

A Bushmaster Adventure

By Stu Simpson

This isn't going so well, I thought. I was rolling down Runway 07 at some grass strip I'd never heard of just west of Edmonton in an airplane I'd bought just minutes before. Only I wasn't rolling anywhere near fast enough because the engine just wasn't cranking the prop the way it should.

A few seconds later I staggered anaemically into ground effect and reluctantly realized I had to do something different if I was going to get this airplane back to Kirkby's.

I cut the throttle and trundled over to the side of the runway where everyone was watching me. Then I tried to remember how I'd gotten myself into this.

A Ten Year Airplane

I'd reached the point in my recreational flying career where I needed a new airplane. I'd simply outgrown my wonderful little Himax. Besides, I wanted a second seat to carry people and stuff. I've been mighty envious of Glen Bishell when he carried another pilot on the big cross-country flights we've done. My wife made it clear that my next airplane was going to have to last me 10 years. Trouble was, shopping around made me realize that either buying or building a second seat was going to be really expensive!

So following Bernie Kespe and Guy Christie's lead I started looking very seriously at building a relatively cheap Volksplane VP-2. I even acquired a set of plans.

My lovely wife, on the other hand, started looking very seriously at divorce lawyers. She's always been very supportive of my flying pursuits, but she drew the line at me constructing another plane. So, building was out of the question. I'd have to find something already built and flying. And cheap!

We decided on a fairly loose budget and I started poking around a bit more enthusiastically.

For instance, I sat in Ed D'antoni's very solidly built Avid Flyer, one of the earliest models of that line. I was definitely too big for it; the cockpit ceiling scrunched me over so much my neck hurt for two days afterward. I had to reach into the right seat to move the stick because there wasn't enough room on my side. It's a great plane, but not for someone built like me.

I took a day to drive to Edmonton to see a Sylvaire Bushmaster that I learned was for sale. The owner, a true gentleman named Chris Barre, found it in a barn and with professional help from Dan Pandur's Snowbird Aviation, completely restored and rebuilt it.

Then he painted it green. Camouflage green. I loved it!



Check out the camo paint scheme. Photo by Chris Barre

To make a long story short, I bought it. The price was very fair and it included a set of skis, a headset and an intercom.

I'm a bit embarrassed to mention the Bushmaster also came with a GPS. For years now I've poooh-pooohed GPS, saying they were for girlie-baby nav-sissies. "Real men use maps," I told them all. Then someone hands me a GPS for free. Carl and Bernie haven't let me forget it, though to be fair, I've not used it in an airplane yet.

Getting It Home

Bernie was kind enough to agree to drive me to Edmonton to pick it up, then act as my ground crew on the way back. Carl, bless his heart, jumped in, too. Carl's participation means all that much more to me because he sat in the jump seat of Bernie's truck for more than half the way there. I sat there the last half and I know how sore MY butt was. Carl's my hero forever.

We showed up at the field where Chris kept the Bushmaster at about 11:30 a.m. He was nowhere to be seen but the plane was out of the hangar with the prop off, just like I'd asked. Chris left a little note on the plane saying he'd be back shortly. The plan was to throw my Ivoprop on for the flight home because I thought I'd get better performance than the plane's wood prop would give. Wrong.

It was kind of a neat airfield, where we were. Some of the hangars looked about ready to collapse, they were so derelict. But one was about as modern as could be, being a Quonset style with fabric tightened over a tubular aluminium frame. It had a nifty looking little biplane inside. The other planes on the field included an assortment of Spam cans, homebuilts and ultralights.

Evergreen and deciduous trees lined the taxiway and barely left enough room for a plane's wings to scrape past. The runway was also surrounded by trees. I sort of envied the guys flying from there for the constant challenges the field must offer. Without a doubt, the place had character.

Chris returned as we were attaching the Ivoprop. He and I did the deal while Carl and Bernie did the prop. I was a pleased as punch with my new plane.

I noticed the weather was starting to close up a bit with towering cumulus building in every direction. I was anxious to get out of there.

I flew Norsemans (derived from, and nearly identical to, the Bushmaster) for a summer when I lived in Saskatoon many years ago. Nonetheless, Chris's pre-flight briefing was a nice refresher of what I remembered from those days. He showed me how to start the plane with the electric start and I discovered what a treat that was after more than 15 years of yanking and cranking! We ran the engine up and saw we needed to back the Ivo's pitch off a bit to get the right RPM.

Bernie and Carl and I fiddled with that for a bit until we figured it was correct, then we fired it up and tried again. The tach showed we had it right.

I got all my maps and snacks ready and took another look at the sky. Things were building quicker now, it seemed. Chris guided me out to the runway so my wings wouldn't prang a tree.

