

# Cavorting Across the Continent

By Stu Simpson

The Covid pandemic of the last two years has drastically reduced flying and air adventuring for me in my Cavalier. I'm very lucky to have already had much more than my fair share of airborne excitement and exploration, but the problem is I'm greedy for that stuff. I've been over the horizon, and I want to go back.

One such adventure that I've not yet written of happened in the late summer of 2014. My wingmen and I crossed the continent and then came back. It was the longest distance flight I ever made and was absolutely one of the best adventures.



The Cavalier and Cherokee in formation heading out across the continent. By Al Botting

## Day 1

Our two planes left Kirkby Field early September 1<sup>st</sup> that year. Bob Kirkby piloted his remarkably capable Piper Cherokee 235 loaded up with gas, Carl Forman, Al Botting and all their stuff. I followed shortly behind in the Cav, and we turned southeast toward Swift Current, Saskatchewan.

Farm machinery toiled away below harvesting the year's crops and churning clouds of dust into the morning air. We passed north of Bassano and watched the TransCanada Highway drift away to the south. Our course

skirted the north edge of the Suffield military range whose boundary was clearly visible on the near featureless plain below.

The Suffield Range is a block of land that the British Royal Army has leased since 1972 for live fire and other exercises. It's the largest British military installation in the world. We didn't want to cross that line into any live fire zones.

We fueled at Swift Current, then filed our flight plans for crossing the border enroute to Williston, ND, where we'd clear customs. Our ride to Williston was a little over 200 NM. The early afternoon heat threw us a few bumps, but we had a good tailwind that shortened our journey to less than an hour and a half.

Clearing customs was straightforward, and we were soon fueled up and walking to a nearby restaurant. We had only one more leg to fly that day so we weren't in a huge hurry.

The last hop was to Aberdeen, SD. This flight, 270 NM long, was bumpy, but the scenery helped make up for it. North Dakota's bright red soil showed well in the afternoon light. Oil wells and the occasional coal mine dotted the landscape as we skirted the south side of Lake Sakakawea. It's an enormous reservoir on the Missouri River, the second largest one in the US by surface area.

The somewhat rolling terrain beyond Williston eventually smoothed into the evenly segmented tabletop farmland of South Dakota. Bismarck sailed past our left wings as we looked forward to the end of the day.

We set down at Aberdeen, a small, pleasant city whose airport occupies the eastern boundary of the town. We tied down and arranged transport to the hotel from the FBO. But after flying 710 NM in one day, I decided I'd walk the mile and a half to stretch my legs. Carl decided to join me.

## Day 2



Heavy dew covered our planes the next morning and our rags were quickly soaked as we wiped down the windows. I forced myself not to rush my preflight. Bob had two other guys helping him to prep the Cherokee, and I felt like I should be keeping up. I fought the urge to hurry and instead took my time.

We departed Aberdeen behind a twin Cessna, and I caught a bit of his wake turbulence in the still morning air. Our next stop was only a couple of hundred miles distant at a place called Spencer, IA. My youngest son is named Spencer, so I didn't want to miss landing there. I bought a hat from the FBO to commemorate the occasion.

The morning was perfect and smooth with just a few clouds and almost no bumps. We spent some time on the next leg snapping pictures and grabbing video of each other's airplanes in such pristine air. Botting got some terrific video of the Cav for me.



Kirkby's Piper Cherokee 235 over the Iowa cornfields. By Stu Simpson

And there was corn. Corn everywhere, as far as you could see in any direction. The world below was a checkerboard of plots between perfectly cut grid roads that crisscrossed the land in a surveyor's dream. Larger highways and railroads ignored the surveyor's compass, though, curving and meandering to connect larger centres. There were a surprising number of windmills, but they didn't have much work that day.

We continued southeast for Galesburg, IL, where Bob wanted to stop and see the Stearman convention taking place there. This was a flying adventure and Bob loves biplanes, so of course we stopped.

