

Taking Wing: Sunset Patrol

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Streetlights are twinkling to life as I turn onto the field, and the airport beacon is already sweeping through the afternoon gloom. Minnesota winters are as dark as they are cold, and in January, both features are particularly oppressive. I park by the hangar and step out of the car, pulling my coat tight against the raw wind; snow crunches noisily under my feet. I fiddle with the hangar key and slip inside. The fluorescent lights flicker and blink, coolly revealing the hangar's familiar jumble of contents: a dozen classic Ducati motorbikes in various states of repair, an old airboat, a disassembled Nieuport scale replica hanging from the rafters and a beautifully-crafted flying Pietenpol Air Camper. At the front, facing the hangar door with nose pointed expectantly skyward, is a yellow 1946 Piper Cub. As always, she looks happy to see me — even after weeks of being locked in a dark and cold hangar without so much as a hop around the patch.



Another fondly remembered summer's evening: I'm on final approach to Stanton Airfield, a WWII-era grass strip that's still prowled almost exclusively by gliders and old taildraggers.

I drag the homebuilt propane preheater around to the nose, though it's a hangar fire waiting to happen and my chances of actually flying today are getting slimmer by the minute. Taking the Cub up sounded like a great idea when I landed the Embraer at Minneapolis–Saint Paul earlier, but the drive to Airlake Airport took longer than anticipated, and I forgot how quickly it would get dark. This Cub is strictly a daytime flier — no electrical system, no position lights, no landing light. I heave the bifold door open and am dismayed to see how much light has faded already. There's technically 20 minutes left till sunset, but with the overcast, it'll be dark as night by then. I reluctantly close the door and shut down the belching preheater. I pause a minute, contemplating the old bird's battered leading edge. She isn't the world's prettiest Cub, but at least she's mine — well, one-twelfth mine, anyway. I lean into the cockpit and check the hour log. I haven't flown her in nearly a month, and neither has anyone else in

the club. What the hell, as long as I'm here. I climb into the cockpit with the usual contortions familiar to anybody who's ever strapped into a Cub. The vinyl seat is rock hard and freezing cold.

I thumb the well-worn throttle and palm the stick, feeling the heft of the elevators and the tension in the cables. I close my eyes, and the chill of the seat fades; the ship dips and sways; the throttle reverberates with the thrum of the little Continental, and my right leg catches a warm blast of prop wash through the open door. I open my eyes, and it's last summer, or next summer, or 50 summers ago — for this Cub is a time machine, you see. I'm flying from the front seat, so I must have a passenger — my wife, Dawn, perhaps, or my friend Andy, or my nephew Dylan, already a keen aviator at 10 years old. We're at the Cub's favorite altitude, 500ish feet, loafing along at 2,200 rpm and a leisurely 70 mph. The sun is low and vivid in the haze, and the breeze carries just the hint of night chill, a welcome respite from the day's humidity. I reach out into the wind. Yes, it feels wonderful.

Lazily rustling fields of hay, corn and beans glow dramatically in the warmly slanting light. Hillocks and hollows cast rambling shadows that rather exaggerate the vertical relief of the Minnesota landscape. The ground falls away from our wings into a thickly wooded valley; a stream glints through the treetops, and I wheel around to follow it, since I have no particular destination in mind. My passenger taps my shoulder and points to the hill on our right, where our shadow plays on golden rows of tall cornstalks. I jink back and forth, tracing the path of the stream; our hillside twin follows suit, weaving through the corn.

The stream empties into a long blue lake, and I bank to lap the shoreline. There are a few pontoon and fishing boats lingering on the water, loathe to waste a single moment of a cherished long summer's evening. Heads turn to follow the little yellow plane, and we wave out the open door. Most wave back, except for some fishermen who perhaps don't appreciate the noise. I eye the altimeter to ensure we're plausibly close to 500 feet away; I'm sure there are FAA inspectors who fish, and in my limited angling experience, it is easy to slip into a foul mood when the fish refuse to bite.