

# San Diego Air Adventure

**By Stu Simpson**

The Cav's wheels touched down nicely on runway 25 at High River. I rolled out to the end and taxied for the ramp to join my wingmen, Doug Eaglesham and Dennis Fox, of Three Hills, for a big trip southbound. We were flying our planes to San Diego to visit the USS Midway, an aircraft carrier made into a museum. Visiting the Midway was just an excuse, as if we needed one, to fly somewhere interesting and far away.

I've lost track of how long I've waited for the chance to fly to San Diego, so I was super excited to be embarking on the realization of that dream.

We left High River – Doug in his Flight Designs CTSW, Dennis in his Van's RV-8A, and me in my beloved Cavalier – for the hour-long flight to clear customs at Cut Bank, Montana.

From Cut Bank we flew to Helena, bypassing it to find a track through the mountains to Dillon, our next fuel stop. It was in Dillon that my starter solenoid died. Thus, Doug kindly offered to hand prop me, and we were on our way again.

We lit out southbound following Interstate 15 as it coursed through the valley. It eventually turned southeast along the easier, lower terrain toward the Idaho border, but since we were flying, I figured we weren't exactly married to the highway. I suggested we take a bit of a shortcut near Dell along a gravel road leading up into a higher valley and a route that would save some time and distance on this leg to Twin Falls. My wingmen agreed and we were soon over a high valley floor that topped out over 6600 feet. Patches of snow still speckled the few cattle ranches and forest reserves below us.

The weather was encroaching now from the west, threatening us with some moderately sized cells trundling over the mountain peaks. I began to doubt the wisdom of my shortcut. We had a little bit of precipitation, that fell as snow at that altitude, before we popped out of the valley near a small place called Liddy Hot Springs.

We were at the northern edge of the Atomic City complex where the Idaho National Laboratories are located. It's a series of nuclear research and

production facilities not quite in the middle of nowhere, but not too far from it, either. We made sure to stay well outside the facilities' boundaries displayed on our GPS's.

Soon we were above some of the most remarkable and scary terrain I've ever flown over; the massive lava fields of the Craters of the Moon National Preserve. This is a truly awesome area of ancient lava fields, old volcano calderas, and cinder cones. The region is still geologically active and scientists anticipate further eruptions there in the future. It kind of makes you wonder why they'd put nuclear facilities right in the middle of it, though.



The jagged lava fields of east Idaho. No place for a forced landing! By Doug Eaglesham.

It was a visually stunning place, but we realized that to be forced down there would mean certain death from the jagged daggers of protruding lava rock. It was a frightening realization, and as spectacular as it was to witness, I was happy to have that region to our rudders.

Less than half an hour later we touched down at Twin Falls for our first night away.

## Day 2

I was really looking forward to the day as we left Twin Falls on a pristine morning. Much the same as the previous day, this would one would have us over territory we'd never seen before, and I was excited about what lay ahead.

We passed the town of Jackpot, Nevada, directly on the border with Idaho, where a large hotel and casino sits right across the street from the town's airport parking ramp. Convenient.

The nearly barren mountains of northern Nevada strode into view as we progressed southward, presenting a stark contrast to the Rockies we're used to seeing. Alpine foliage is scarce there, as would be expected in such a dry, harsh environment. Nonetheless, the terrain was breathtaking.



The mountains of northern Nevada seem much less intimidating with so little alpine foliage covering them. By Stu Simpson

We cut corners where we could and soon found ourselves tracking southwest paralleling I-80 across the northern reaches of the state. A seemingly endless array of mines passed beneath us, though what they produced we could only guess. There were pit mines and underground ones, some still active, some long forsaken.

At Battle Mountain we abandoned the highway, continuing straight on toward our first stop, Lovelock – Derby Field. Now we were over true desert; arid, sandy, and desolate beneath the sun's relentless punishment. The flying had been smooth as glass all morning, but our approach into

Derby was a rodeo ride as we bucked and fought with the thermals for the right to descend and land.

A derelict MiG-15 crouched in a corner of the ramp, a long-forgotten relic of a communist dream. Meanwhile, a steady stream of screaming, turbine-powered crop dusters taxied in and out every few minutes. We couldn't tell if it was one or two planes making short hops, or several planes cycling one after the other.



