

Over The Rocks To Arlington

by Bob Kirkby © 1999

After a long winter of feet firmly planted on the ground I was looking forward to several flying adventures during the summer of '99. I wasn't disappointed. This is a story about one of these adventures in my Cherokee 235.

My wife's son, Nick Nesterenko, who normally resides in the concrete jungle of Toronto, was spending the summer with us. Through his previous periodic visits he had developed an interest in flying - hard not to since we live on an airport. This summer I wanted to arrange at least one exciting cross country flight for Nick and myself, to keep his interest peaked (as good a reason as any to go flying). Although I have flown to Oshkosh twice I had never been to the closer EAA Northwest fly-in at Arlington, WA. This sounded like a perfect destination from Calgary so we circled the first week of July on the calendar and began making plans. The Arlington fly-in runs from the first Tuesday in July through to Sunday. Although I could easily spend six days looking at airplanes I thought it might be a bit too much to expect of a seventeen year old, so we settled on flying in on the Thursday and returning on Sunday.

When flying VFR through the mountains it's best to plan more than one route and leave the final decision to the last minute. The weather can change so rapidly the window of opportunity to clear a pass is often measured in minutes. My preferred route was to be the Bow Valley VFR route from Calgary to Golden, Revelstoke and Sicamous. This would take us though the very high Rocky, Selkirk and Monashee Mountain ranges via the Kicking Horse and Rogers passes, following the highway all the way. A cruising level of 8,500 feet is a good compromise since it would keep us at least 3000 feet above the valley floors, except for a short period in the Rogers pass, yet is low enough to keeps us out of the cumulus clouds that tend to form around the peaks. At Sicamous, which is at the northern end of the Okanagan valley, we could fly directly over the lower mountains of the Okanagan range to the Princeton VOR and then directly over the Cascade Range to Hope, at the eastern end of the Fraser Valley. My second choice would be the southern VFR route through Cranbrook, Castelgar, and Princeton to Hope. Should these both be blocked a third route would be into Montana and across through Idaho and Washington.

As it turned out my preferred choice was available on the Thursday we were to leave. The weather forecast promised clear skies all the way through to the coast except for some scattered at 6500 ft in the Rockies. There was one problem, however. Thursday morning the wind in Calgary was blowing at 25 gusting 35 from the northwest. Although the winds were good in the mountains this would make for one hell of a ride through the foothills. The forecast called for gradual calming throughout the day with reasonable winds expected in the late afternoon. We decided to wait until they calmed down and leave around 5:00 pm. We would not be able to go all the way since the US customs office on the field at Arlington was only open from 0800 to 1500 daily. Instead we chose to fly to Chilliwack, BC, overnight there and do the 30 minute hop to Arlington Friday morning. We would have plenty of daylight since

Chilliwack is only 3.5 hours from Calgary at our planned speed of 130 kts, plus we gain an hour.

At 5:00pm I checked the weather again and the winds were down to 20 gusting 26 - tolerable. Off we went. By the time we got to Banff the winds had almost vanished and we were getting a good 130 kt ground speed and a smooth ride. There were a few puffy clouds around about 1500 ft above us but otherwise it was clear. Nick had the task of navigating, which was relatively easy since we were following the highway. I made it more challenging by keeping the highway under the left wing, out of his view, and making him identify mountains and valleys along the way. He rose to the challenge and guided me through the mountain passes with ease.

At Golden I tried to activate the Dialup RCO to give Kamloops radio a position report, but failure to light the fire. I made a mental note to read up on DRCO's for future encounters. After Golden there are a number of long twisting valleys which gradually got narrower and higher as we approached the Rogers pass. At the same time the cumulus clouds around the mountains became more numerous and, worse, started to get lower. By the time we got to the Rogers Pass entrance they were at our altitude and very thick. The pass is narrow enough as it is without having clouds on either side making it even narrower. We dropped down 500 feet then pushed on into the pass with a good visual on the granite. It wasn't long before we were out of the pass and over Revelstoke where there's a real RCO. This time I was able to contact Kamloops with a position report. After Revelstoke there is one more narrow valley to penetrate before we would be free of the ultra-high terrain. The clouds were just as menacing so we stayed low enough to maintain good vis but high enough to be able to turn around if necessary. Once we passed a valley junction called Three Valley Gap things started to open up and the clouds disappeared. We were now approaching the lower mountains of the Okanagan Range.