I thought there'd be dozens of Stearmans at Galesburg, but there only looked to be fifteen, or so. Still, it was pleasant to wander around them with their bright colours and round, drippy engines. The Stearman people all knew each other, and their camaraderie was enjoyable to see. We were outsiders, but not at all unwelcome. It was fun being there for a while. I bought a t-shirt before we headed out.

Something I've noticed in all my flying in the US is that the further east you go from the Mississippi River, the more brick construction you see. I've no idea why, but brick construction seems to rapidly diminish west of the river. To be fair, so too does the population and number of structures of any type.

Another unique facet of the American landscape that's surprisingly evident from the air is the country's high schools, or more precisely, its high school football stadiums.

No matter where we fly, urban or rural, high school stadiums gleam like beacons. Many of them can easily rival, in terms of size and sophistication, a professional or university stadium in Canada. The college and university stadiums are even bigger and vastly outsize all but the largest such facilities in our country.

The end of the afternoon brought us to Bloomington, IL. Flying over the city, I had the overwhelming sense that here, and Galesburg, and the other places we'd seen from the sky that day, are what people mean when they talk about middle America, or the American heartland, or whatever term you prefer. Everything below us seemed so utterly representative of the nation as a whole. Of course, there are lots of different landscapes and cityscapes throughout the country, but this Mid-West area seemed to embody and express the average of it all. It was a remarkable sensation to absorb.

### **Day 3**

Bloomington's tower controller cleared us enroute as we headed southeast in the morning sun. The world below was in high gear, making its way through Wednesday. Looking ahead it was obvious that weather would play a role in our day at some point, but to what extent we couldn't yet know.

Within an hour we were talking with Indianapolis approach as we neared the city at 5,500'. The controller didn't need to vector us, but he did ask us to maintain our altitude while we sailed past Indianapolis International. I wasn't exactly sure where the world-famous speedway was, but I wasted no time rubbernecking out the right side of the plane looking for it.

I spotted it below and its size shocked me. I thought it was simply a famous oval car racing track, but it's actually an enormous multi-use complex occupying about four square miles of the city. I'm not a racing fan at all, but I'd love to go back and see more of it.

We were coming up on some weather that we'd need to address quite quickly. Small pillars of cumulus clouds sprouted up, filling the sky ahead. Each one looked like a miniature thunderstorm and appeared well on the way to shedding their 'minatureness'. I've since come to learn these clouds are called Caribbean Cu and are generally harmless unless the occasional one grows into something harmful. We were going to be on top of a broken layer of them in a few miles.



So-called Caribbean Cu ahead. Time to descend. By Stu Simpson

“Indianapolis approach, experimental Bravo Quebec Romeo flight.”

“Experimental Bravo Quebec Romeo flight, go ahead,” the controller replied.

“Approach, Bravo Quebec Romeo flight has some towering cu a few miles ahead of us here and we need to descend right away,” I explained.

“Experimental Bravo Quebec Romeo flight, you’re clear of my airspace now, descend your discretion and maintain VFR. Frequency change approved.”

I acknowledged the clearance and Bob and I switched to our enroute frequency to coordinate our descent. We picked up speed and continued running down the miles to our next stop, just north of Cincinnati.

We landed straight in on runway 11 at Butler County airport in Hamilton, OH. I could see Cincinnati’s skyscrapers to the distant south on our approach. After fueling we discussed our next destination, which we hadn’t chosen yet. We decided on an airport just across the state line in West Virginia at a little place called Point Pleasant.

Taxiing out I noticed a derelict A-4 Skyhawk sitting forlorn on a concrete pad. Perhaps it was the unrealized dream of someone whose eyes were bigger than their wallet. It was in awful condition and looked like it had been in the war just that morning. I felt sorry for it.

Southern Ohio has some of the most beautiful and picturesque landscape I've seen from the air. The farms and towns looked like they were built for a storybook, with bright green fields, red barns, tractors and two-story farmhouses.



Each of the steam plumes is a nuclear power plant. The Point Pleasant runway is just to the right of the stacks on the right side of the photo. By Stu Simpson

The terrain ahead got rougher, but not much higher, with low, tree covered hills. The Ohio River, the region's major waterway, meandered along off our noses as it buoyed barges and pleasure boats. Nuclear power plants studded the shorelines where their enormous cooling towers spewed steam into the afternoon sky. I wondered what effect, if any, the steam output had on the local weather.

