

Zen Bow Article: Unicorn



I was hoping for an uneventful flight to the Dallas-Fort Worth airport from Harlingen one muggy evening in April. The forecast called for widespread thunderstorms in south Texas that day. As we climbed to our cruise altitude the extent of the weather system became evident. Red radar returns indicating thunderstorms stretched out in front of our flight path for at least 240 miles. Above, the stars were shining. Below and around us, the storms were quite active and filled the night sky with continuous eruptions of lightning. At times the lightning was so bright it seemed like day. The ride on top of a thin layer of cirrus was surprisingly smooth. We continued northeast looking for a hole in the storms big enough to pass safely through to DFW. The light from the storms became so bright I lowered my seat to help preserve my night vision. The First Officer kept watch outside the aircraft while I navigated around the storms with the radar and flight instruments. I looked back outside when he said, "Wow, check this out!"

The aircraft was wrapped in a very bright, white glow. A long white shaft of light extended from our nose for about thirty feet. The aircraft looked as though it had a luminous unicorn horn of static electricity attached to it. In eighteen years of flying I had never seen anything like it. But while nature was treating us to a seductive, other-worldly show, I became concerned about the possibility of a static discharge in which all the static electricity surrounding the aircraft would disappear in a flash, departing the aircraft as a bolt of lightning. Fearing the worst, I considered what I would do if this occurred. Complete or partial electrical failure could result from a severe static

discharge, perhaps rendering us unable to navigate normally or to see the storm cells on radar. This would be a big problem.

A flight attendant entered the cockpit, looked out the window, saw our unicorn horn and said, "Cool!" After a moment she asked, "Is this safe?" There was one acceptable answer. In my most controlled manner I said, "yes, we're O.K." But I wasn't sure, and I began to doubt my decision to come this way. Maybe I shouldn't have taken off at all. Maybe I should have called in sick...

MU! Find the MU! It's here, somewhere. If the electrical power goes, be there. Be there when it happens. Into the breath, into the hara, into standby gyro, and wait. Wait for this bizarre white glow and our status as a modern day unicorn to play itself out, one way or another. MU!

Nothing happened. After a time we found a gap in the storms, the unicorn horn disappeared, and the white glow faded away. A million lights from the DFW Metroplex appeared before us. We made a routine landing.

-Rick Stirr

Rick is an airline captain. He sits with the Madison Zen Center and lives with his wife, Gail, and their three daughters.