And then there I was, ready to go.

To say I was nervous would be about right. I was going to fly a new plane, from an unfamiliar field, surrounded by trees, on a 200-mile cross-country trip home. Why should I worry?

Try and Try Again

Taxiing out, it all started coming back to me from the Norseman days. Steering was very precise and positive, and the ride was a bit smoother than the Himax's. I U-turned at the button, double checked everything and went ahead with full throttle.



Chris Barre shows Stu the finer points of operating the Bushmaster. Photo by Carl Forman

Remember at the start of this yarn when I said it wasn't going so well? The thing wouldn't accelerate. I looked at the tach and it was barely making 6000. For some reason the engine was bogging and fighting itself. I got into ground effect about a third of the way down the trail, then pulled the power and headed back to the taxiway.

We ripped the spinner off and dialed the prop back a bit. Then I gave it another run. Same thing happened. Looking at the sky, I knew we didn't have much time before the CBs would be upon us. We decided to throw the old prop on, the one with which Chris had been flying successfully for all his hours.

I was really nervous when I got to the end of the runway, but the 503 revved up beautifully this time. There was a noticeable increase in thrust as I started moving. After a few seconds I pushed the stick forward to get the tail up. Nothing. Then I remembered this isn't the Himax. I left the stick a little forward and about the same time the tail came up the plane felt like it was ready to fly.

I kept it on the ground a few seconds longer and then let it slip into ground effect. We stayed that way for a little while longer, building up speed to help get above the trees and their inherent mechanical turbulence.

The climb rate was definitely less than the Himax, but at least it was steady and constant around 300 feet per minute. I saw the high-tension lines off to my right and knew I could clear them with no problem. I turned south and into the wind, slowly clawing my way upward. My destination was Lacombe.

After I cleared the power lines I got my bearings and started figuring how to stay clear of both the Edmonton International control zone and the thunderstorm directly ahead.

The weather office had quoted a 10-knot tailwind for my trip home. Instead, I found a stronger headwind. There was a thunderstorm ahead with more building along my route. And my fuel gauge seemed to be slipping a little quicker than I expected. I wondered how I was going to get out of this one.

The only saving virtue was the Bushmaster. What a great plane! The handling was superb. It felt as good or better than my Himax despite being so much bigger. The controls were light, smooth and precise and it had great response to turbulence. I know the Himax's cockpit is big and comfortable, but the Bushmaster's seems the size of the average living room. I immediately felt right at home and was loving every minute of it.

Now, about that thunderstorm. Things were looking up a bit. The storm was moving directly east and appeared to be on a track to take it south of Edmonton International. It looked like the Bushmaster and I would be able to sneak around behind it. I decided now would be a good time for a sandwich.

After my in-flight meal (no movie) I found myself well south of the control zone, but the headwind was really slowing me down. Chris said he usually planned for no more than two hours of flying, which gave a comfortable reserve of half an hour. I did some quick mental arithmetic looking at the map, figuring my ground speed and counting the miles until Lacombe. It was sure going to be tight; more so because of another thunderstorm off to the west headed for the same place as me. It meant there would be more pressure at Lacombe to get refuelled and headed south again.

Three things seemed to be headed to a simultaneous convergence point; my steady, but slow progress toward Lacombe, the next thunderstorm's steady, but slow progress toward Lacombe, and the fuel gauge's steady, but somewhat quicker progress toward empty. I was determined to win the race.

The Lacombe airport finally came into view and before long I was overhead for a left-hand downwind to Runway 16. Runway numbers have rarely looked sweeter to me than those ones did. I taxied to the south end and shut down. Peering into the tank, I realized I was nearly on fumes. That one was a little too close.

Well, no sense worrying about it now that I was down and safe. Best to concentrate on getting fuel and getting back into the air. Bernie and Carl showed up a few minutes later. Bernie scooted me down the road to a gas station, then we zipped back and filled up. The 8-gallon tank took nearly 8 gallons.

The Biggest, Blackest, Meanest Monster

Firing up again, I decided I could really get used to this electric start thing. I taxied all the way back up to the button of 16 and pushed the throttle forward. The takeoff run was a bit less on the pavement than on the grass and in short order the Bushmaster was airborne and climbing south toward Bishell's strip near Carstairs. I figure I beat the storm by 15 minutes.

Red Deer appeared a few minutes later and I noticed the wind had eased off just a bit. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't enjoying this. After all, who doesn't like a good honest aerial adventure?