We landed at Pt. Pleasant and pulled up to the fuel pumps when a couple of good ol' boys appeared from a nearby hangar. The one in bib overalls explained in a heavy southern accent that they were out of fuel. He recommended we head a few miles east to Jackson County where they did have gas.

We looked at the map and decided to take his advice since Jackson County was only 15 miles distant. We made the short hop and the very friendly FBO operator helped us top off. Then it was back into the air for our last leg over the Appalachian Mountains to Stafford, Virginia.

The Appalachians are nothing like the Rockies, but they're still mountains in every sense of the word. I admit that I expected them to be more akin to

foothills since it'd be tough to rival the mountains on our side of the continent. Some of the peaks climbed to 5000' nearby, and the weather was creeping down to meet them.

We made our way forward, crossing ridges and valleys one after the other. I hoped like hell I wouldn't have to go down in that area. Some places are exceptionally thickly wooded, and a plane would simply disappear beneath the canopy.



The Appalachian Mountains may look like foothills to us, but some peaks rise over 5000'. By Stu Simpson

We dodged low clouds and rain cells as we neared the Shenandoah Ridge, the last ridge to cross before our descent into Stafford, but the lowering ceiling obscured much of the ridgetop. We spotted a break to the south and dodged that way, hoping to sneak through. The gap was large enough and we swept past the mountain with just enough room to spare. As soon as I cleared the peaks, I pushed the Cav over for lower terrain ahead. Bob followed closely behind.

Now another growing cell was lodged between us and our destination. We turned left to skirt its western edge, aiming to track around some clearer air at the north end of it. Steady rain streamed over the Cav's windscreen as we maneuvered around the cell. Our planes slipped occasionally through and around low, ragged wisps of cloud stretching for the ground. Still descending, we made an eastbound turn around the cell. We slipped between it and the south end of the very restricted airspace encircling



Washington, DC, missing it by merely a mile. It didn't have to be a lot, it just had to be enough.

The way ahead was clear to Stafford, and I could see the Chesapeake Bay in the distance, a stone's throw from the Atlantic Ocean. Bob and I happily set our planes down on Stafford's long runway and taxied to the itinerant parking ramp.

## **Days 4 & 5**

OK, so, funny story. Al Botting has joined Carl and Bob and I on numerous flying adventures. And on each one he insists that we find a Cracker Barrel restaurant for at least one meal on the trip. I love kidding with Al, so I've taken to feigning that I just can't recall the name of the restaurant. I'll appear absent minded and refer to it with some silly name like Crapper Barrel, Cheese & Crackers, Cracker Jack, or Crack House. Maybe it's his hearing, but Al's never really caught on to the joke. It's enormously amusing to someone as childish as me.

Our main objectives with this trip, other than the flying itself, were to see the two famous air museums in the DC area: the Smithsonian Air & Space Museum on the Mall in Washington, DC, and the Smithsonian's Udvar-Hazy Center west of the city. Each facility lived up to its reputation and ought to be bucket list items for any flying enthusiast.

We also spent time touring DC itself seeing things like the Whitehouse, the Lincoln Memorial, the various war memorials, and the Washington Monument. Washington, DC, is an historic city and one of the world's centres of power. It's an interesting place and well worth a trip to see it.

## **Day 6**

Botting's plan from the outset was to fly back home commercially from DC. We bid him farewell from the hotel lobby, then Bob, Carl and I drove back to Stafford. None of us had any immediate commitments to meet, so I'd managed to convince my wingmen that we should head to Nashville, TN. I've always been a country music fan and since we were this close, I really wanted to visit the city where most of that music is made. It was only a two-leg flight not quite 500 NM long.

We planned our mid-point stop in Abingdon, VA, some 240 nm to the southwest. But soon after takeoff it started to look very questionable as to whether we'd get there. The warm, humid air was tossing cumulus clouds up into our path as we coursed along a couple of thousand feet up. They

were of little concern at that moment but were clearly soothsayers of the hours ahead.