Rather than fly direct from Sicamous to Hope we flew south along the Okanagan valley for 5 minutes to the Enderby beacon, where we turned southeast toward Princeton. Going via Princeton instead of direct to Hope took us 15 minutes out of the way but it provides a friendly airport en route should difficulties develop over the mountains. Also, if my GPS decided to quit I could easily track the Princeton VOR until we were clear of the mountains at Hope. At Enderby I had no trouble contacting Kamloops Radio directly with a position report since we were now well above the peaks. So on we droned. This time I kept Nick busy identifying possible emergency landing sights on the valley floors. One thing there is no shortage of in BC is logging roads. They're not on the VNC but you'll find lots of them in every valley.

I am always in awe of the mountains, especially flying up close to them, but being Nick's first time he was spellbound. On this leg I had a moment like that as well. As we crossed the final mountain before Hope the ground instantly dropped away from 6000 feet to 100 feet ASL and the beautiful Fraser Valley suddenly opened up far below. On our right the narrow Fraser Canyon wound its way north and on our left we had a spectacular view of snow capped Mount Baker 30 miles south. No time for rubbernecking though, I could already see Chilliwack 25 miles ahead and we had 8400 feet to lose. I trimmed for a 500 FPM descent as we plunged into the emerald-green abyss. The descent and landing is always my favourite part of a flight and this was one of the best. Gliding down between the mountains and over the Fraser river plus the challenge of managing the quick descent without shock-cooling the

engine was exhilarating.

The Chilliwack airport is very pretty with its lush green grass surrounding newly coated pavement and a new-looking terminal building. We pulled up to a fuel kiosk on the ramp and found a self-serve, card-lock type fuel delivery system. After swiping my credit card I was able to fill 'er up while Nick went to check out the facilities. Obtaining fuel turned out to be easier than using the facilities. It was only 8:30 in the evening but the terminal was locked up tight, on both the ramp side and the public side. Luckily I had my cell phone with me or I wouldn't have been able to close my flight plan.

We moved the Cherokee to the tie-down area and secured her for the night. By the time we finished a gentleman had opened the terminal building from the front so we ran over and knocked on the door. He let us in and it turned out he ran the local flying school and had come into the office to ask the FSS to fax him information on flying into Arlington the next day. I, of course, had a copy of the multi-page Notam with me, so in exchange for copying it he offered to drive us to the nearest motel for the night.

The next morning we took off at 0800 for the hop into Arlington. The arrival procedure was a scaled down version of the Oshkosh arrival procedure. We were to head for a small grass strip 10 miles southeast of Arlington called Green Valley where we could join a single file route into Arlington. As in Oshkosh we were to stay off the radio and just listen to a controller at Green Valley give instructions to the pilots flying overhead, identifying each by airplane type and colour. This sounded simple enough but as we approached Green Valley I detected some confusion on the radio, to put it mildly. Pilot after pilot called in to the approach controller saying that they couldn't find Green Valley. Instead of giving sequencing directions the controller spent all her time trying to explain where Green Valley was. She got so frustrated with one pilot she finally said, "Just pick any airplane going the right way and follow it!" The designated approach altitude was 1200 feet so I decided to stay at the 2500 feet I had been flying until I found Green Valley, then fly south a mile or so, descend and return to the entry point. I was able to find Green Valley, although it was difficult since the grass runway did not stand out at all, then the rest of my approach worked out.

Eventually we found ourselves in the inbound lineup behind a very slow Luscombe. I had to put the 235 into slow flight in order not to overrun the Luscombe until we were on downwind for runway 34. At this point the very efficient tower controller noticed the holdup and instructed the Luscombe pilot to make a two tight turns and land on the grass. This worked and the rest of us were able to spread out and resume a normal approach. Once on the ground we were efficiently ushered to the customs tent and soon after were cleared to proceed to the aircraft camping area.

It wasn't long before we had setup camp beside the Cherokee and were ready to start



The author - camp set up and ready to go at Arlington

wandering around. Compared to Oshkosh this was much more a private pilot/home-builder's fly-in. The commercial displays were minimal and most related to home-building or at least recreational aviation. Nick, being an energetic teen, thought we should cover the whole place on the first day. I managed to slow him down a bit and we were able to stretch the tour over the two days. I really enjoyed the displays. There were lots of RV's, of course, lots of Glassairs, Stardusters, Pitts, not many warbirds, and a few interesting conventionals like Citabria. There was not much variety in the ultralight area which was dominated by the Titan Tornado. Pre-show fly-bys by RV's and Glassairs were impressive (lots of them).

