

A Mountain Flying Adventure

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My daughter Tanya, at the time living in Vernon, BC, had been asking me to come and visit her for some time. In early April I felt I could use a break from the hectic pace at work and so decided to take her up on her invitation. It was time for a mountain adventure in my Cherokee 235.

Since acquiring the 235 I had only taken it into the mountains twice, once for a mountain check-ride and the second a sightseeing flight up the Kananaskis valley. This sounded like a good time to get some more mountain experience under my headset. I planned on leaving early Friday morning and returning Saturday afternoon. On Thursday the weather office was predicting good conditions for the entire weekend - sound familiar?

I arrived at Okotoks at 0800 Friday. (I had the airplane out at Okotoks for its upcoming annual, after which I would take it home.) One more weather check sounded great. No ceiling, winds 15 all the way, all day. I loaded 84 gallons of fuel, filed for the VFR route through to Vernon and was off. I expected an ETE of 2+30 so I technically had enough fuel to go there and back, but since I'm inexperienced at juggling four tanks, especially in the mountains, I figured it was better to haul extra fuel than to be wondering why I didn't if I needed it (ultralight experience speaking).

I set a heading to intercept Highway 1 at Seebe and climbed to 8500 ft. What a day. Not a cloud in sight, smooth air, unlimited vis., that big Lycoming muttering happily to itself like an old Buick, and some occasional chatter on 126.7 MHz. It was a great to be alive. Overhead Highway 1 I pulled a gentle left turn to head westward while sliding over to the right side of the valley. Time to make a traffic call for Canmore. A helicopter pilot replied that he was just lifting off at Canmore but would be well below me. And on we go, keeping the highway in sight on the left and giving the peaks their due respect on the right.

Flying through the mountains on a day like this is an awesome experience. Watching the snow covered peaks drifting past 1/4 mile from the wing tip is breathtaking. I have always thought Castle mountain (Mount Eisenhower) to be one of the most impressive in the Rockies and seeing it's vertical rock face slide by just a few hundred feet off my wing left me in awe.



Three Sisters mountain at Canmore.

To my right I saw tracks in a snow cap. Curious, I banked slightly to get a better view and it dawns on me that I am looking at the top of the Lake Louise ski area. To the left across the valley I confirm this with a sighting of Lake Louise. Magnificent! I grabbed the camera just in time to snap a shot before it disappeared behind the wing. The air was perfectly smooth at 8500 ft and the view crystal clear.

With the Kicking Horse pass coming up I pulled out the VNC to confirm that I was turning into the right valley. Although the highway is very easy to follow I felt a little more re-assured if I correctly identified the mountains and valleys. Although the pass looks very tight it is relatively short and with a few brief hops over the corners of mountains jutting out I get through it quickly and find myself coming up on Golden. I changed to the Golden ATF and made an advisory call. The radio was quiet. Then about two miles past, I switched back to 126.7 and contacted Kamloops FSS through the RCO at Golden. They responded quickly and I gave them my position report.

Now it's into the Rogers Pass toward the next checkpoint - Revelstoke. Turning right into the pass I encountered a few bumps as the winds coming down the two valleys collide. Once in the pass it smooths out again and I snapped a picture of those high-peaked alpine buildings at the pass summit. Coming out of the pass I spotted a 172 or 182 at 9500 ft heading east. This was the only traffic I saw the whole trip. Just west of Revelstoke I called Kamloops again to report and was surprised when they came in about 3 x 3, until they told me the Revelstoke RCO was out. Now I'm impressed that I can hear them at all.

The scenery changes quite a bit on the next leg. The peaks are much lower, not much snow left, and the valley floor is dropping. Between Revelstoke and Three Valley Gap the valley is really narrow, much more so than I remember from driving through there. Not the place to be turning around under an overcast. Once past the gap everything starts to widen out and as I approached Sicamous I see more valley than mountains in all directions. The view of the Shushwap lakes is stupendous, although it is getting a little hazy. Now I need to pay a little more attention to the chart and start looking for Vernon as I head south down the Okonogan valley.

I finally get Vernon pegged about 10 miles away and I have the hill that is on the north side of the airport. There was lots of chatter on their frequency as float planes flying up and down the lake issued advisories. I called Unicom and got a friendly reply giving me the wind and the active and, "there is a Buffalo on the ramp". You're kidding - in Vernon? Since runway 23 was the active I had to come in over that hill which tops at 2800 ft ASL and drop down to circuit height in less than 1/4 mile. Circuit height here is 1300 ft (2400 ASL) due to the upsloping terrain on the south and east sides of the airport. I got a visual on the runway just as I reached the hilltop, clearing it by 500 ft, nosed over and chopped the power. An RV-4 announced being on the left



"Buffalo on the ramp" at Vernon.

downwind so I concentrated on finding him and quickly picked him up just as he passed mid-field. By the time I reached downwind I was at circuit height and only about 500 feet above the hillside. Now I see why they have an extra high circuit here. After a comfortable landing I taxied in next to the Buffalo which turned out to be with a SAR group on exercises in the hills around Vernon. They drop guys into the nearby hills and they have to make their way out on foot. Sounds exciting.

The trip took me 2+15. As I shut down Tanya came out of the FBO office to meet me. In no time at all we were charging up a winding road towards Silverstar, a resort where she had been working this past winter. She treated me to an afternoon of fantastic spring skiing in +5 degree weather with a postcard view in all directions. Later, on our way to dinner she comments that the snow on the hill is melting fast and she wishes it would snow tonight.