The weather shortly after leaving Stafford, VA. It got steadily worse. By Stu Simpson

We once again met the Appalachians, this time from the southeastern slopes that roughly paralleled our heading. We'd need to reckon on them should we have to divert before reaching Abingdon.

The clouds built rapidly as we progressed. Luckily, they formed into fairly well separated cells rather than an impenetrable squall line, as can happen in that part of the world. But they still forced us to move our route several miles south of our intended course line.

Gary Abel was stalking us. He was at home in Strathmore healing from eye surgery and following our satellite trackers. He compared our positions to the local weather radar picture and helpfully texted me about where the bad stuff was hiding. He was over 1800 miles away and feeding us up-to-the-minute weather information for our location. Now, that's great technology!



A storm cell stalks Claytor Lake, VA, forcing us about ten miles south of our originally planned course. By Stu Simpson

We sank lower away from the clouds, and angled further out to the south, occasionally weaving around low rain clouds and more serious buildups. With each passing mile I updated my alternate airports list should a diversion become necessary. There were options, but not an overabundance of them. I worried about tall towers, too.

Despite the rain, or maybe because of it, the scenery below was gorgeous. Small towns and farms looked green, clean, and nicely kept. Southern Virginia went placidly about another Saturday, paying no mind to a couple of winged vagabonds sneaking around between the clouds above them. I tried to drink it all in and cement it in my memory.

We were considerably southeast of Abingdon then, having dodged well south of our intended path. We ducked one last time around some low scud then turned back to the northwest. The airport's rotating beacon flashed in the distance.

A significant cell pounded down on the area within a few miles surrounding the airport, and moderate rain streaked the Cav's windscreen as I turned final for runway 24. There was no lightning, though, and the wind remained steady. This wasn't a thunderstorm yet.

I wondered if the Cav would hydroplane on the wet runway, and I resolved to get the flaps off and the speed bled after touchdown as soon as I safely could. I double checked that carb heat was on full.

Bob and I landed with no problem and taxied clear, wondering how long the weather would delay us.

“Whoop! That looked like a close one,” Gary texted as I shut down. I heartily agreed.

We refueled in the rain, shielding our fuel tank filler necks with rags to keep water from the tanks. The FBO loaned us a car to go get a sandwich, and by the time we left the restaurant, the sky was sunny again, at least for the moment.

We departed Abingdon in fleeting sunshine and with more build ups ahead. We had a similar distance to cover to Nashville, and I wondered if any additional nasty weather would impede our journey.

As our planes cut through the humid air the landscape below evolved into sharply chiseled parallel mountain ridges stretching for miles. Running southwest to northeast, the ridges were evenly spaced just a couple of miles apart. These remarkable formations seemed like the aftereffects of a geological rake and were simply jaw-dropping to see.



Stunning parallel mountain ranges in Tennessee. By Stu Simpson

At our speed we soon angled away from the raked ridges toward the gentler hills of northern Tennessee. The air was cooling in the humid late afternoon. Fractured sunlight bounced off the mists crawling into the valleys below. We occasionally weaved our way between lower clouds like

pedestrians on a downtown sidewalk, but the worst of the weather was now to our rudders.



Late afternoon mist fills the valleys of the Tennessee Hills. By Stu Simpson

I relaxed a little then, and suddenly felt immensely lucky that we were there in our very own airplanes. They'd brought us to that incredible experience, to the things we were seeing, and to the adventure we were living. I absolutely reveled in it.

I snapped back to reality as we readied for the approach into the ironically named John Tune airport on Nashville's northwestern edge. We landed, fueled up and looked for parking spots.

But there didn't seem to be any. The ramp space was chock-a-block with all manner of single-engine machines, light twins, turboprops, and business jets. The grass wasn't an option because it was all sloped down toward drainage ditches. Bob found a spot on the north ramp, and I finally eyeballed an opening on the west ramp between a Bonanza and a King Air. My right wingtip fit nicely beneath the King Air's left one.