The airshow on both days was excellent. It had none of the annoying public-attracting stuff like rocket-powered fire trucks, simulated bombing runs by military jets and F-18's screaming overhead. Instead all the acts demonstrated pure piloting skill. The headliners were Patty Wagstaff in her Extra 300S, Delmar Benjamin in the his GeeBee R-2 replica, Steve Wolf in the new Pitts Model 12 with its 360 hp 9 cylinder radial, and the venerable Bob Hoover doing his engine-out routines in the twin-engine Shrike Commander. If you've never seen Bob Hoover perform you must do so. His reputation as the "pilot's pilot" is clearly an understatement. This was the second time for me and I was still so impressed I ran directly to his tent later to buy his autobiography, autographed of course. Other performers included Dave Harris in his BD-5J Microjet, Tom Staggs doing an aerobatic routine in a Long EZ, delightfully narrated my his wife, and Eric Beard doing aerobatics in a Yak 54. All-in-all a tremendous array of aerobatic talent was on display.



Steve Wolf (centre) explains Pitts Model 12 to Delmar Benjamin (in cockpit)

There was lots to do in the evening also. We watched a jazz concert by a local jazz ensemble, took in a movie at the "Theatre in the Woods" and on Saturday night we were treated to a night airshow after dark. This was most impressive. "Captain Lazer" piloted a Hughes 269 helicopter well equipped with fireworks that shot out horizontally in the night sky, strongly resembling a Star Wars style dogfight. This was followed by a young paraplegic gentleman, whose name I can't remember, who was winched aloft in a hang glider adorned with dozens of flashing lights. As he soared at altitude in the dark, he resembled an alien spaceship searching for a place to land. When he began his descent the night sky suddenly lit up as fireworks began launching in every direction from his Regalo wing. The fireworks continued in a most impressive display until he landed softly on the taxiway.

All too soon Sunday morning came and it was time to head home. We broke camp at about 7:30 and while Nick searched for food I headed for the on-field FSS tent to check weather and file a flight plan. This time we had decided to fly across Washington and Idaho then north to Cranbrook where we would clear customs and re-fuel. Nick and I met back at the plane and I tried to call the Canpass

number to advise Canada Customs of our intended arrival time and place on my cell phone. Unfortunately my cell wouldn't work with their 800 number and I didn't have a regular number for them so I had to walk a half mile back to the public area to use a pay phone. This delayed our departure by twenty minutes but soon we were climbing out from runway 34 into a beautifully clear morning sky.



Mount Rainier in the distance as we fly over the Wenatchee range

I had planned for a cruising altitude of 9500 feet to give us lots of clearance through the Wenatchee Mountains east of Seattle. With peaks around 9000 feet we had a spectacular view of the mountains, including majestic Mount Rainier off to the south. It took quite awhile to reach our cruising altitude from sea level, but eventually we got there and I turned the controls over to Nick to fly us through the pass to Wenatchee, then northeastward across the plateau to Sandpoint, Idaho. Once again we experienced new and spectacular scenery. It was like flying over the prairies with mountains in all directions off in the distance. At Sandpoint we flew north along the Kootenay valley to Creston, then followed highway 3 through the Purcell Mountains to Cranbrook. While taxiing in I asked Cranbrook Radio for directions to the customs office and was directed to a pay phone in the lobby of the FSS building. Apparently they take Sunday off so I called the Canpass number again and was instantly cleared over the phone. This was my first experience using Canpass and it worked out very well (with the exception of not being able to call them on my cell from the US).

After filling the Cherokee with 100LL and our bellies with lunch at the terminal cafeteria, we were off on our last leg to Calgary. We followed the highway through the Crowsnest pass and saw yet another



The famous Frank Slide near the entrance to the Crow's Nest pass

variety of scenery. We saw lush green valleys at Fernie followed by ugly slag heaps and strip mining remnants at Sparwood. About 3 miles past Sparwood I spotted a paved runway below us, which surprised me since I hadn't seen it on the map along our route. I asked Nick to try to find it on the map for future reference. After much map shuffling and rubber-necking he found the airstrip all right, but it wasn't along our route. We were enjoying the scenery so much we had missed our turn at Sparwood and

were headed down the wrong valley. While I executed a 180, Nick and I had a little discussion about cockpit resource management.

Back on track we flew through the Crowsnest and just before exiting the mountains passed by the famous Frank slide site. I had seen it many times from the highway far below, but seeing the mountain that broke apart just off the wingtip was breathtaking. From our perch we could easily gauge the incredible size of the chunk that broke away from the mountain top during the night so many years ago and buried the town of Frank. The blanket of boulders spread clear across the valley floor.

We cleared the mountains over the glider strip at Cowley, then turned north and flew a straight line along the foothills for home. We passed Clareshome, Nanton and High River in short order then crossed the familiar Bow River and started our descent into Chestermere-Kirkby Field. Home again, we tucked the faithful Cherokee away in the hangar, heads spinning with the exhilaration of having completed another exciting flying adventure. One to remember for years to come.