Stu takes off on the first leg home; destination Lacombe. Photo by Carl Forman

Peering ahead, it looked like more adventure was headed my way. There was yet another thunderstorm growing like blazes southwest of Innisfail. I could tell right away that this one could be a crusher. Sure enough, as I passed the east end of Red Deer, I was seeing lightning and an unbelievable downpour from

the storm's core. It was the biggest, blackest, meanest monster I've seen while flying. Naturally, it was headed right for me.

I knew getting to Bishell's was going to be a bit tight fuel-wise, so I had to plot my course to get the most direct route while remaining clear of the storm from hell. As it happened, I just managed to clip the south-eastern edge of the cell. I felt like a guy who'd jumped a subway car just as the doors slammed shut. I saw some lightning and had a short blast of turbulence and rain. I silently thanked Chris for getting a prop with leading edge protection. Most unnerving though, was actually hearing thunder over the noise of the Bushmaster. I even had earplugs in!

South of, and well clear of the storm, I discovered the wind direction had switched. Now it was from the west at about 15 knots. So with the south-westerly course I needed to get to Bishell's, the wind now had exactly the same effect as the south-easterly breeze I'd battled to that point, only from the other side of the plane. I resolved to stop cursing and taking the weatherman's name in vain once I got home.

Navigating to Bishell's was an additional challenge. It had been a number of years since my last low level ultralight flight north of his place, so I was really depending on my map. I didn't have the sissy GPS because I didn't have time to learn how it worked before leaving Chris's strip. Besides, there was the seed plant near Bishell's, just over there. Good thing I didn't miss it. See, real men don't need GPS.

I dropped into the circuit at Glen's with the fuel gauge on my mind and a crosswind on the ground. I put the Bushmaster down just right though, even spending a quarter of a mile on one wheel with the left wing down into the wind. The Bushmaster is that good.

Glen Bishell couldn't wipe the grin off his face as he examined my new plane. I knew darn well he was comparing it to his own Bushmaster, and frankly, so was I. We pilots are like that. I think Glen was pleased that there was someone else on the block with a plane like his.

Bernie and Carl beat me there, and I spotted Carl lugging a can of gas out toward me. Boy, was I lucky to have those two along. Thanks, boys.

The Bushmaster didn't use as much fuel as I thought on this leg, so I was pleased to still have a bit left over in the refuelling can. The shortest and easiest leg was next; the one home to Kirkby Field. The northwest breeze at 15 or so would make a perfect tailwind.

Last Leg

I launched out of Bishell's with a smile on my face and the anticipation of the wind finally blowing my way. Even the thunderstorm ahead couldn't dampen my spirits. I was going to dodge it easily by going around the backside.

I used a radio for the whole trip, but only in receive mode because the Bushmaster didn't come with an antenna. I had mixed feelings about having it now. As I approached the Beiseker highway I tuned in Calgary International's tower frequency. Turns out the wind had shifted. Again.

This time it was a whopper. The tower was reporting winds of 250 at 20 gusting 35. To hell with my newly made vow of verbal chastity toward the weatherman. This was just dirty pool. I started cursing

everything meteorological I could think of, including forecasters, their ancestors and the next three generations of their offspring!

Then the wind booted the Bushmaster's tail to the left and I snapped back to the job at hand. I fed in a healthy amount of right rudder and started crabbing (yawing, this time) to keep from winding up in Winnipeg.

The ride was surprisingly smooth and in due course I was over top the home 'drome. Kirkby Field looked as good as it always does and I said an out loud prayer this time, thanking Bob for putting in the east-west runway.

Lining up on final, I was immensely impressed with how my new plane was handling the hurricane we were in. There was quite a jolt as the wind fought through the trees near the end of the runway, then I greased it on at nearly a crawl. I rounded the corner heading north along runway 34 and threw the stick into the wind. The Bushmaster's big slab-sided fuselage felt the crosswind a lot more than the Himax ever did, but it was still easily controllable. Yup, I'd found me a winner.

I tied the Bushmaster outside for the night and came back the next day to rip the wings off. With Bernie and Bob helping, the wings were soon hanging above the Himax and the fuselage was safe at home in my garage. There was no hangar at Kirkby Field big enough to house it.

So what's next? A new engine is definitely a priority. The Bushmaster really needs 65 horsepower, or so. Maybe one of the new auto conversions would work. I have to sell my Himax, too, because my wife says I can't be an airline. Bob and I will be building a new hangar soon, and hopefully I'll be back in the air in no time.



Stu and the Bushmaster are a good fit. Thunder clouds threaten to the west. Photo by Carl Forman

It was quite a trip flying my new plane to its new home. It's a great ride and I'm thrilled to own it. I expect I'll never forget my first Bushmaster adventure, and I sure hope to have many more.