The Cav's wingtip tank fit nicely beneath this King Air's wing. By Stu Simpson

## Day 7

We had a problem first thing that morning. We didn't have any maps to properly continue our flight. We hadn't actually planned on Nashville when we left Kirkby Field, it was something we made up on the way.

No problem, I said, we'll just head out to Nashville International, find an FBO or a pilot shop and buy some. Those places frequently have such items. Bob and Carl agreed, so we headed to BNA.

There are plenty of FBOs at the airport, many of which operate or cater to aircraft used by the city's entertainment industry. Autographed pictures of country music stars cover the walls of their lounges and public areas. These places also sold things like oil and headsets and some other typical aviation odds and ends. But none of them sold maps. After my request for maps at the third FBO we tried, and the third puzzled stare from an FBO attendant, I asked why.

"Everyone orders them online, or they're using electronic ones," he explained.

Electronic VFR charts were still in their toddler stage in those days and were more expensive than the average private pilot was willing to pay. We were equally frustrated that Nashville didn't even have a pilot supply shop.

However, I reasoned, I'll bet they do have a map supply shop. Bob and Carl set to work searching online for such a vendor. There was only one,

they learned, located in an industrial area north of the airport. We didn't expect it to be open on a Sunday, but we drove there so we could find it easily the next morning.

In truth, we were reasonably certain that if we couldn't get maps, we could still find our way using the GPS's that we each had (I had two on board). At the very least, we could get to another airport and hope it had some maps for sale.

We spent the rest of the day touring the city, including the world-famous Grand Ole Opry, which Carl passed on, but Bob and I thoroughly enjoyed. Since then, I've seen numerous country music videos that were shot in the city, and I've recognized the scenery. I get a kick out of pointing out some place and saying, "I've been there. I flew my airplane to there." Silly stuff, maybe, but it's fun for me.



Bob Kirkby outside the Grand Ole Opry, an institution among country music fans. By Stu Simpson

## Day 8

The map shop didn't have all the charts we wanted, but they had enough to get us back onto the maps we already had. We returned to the airport and prepped our planes to leave.

But now the weather thwarted us. The cloud ceiling was broken at only 1000'. It would have been legal, maybe even safe, but Bob prefers a minimum of 1500'. I fully support that, and so we waited.

Two things frustrated us. First, while the weather restricted us from leaving, it was only a problem for about 50 miles to the west. That's only about 25 minutes of flying for us.

Second, we had a LONG way to go that day. It was about 760 NM to our planned stop of Valentine, NE. We'd already been delayed by having to get maps, and now the weather was thumbing its nose at us, too. We might have to alter our plan.

We finally got away late in the morning and turned west to where the ceiling had lifted substantially. We paralleled the south end of the restricted military airspace for Ft. Campbell, KY, where the US Army has a major helicopter operation. We were about ten minutes clear of Tune's airspace and making our way steadily higher when the radio came alive.

"Traffic advisory, this is Eagle One, flight of five, southbound at fifteen hundred, leaving the Campbell 2 MOA."

Damn, they were close to us, I realized. I peered out my right side looking for the traffic.

There they were at our two o'clock low for about a mile-and-a-half. Five dark green Sikorsky UH-60s in a tight V formation were shooting straight southbound. They were hard to see against the matching green foliage below, but I had them. It was a pretty cool sight.

"Eagle One," I called, "This is experimental Bravo Quebec Romeo, flight of two. We're going through your ten-thirty or eleven o'clock for a mile-and-a-half, westbound at two thousand five hundred. I have you in sight, no conflict."

"Uh, okay, we copy, we're looking", he replied. I kept my eye on the choppers and occasionally on my own altimeter to ensure I didn't stray. Our courses rapidly converged.

"Eagle One, Bravo Quebec Romeo flight is now at your twelve-o'clock high for three quarters of a mile, no conflict. We'll be clear of you shortly."

The Army guys finally saw us a few seconds later when they were almost right below us. That surprised me because they should have easily seen us against the sky, and they had a lot of eyes looking.

After spotting us, Eagle One bid us a good flight and we each went on our way. Bob and I clipped the southwest corner of Kentucky then turned northwest hoping to atone for the morning's setbacks.