Tanya had to work the next morning so I planned on catching a ride to the airport with her at 0830 and taking off shortly thereafter. Unfortunately for me Tanya got her wish. Saturday morning it was snowing on top of Silverstar. All around there were puffy white clouds, some dropping snow, some just getting in the way. The weather office in Kamloops told me the ceiling was 6500 ft here and at Revelstoke, according to the AWOS there. What was in between was anyone's guess. The good news was that it should improve as the day progressed. I decided to hang around the FBO office for awhile and see what direction things were going. An hour later things started clearing to the west and improving slightly overhead, so after another check with Kamloops I decided to give Revelstoke a try. If things were looking good I would carry on, if not I could either return or land at Revelstoke.

Off I went, climbing out over the north hill, bouncing a bit but otherwise comfortable. As I passed Sicamous I hit the occasional snow shower, not heavy enough to seriously reduce visibility, just enough to provide a new and interesting experience. By the time I can see Three Valley Gap the ceiling is solid 500 ft above me and starting to drop. I'm almost ready to turn around but I can see the gap ok and I want to have a peak through towards Revelstoke. The ceiling starts dropping fast. I slow and start descending to stay out of it. Just as it is getting too low for comfort I get a glimpse through the gap and can see daylight all the way through, but the ceiling is only about 500 feet off the deck. No way Jose. A high-G left turn gets me heading back towards clearer skies and a smooth landing back at Vernon.

When I call FSS again to close my flight plan and advise of the weather encountered, the FSS guy responded with a good natured chuckle and, "Guess the ceiling isn't 6500 feet after all." Slightly frustrated, but enjoying the experience, I hitched a ride to the Longhorn Restaurant a mile or so from the airport intending to relax for a couple of hours and satisfy my ravenous appetite.

The plan now is to wait until 1330, check the weather, and try again. This is as late as I can leave and still get home before dark, allowing an extra hour in case I have to stop in Revelstoke or Golden. According to FSS the weather has improved considerably by 1330 although the wind at Springbank is reported to be pretty brisk. I decided to give it another shot. This time the clouds are scattered at 6500 and broken at 8500 and the valleys are clear all the way to Revy, except for a few scattered snow showers. Over Revy, however, I saw nothing but snow towards Rogers Pass. No question about what to do. While making an advisory call I joined the circuit into Revelstoke. Even that proved challenging.

As I turned final a sudden snow/rain shower hit, trying very hard to block my view of the runway, but I kept it in sight. Before I reached the numbers the snow stopped as quickly as it started and I finished the landing in sunlight. After calling FSS to close my flight plan in the deserted terminal, I struck up a conversation with a 182 pilot who landed just 10 minutes before me for the same reason.

We spent the next half hour on the tarmac watching the ceiling clearing from the north. Gradually the Rogers cleared and he decided to go. He'd been flying the mountains for years and assured me that it "should be ok now." I told him I would wait 15 minutes and if he didn't return I'd give it a try too. He doesn't, so I file another flight plan and go. After taking off I circled the valley entrance once to make sure it looked good before entering. He was right, the clouds were scattered now at 6500 and it remained clear as I gingerly traversed the pass.

Turbulence is now moderate with a few severe spasms at the valley intersections. At Golden I called in a position report and decided to continue. It was getting clearer up ahead but I knew the wind was there. I gave my seatbelt a good tug and reduced speed as the turbulence continued. Seeing the wide Bow Valley after the Kicking Horse pass is a relief. The weather looked good for the home stretch. I am very impressed with the way the 235 handled the rough air. Although I was really getting bounced around I had no concerns about control. Keeping the wings level is little work and merely pointing the nose is enough to correct for up to 1000 fpm downdrafts (the climb performance of the 235 is excellent).

The real test was yet to come though. As I passed over Canmore I started thinking about what it would be like transitioning to the foothills. With the reported wind at Springbank out of the north at 25 gusting to 35 I was expecting it to get pretty rough. And I wasn't disappointed. But I did find that below 5500 ft it was tolerable. What I didn't count on was a solid, decreasing ceiling between Seebe and Okotoks. I set my ADF for radio station 66CFR (their transmitter is about two miles west of Okotoks) and dropped down to 500-1000 feet AGL to stay under the ceiling and out of the worst of the turbulence. That brought me in safely and as I entered the pattern at Okotoks I just had enough ceiling to maintain circuit height. I was surprised when I got no response to my radio call to Unicom, but no matter. There was no question as to which runway was the active. On final for 34 I felt like I was standing still. The wind had to be 30+ kts from the north. I touched down at 1700 hours on the dot, glad to be home.

No wonder I got no response on the radio. Everyone was gone home. I guess they figured it wasn't such a great day for flying. Fortunately, they left the back door open so I was able to go inside out of the wind and close my flight plan. The FSS guys wanted a full debrief on the weather through the rocks. That's the first time I have been asked for a pirep. One thing I came to appreciate was the great service that the FSS guys provide. Sure the weather reports aren't always right, but on this trip I talked to them a lot and found them to be not only very helpful but friendly and encouraging. It sure is a good feeling to know that someone is tracking your progress and is interested in whether you make it or not.

All in all my trip to Vernon and back proved to be a very enjoyable and educational experience. It was a great slice of mountain flying and I've learned a lot. I've also satisfied myself that the Cherokee 235 was a great choice of airplane and a real mountain traveler.

