

# A List of Memories

by Stu Simpson

Surprising things happen when I've nothing better to do. For instance, I was bored one day and got to pondering how many different airports I've landed at in my flying career. So I made a list. I was surprised and pleased at the number. It turns out I've been into at least 263 different airports split between Canada's four western provinces and 27 US states.

I don't know if anyone else has made a list of that stuff. I doubt it. I mean, it took me 37 years to even start wondering. And is there really any point in doing it? It turns out that for me there is. What started out as an amusing statistical exercise accidentally turned into something infinitely more precious.

As I found each place on the maps I scoured, I added it to a numbered list. Each town or airfield unexpectedly kicked loose a little remembrance of it. Before long they all coalesced into a cascade of memories; some long lapsed, some more recent, but all equally treasured. The torrent yanked me back to places and flights I didn't want to forget, but somehow sadly had.

It's no big surprise that most of the airports I've flown to are in Alberta, where I live. What is surprising is the number of them – 103. There are some places in the province where I've only landed once or twice, and a lot that don't even exist anymore. Nanton Green Farms, Smith Engineering, Acme and Mossleigh, for instance, have long since grown over or been plowed under. But by making my list I can remember them as they were.

The list shows twenty-one spots in BC where I've touched down, fifteen in Saskatchewan, and one in Manitoba, that being Brandon. I've hit twelve places in Idaho and ten each in Washington, Montana, and North Dakota. I honestly thought Montana would be higher and North Dakota lower. The remaining states have anywhere from one to nine places where I've landed.

There are lots of airports in the US I only visited once, like Olive Branch in Mississippi, or Stafford in Virginia. There's Bird Field southeast of Sandpoint, Idaho, where with my Merlin I had the absolute wildest approach of my life. I lit there for only a few seconds, though, because I didn't want my wingmen to endure the same maelstrom I had, and because of the deer on the runway.

I rediscovered airports in Oregon and California from the summer of 2012. A trip in my Merlin all the way to San Francisco and back, with Geoff Pritchard in his Champ, was the biggest adventure of my life.



The author's Merlin

Courtenay Airpark on Vancouver Island, was another memory that jumped off the list. Gary Abel and I went there. I tell you, flying the Cav across the Strait of Georgia was just plain scary, but Gary convinced me I could do it. He was right, and I made it. And I crossed it again, too, coming back a couple of days later, but I still didn't like it.

Airports far away invariably involve terrific cross-country trips with other flying club members. One of the funniest moments I recall was when our flight landed at the long gone grass strip in Andrew, Alberta. A pair of the local volunteer firefighters were there. One of them went around and just leaned on each one of our planes as he spoke of how important he was. His semi-toothless friend was so excited he could barely speak. He just wrung his hands repeatedly and kind of stutter-mumbled.

We landed once at the north end of Cincinnati on the way to Washington, DC. My wife, following our flight on the satellite tracker, texted me one word, "BOOGER!" We still crack up over that, and how turkeys can't fly. Think WKRP.

I also laughed when I added Cache Creek, BC, to the list. Its runway slopes downhill to the south. I landed there and rather absurdly had to fishtail the Merlin down the runway to eat up energy til I was slow enough to turn back around. I never could get the brakes working properly on that plane.

The list also contains big airports like Spokane International. There, I was third to land in my Cavalier behind Bob Kirkby and Bashar Hussein, and just in front of a Dash 8. The controller rapidly had me take the first exit to clear the runway

so the Dash didn't have to go around. I heard him go by behind me. Several 767's lined the ramp on the other side of the field. I admit I was impressed.



The author's Cavalier. By Divan Mueller

It was cool to taxi and depart behind an Airbus 319 at Des Moines recently. Right after takeoff I asked the controller for a heading change to avoid possible wake turbulence.

Leaving Pearson Field at Vancouver, Washington, does not evoke pleasantry for me. Each departure out of there has scared the hell out of me. Taking off west puts you right over top of a series of bridges, power lines and shipping docks over and along the Columbia River for the first minute or two of flight. It'd be an awful place for something to go wrong.

I landed the Cav at Sheridan, Wyoming, while accompanying Kirkby back home in his newly acquired Starduster. As we taxied out he blew a kiss to the wonderful young lady working the ramp there. That memory always makes me smile.



Bob Kirkby and his Starduster

I've landed and taken off a couple of times at Meadow Lake, CO, just outside of Colorado Springs. It's the highest airport I've been to and the density altitude on each takeoff was well over 9,000'. The Cav had no problem with it, though.

So many of the airports on my list have offered up wonderful surprises. A bunch of us en route to Oshkosh landed at the Siren County airport in Wisconsin. An array of pristine 1930s vintage Howard DGAs littered the place. We'd landed right into the middle of their annual convention. Another time, Kirkby, Carl Forman and I got held by weather at the Urbana airport on the north end of Champagne, Illinois. Waiting to leave, a gentlemen approached us and invited us to come see some airplanes. We toured a terrific collection of warbirds and other classics, and I even got to sit in an F4F Wildcat.

Coleville, Washington is on my list. Wade Miller and I crossed back into Canada from Coleville in 2009. He had a Christavia then, I was in Merl. Embarrassingly, we forgot to open the flight plans we filed and the flight service specialist in Castlegar had to make a call on our behalf. The next day we had to land at Banff to avoid a snowstorm in the Bow Valley.



Wade Miller's Christavia

I could go on and on here. I haven't even mentioned my Bushmaster, or Radium, or Carl's emergency at Cold Lake, or the blizzard at Gillette, or the pretty girl at Shaunovon, or that time when.... No, no, I should stop now.

But I'm going to keep my list of airports and visit it every now and then. It's not to gloat over the number of them, though I am proud of that. Instead, I'll glance at one place or another and happily recall my airplanes, my wingmen, and the countless, treasured adventures that took us there.

You see, I didn't just make a list of airports, I made a list of memories.