The Mississippi River slipped under us, and miles of southern Missouri started falling away behind, about two each minute. After a couple of hours, St. Louis' skyline slipped into view on the northeastern horizon. The city's distance shrouded the fact that it was enduring race riots of incredible physical and social destruction. We wanted nothing to do with the place.

We refueled quickly at Rolla and were on our way again. The gently textured terrain of Missouri eventually gave way to the tabletop-flat plains of Kansas. We diverted a couple of miles to stay clear of the north side of Kansas City's Bravo airspace. We skipped contacting approach since we were low, well away from the airport, and in perfectly clear conditions.

The wind grew stronger, bellowing from the southwest and forcing us to constantly crab to maintain the track we needed. The only good things about it were that it wasn't a headwind and wasn't forecast to be one.

These were the hard miles now, made tougher due to the number of them, the daytime turbulence, and the race with the sun marching relentlessly westward. I'm not sure we'd have wanted to be anywhere else, though.

Somehow, I got picked to land first at Crete, NE. The Nebraska wind blew from the southwest at 17 gusting 23. The town was on the west edge of the airfield and the mechanical turbulence it generated made for a tumultuous approach to runway 17. I tussled with the rudder pedals on touchdown but managed to land well enough that I could fly the Cav some more that day. Carl, ever discerning about such things, even complimented my landing.

The ramp attendant at Crete was an ass. Just an ass. We'd flown nearly 300 NM and were each buying a big bucket of gas from him, but he acted like we were the worst thing that could have happened to his day. That attitude is exceptionally rare when flying in the US where most fuel operators can't do enough for you. I was glad to be rid of him.

We had a little over 200 NM to go to end the day. We'd make Valentine, on the north edge of Nebraska, before sundown, but not long before. I hoped we wouldn't be too late to get a motel.

The Cherokee and the Cavalier ate miles for supper while we feasted on protein bars and fruit. Lengthening shadows stretched ever further across the ground, and the wind continued its bluster.

The terrain below was remarkable and appeared even more so in the evening light. Heavily lined and textured, it too looked like time had raked it long ago. These were the Nebraska Sandhills, an area of sand dunes

covered by stabilizing prairie grass and wholly unsuitable for farming. Thus, it was desolate. There were few roads and no farms.



The Nebraska Sandhills, seen enroute to Valentine. By Stu Simpson

The sun was well into the horizon when we finally set down at Valentine. It was the longest distance I'd flown in a single day; 760 nautical miles (875 statute), and I was knackered. We all were.

## **Day 9**

This day could be dangerous, I realized. The forecast was awful the further west we wanted to go. An enormous and powerful winter storm (in early September) was rolling across the US and Canada, raising hell every place it touched. It had already hit Calgary and southern Alberta and knocked down trees and power lines. Now we were about to go head-to-head with it, hoping to duck out of the way at the last minute.

The goal was Gillette, WY, only 235 NM to the northwest and right in the approaching storm's path. Our local weather wasn't really cooperating, either. Low ceilings and drizzly rain had so far shackled us to the ground. It was all slowly lifting, but when could we escape?

We knew the storm was going to hold us up somewhere. The question was where. Did we want to be stranded in Valentine, a town of 2000 people and not much else, or in Gillette, a considerably larger city with many more amenities for stranded aerial wayfarers? We discussed it at length and

decided to reach for Gillette. If we couldn't make it, we'd backtrack for Rapid City, SD.

We lit out with the clouds at about 1500' but with good visibility and mostly flat but steadily rising terrain ahead. The highest point along our projected path would be in the Black Hills, up over 6000'.

Within an hour we were traversing the South Dakota Badlands. They're just as dramatic as our Alberta badlands, but cover a much, much larger area. So far, the weather was holding. We were even getting some thermal turbulence.

We reached the south end of the Black Hills as the clouds began descending to meet us. I suspected they were part of the oncoming system's moist air being forced upslope by the west side of the mountain range. We overflew Custer, SD, and the town's nice looking airport. It was a sizable community and I marked it in my mind as a possible alternate.

