the bull's resolve. I must learn this magic, and I must learn it soon or find another job.

The next takeoff, and the ones that follow, are more revelations of how angry the bull can become. He defies me. He mocks me. He refuses to let me have any control over him. Mable must work his magic on every takeoff. Only the magician can control the bull. Mable's gruff demeanor belies his infinite patience and empathy. He spends the time enroute giving me tidbits of advice on how to become a magician, but his wisdom does not transfer to me. The day is filled with embarrassing attempts to get the airplane off the water with some semblance of grace.

I go home beaten by the bull. "How did it go?", she asks. "Great", I say, "Where's the rum?"

The next day is a repeat. No matter how I endeavor to follow Mable's commands of "push", "pull", "snatch" (I have never snatched an airplane control before), and "relax", the bull does not stop his bucking. At the end of the day, I begin to think my career will be doomed to fly only from runways - well-marked strips of concrete that provide little challenge and no thrill (this is how seaplane pilots think).

I fly next with McDermott. He is amused by my technique of taking off, but in the end he must work his magic to tame the bull. He offers few tips of wisdom. "You'll get it", he says, "I just hope I'll survive." Our day is spent riding an extremely petulant bull across various harbors in the Virgin Islands. My ego has been dealt a blow that I fear may be fatal.

Mable again. Out-of-control bucking again. Mable sees my frustration and tries everything he can think of to prop me up. I am lower than at any point in my flying career. I wonder how hard it is to get a real estate license or a Coast Guard captain's license or any other thing I may need to change careers.

The next day is THE DAY. Mable and I make the takeoff together. He is lightly on the controls, and I try to anticipate his actions. Push, pull, snatch. The nose rises as the bull considers his mood. He is angry. He pitches down. My instinct is to pull, but my hands, almost unconsciously, modify the action. I pull hard then immediately relax. It is the perfect snatch. The bull is surprised. He is so

surprised that he forgets to buck, and the nose drops smoothly and we are on the step. Now I am surprised. Mable is not on the controls; I have tamed the bull myself. Am I beginning to become a magician? It is by feel rather than rational thought - instincts that must be learned and stored in the subconscious. It truly is magic. My mood soars for the first time since meeting the bull.

I do not have the graceful skill of Mable, but I have a bit of his magic. The takeoffs are becoming consistently acceptable as I gradually learn how to control the outcome of this rodeo. The bull is often quickly beaten and he begins to relent.

McDermott returns after an absence and we fly together again. As he allows me to make the takeoff, he settles in his seat and prepares to be amused by my violent sinusoidal antics; but the bull is in a good mood today and barely shows himself. As we climb away from the water McDermott says, "You've improved." It is a memory I will cherish for a lifetime.

Weeks later, I am sitting at the Goose Grill sipping coffee. My ego is still in the recovery room after my frustrating, protracted and nearly unsuccessful education in Mallard takeoffs. I watch a Mallard begin its takeoff run. The pilot is an experienced Goose pilot and excellent handler of seaplanes, but he has had only a brief introduction to the Mallard before taking on his temporary reassignment. I watch the Mallard plough through the water, climb out of the bow wave seeking the step. I see the bull. The bull is in a foul mood, no doubt insulted by being ridden by a greenhorn. He is furious. I watch the Mallard bounce alarmingly across the harbor before staggering ungracefully into the air and I am slightly ashamed to admit that my ego continues to recover.