Once past the high terrain, we pushed over to stay clear of the ever lowering cloud deck. Gillette was less than 90 miles away now, and our window was steadily closing. But who'd get there first, us or the storm?

The ground had mostly flattened again, and tendrils of virga swung down from the ragged overcast. We were over the Thunder Basin, a sweeping prairie grassland both desolate and remote. At our low altitude, I hoped it meant there were also few, if any, towers in the area.

About 25 miles back from the airport, the Cherokee was ahead of me, and we were scud running, plain and simple. I don't recall how much height we had, but I do recall we couldn't go much lower. Occasional patches of rain and sleet assailed us as we neared the last small ridge between our planes and the valley where Gillette sat. I planned diversion options in my head, ready to pull the trigger if we couldn't make it through in the next few minutes.

"Stu, this stuff is way too low, and we need to make a turn," Bob radioed. Okay, time to pull that trigger.

"Roger that," I replied. "Come right to zero five zero and we'll try something else." That direction would put us close to, or over, the nearby interstate highway.

"Okay, right to zero five zero." I turned with the Cherokee and blessed it's bright red and white colours in the afternoon gloom. We soon adjusted our heading some more to come back to the southeast. I was about to suggest we divert back to Custer, or maybe even Mondell, several miles closer,

when I looked back to the west. There was a gap in the terrain, a notch in the ridge that was open. Brighter daylight shone beyond it.

“Bob, I see a gap to our west that I think we can get through.”

The radio was silent as Bob and Carl talked it over.

“Okay”, Bob replied, “Let’s check it out”.

“Rog. Let’s turn right to two seven zero.”

“Roger, two seven zero”.

We made the turn and headed for the lighter part of the sky. The land dipped down where a stream had, over the eons, cut its way through the ridge.

The closer we got the more confident I became. In minutes we pushed over just below the clouds and shot through our opening. The ceiling was definitely higher there, or maybe the ground was just lower. Either way, it was enough. We turned right to cover the remaining miles to Gillette.

Gillette’s tower controller cleared us straight in for a formation landing on runway 34, knowing full well we’d about run out of VFR weather. I landed long to give Bob plenty of room, then we each taxied clear and headed for the ramp. Bob and Carl rushed to dress the Cherokee in its covers, then attached the tie-down straps. I only had to worry about my tie-downs. Within minutes of us pulling our straps tight, the forecast snowstorm reached the airport, hammering it with hard blowing snow.

That was also a close one.

It snowed and stayed socked in for the next two-and-a-half days, not just in Gillette, but all over western North America, in an event that came to be called Snowtember. We were stranded three days in total.



Sleet has already started falling in this photo, but within minutes we couldn't see Gillette's control tower, visible here just above the Cherokee. By Bob Kirkby

We relaxed, read, shopped, did laundry, went to dinner, and saw some movies. It was really a restful time and far better than Valentine could have offered.

## **Day 12**

My COPA membership card once again proved useful. Durable, too. I used it that morning to scrape thick a thick coating of ice and frost off the Cavalier. Both our planes were completely encased in the stuff. Since the Cherokee at least had pajamas for the fuselage, Bob and Carl only had to scrape the wings and tail. Funny how you think you have a small plane until you have to scrape every inch of it. It took nearly an hour, even with some help from Carl.

A biting southeast wind harassed us while we worked. The sun slipped above the FBO but wouldn't actually warm things up there until much later. We'd be long gone by then.

If all went well, we'd get home that day. The storm had blown through leaving a blanket of snow covering the ground. It would most likely melt by early afternoon.

As we cleared Gillette's control zone, I called the tower.

"Bravo Quebec Romeo, go ahead," the controller replied.

"Sir, we've been stranded here the last three days and your city really treated us well. We just want to say thanks."

"I'm glad we could help you guys. Come back any time," he said. I could hear him smiling.

We switched to our enroute frequency and checked in. We made great time with a nice tailwind, though it was a bit bumpy. Some remnant wisps of cloud appeared here and there, and there was some lower stuff to the west, but none of it bothered us.



Low clouds linger over part of Montana. By Bob Kirkby

We landed at Lewistown, MT, where Bob enjoys stopping on his cross-country flights through that region. A former World War II bomber training base, it has long runways and is well placed in remote eastern Montana. It was my first time there.

We refuelled and used the lounge to file our transborder flight plans, then were quickly up and gone toward Lethbridge 200 NM distant. Home was just over the horizon.

Our tail wind had abandoned us, traitorously turning to a headwind that dragged us back to a mere 100 mph of ground speed. We pressed on, frustrated, but having no other option.

We finally crossed the border, and I was relieved knowing we were back in Canada and now so close to home. The Lethbridge ATIS reported good

conditions on the ground with a north wind around 10 knots and a pleasant 17 degrees.

We touched down and made for the customs ramp to report our arrival. Clearing customs wasn't hard, but we had to wait on hold for several minutes. When we finished, I taxied over to the Air West fuel pumps to put enough in to get home.

Near Vulcan, the weather ahead was ghastly. Towering cumulus filled our windscreens, and rain and low scud blocked our way forward. Fortunately, it was a bit late in the season for big thunderstorms, though it'd be foolish to rule them out entirely.

"Bob, I don't think we can get through this way. I suggest we divert toward High River."

Kirkby agreed and we turned more westerly. As we progressed, I wondered if we could even make it to High River. We had the advantage of being in our own back yard so I wasn't really worried, just annoyed that we might have further delays so close to home.

A few miles back from HR we saw an opening to the north that looked a bit better, so we decided to try it. There were numerous diversion fields available should we suddenly need one, but with any luck we wouldn't.

Kirkby led us across the Bow River toward Indus. He made the radio calls for any traffic there, as if someone else would be mad enough to be flying then.

We swept through the falling rain as I eased further back to go line astern and give Bob room for landing. We agreed that a non-standard straight-in approach to runway 34 would be just fine under the circumstances. I made a few S-turns to open more space between us.

The sky had almost closed in with the ceiling below a thousand feet and visibility down to maybe a mile in rain. I barely made out the airfield, but the approach path landmarks were clear enough. This was going to be tight.

Bob set the Cherokee down, then it nearly disappeared as a drifting low cloud almost obscured the field for me. Kirkby quickly pulled off the runway and turned to watch my approach.

"You're looking good, Stu," he encouraged.

"Roger that." We all knew he and Carl were powerless to do anything else to assist. I snapped a glance at my GPS to double check I was on the

correct approach path. I was dead centre. I added my second notch of flaps, tweaked the trim, checked my speed, and eased off some power.

Half a mile back I either broke out of the low cloud or dropped below it enough that the runway was once again clearly visible, even through the Cav's rain-streaked windscreen. I looked quickly both ways for any semi trucks on the TransCanada. It was clear.

I pulled the power off and the Cav sailed serenely over the threshold before touching down and bouncing gently once or twice. My landing wasn't the best, but the important part was that I had landed. Right then, that was good enough for me.

I backtracked to clear the runway and Bob said, "Welcome home."

## **Stats**

Statistics are always fun and interesting after such an epic adventure, so here are some numbers from this one.

First, these are the nav points for the route we flew.

```
CFX8 CYYN 481043N1033835W KABR KSPW KGBG KBMI KHAO  
3I2 I18 KRMN KVJI KJWN 361822N0880730W KVIH KCEK KVTN KGCC  
KLWT CYQL CFX8
```

We covered 3782 NM (4350 SM). It was the longest flying trip I've ever made, but I think Bob has ventured further.

Our longest distance in a day was from Nashville to Valentine at 760 NM. Our first day from Kirkby's to Aberdeen was only 50 NM shorter.

We were gone twelve days in total. We'd have cut that to only nine had we not been weathered in at Gillette.

We landed in, crossed over, or visited two Canadian provinces and seventeen US states. That's a lot for one trip.

We logged about 37 hours of flying time. That's also a lot.

We spent a bunch of money on gas, oil, food, hotels, car rentals, and the places we visited. I never added it all up, but it doesn't really matter. For the adventure we had, it was damn well worth it.





Photo by Al Botting