A long forgotten MiG-15 oversees Doug and Stu's fueling operations at Lovelock-Derby Field. By Doug Eaglesham.

Leaving Derby, we harnessed the thermals to lift us ever higher as we headed for Reno. NorCal approach vectored us right over Reno-Tahoe International, and warned us of a Southwest 737 departing right beneath us. We perched at 8500 feet, so the Boeing never presented a conflict, but it was cool to see it takeoff and climb right underneath us.

An inbound Piper Cherokee was our next concern as we passed into the Sierra Nevadas, but we spotted it ahead and well below us. No conflict.

Lake Tahoe glimmered off to the south as we flew over Truckee, just inside the California border. The upper reaches of the mountains were still thoroughly deep in snow and I couldn't help thinking of the early settlers

and explorers who dealt with the weather hardships those mountains regularly incur.

We sailed downhill from the Donner Pass toward Sacramento. All along the way I continued to be amazed at how the area was so familiar. It was because I'd 'flown' it on my desktop flight simulator several times. The fact that it allowed me to recall specific valleys and terrain features in the area speaks to how amazing – and useful - such technology has gotten.

Sacramento slid past off our right wings, diminishing in the haze as we arced southeastward skirting the western slopes of the Sierra Nevadas and pushing on toward Merced, our destination for the day.



Dennis' brightly coloured RV-8A above the fertile San Joaquin Valley in southern California. By Doug Eaglesham.

We were perhaps forty miles north of Merced at 3500' when Dennis called traffic at our eleven o'clock. I spotted a dark shape on the horizon that seemed about a mile and a half away and close to our altitude. At first, it seemed to be heading south at a speed similar to ours. Several seconds later I realized it was in fact heading northwest on a path about 70 degrees to ours.

It quickly took shape as a US Army Chinook helicopter, a massive dual rotor beast with an unmistakable profile. And it was coming right at us. I called for our flight to descend a few hundred feet to create some space, which proved to be very prudent.

The Chinook loomed larger in the windscreen and several seconds later I passed right under it by a few hundred feet. I could see one of the helmeted crewmen in the half-open hatch just behind the cockpit, so I waved at him.

Doug reported that as soon as the Chinook overflowed us it started climbing hard to a higher altitude. I reckon they should have done that earlier since they were tracking the west side of the compass.

We landed at Merced a few minutes later, tied down, secured a car, and went looking, unsuccessfully as it turned out, for a starter solenoid.

### **Day 3**

The FBO manager at Merced was quite helpful in me locating a solenoid. In fact, I bought a whole, almost new starter. It had a cracked casting, but everything else on it was shiny and fine. I was able to haggle him down to a pretty respectable price and we were both happy with the outcome. Doug and Dennis and I decided to wait until San Diego to effect repairs on the Cav.

We left Merced and turned southeast, our destination being El Cajon's Gillespie Field, on the east end of San Diego. But as we progressed it looked doubtful we'd make it.

Fresno, and then Bakersfield passed by, and the further south we got the worse the distant weather appeared. We approached the south end of the San Joaquin Valley, which is delineated by the Tehachapi Mountains. The Tehachapi range runs southwest to northeast. We were high enough at Bakersfield to see over the southwest end of the range and what appeared to be a solid cloud deck beyond. There was no way to tell if it was an undercast, a broken, or a scattered layer until we got closer for a better look.

The northeast end of the range into the Antelope Valley was clear, as you'd expect, since it's the gateway to the Mojave desert beyond.

We'd been aloft for more than ninety minutes, and weren't sure we could make our intended stop of Chino due to the weather. We were also uncertain of the route beyond Chino, and we were getting hungry. We decided to divert and form a new plan for continuing.

We turned over the Tehachapi Range and made for Lancaster. Tehachapi itself is in a bowl atop the range and is famous for its soaring activity. Similar to the Crowsnest Pass in southern Alberta, it's in a natural venturi where mountain waves slingshot sail planes well into the flight levels.

The wind grew steadily as we crossed the mountains and descended onto the right hand downwind for Lancaster's runway 24. In the near and far distance we could see the storied Mojave Air and Space Port, and Edwards Air Force base, each of them cradles of so much aviation history.

Lancaster's controller reported the wind as 250 at 14 gusting 26. It wasn't much of a problem for landing, but it rocked our planes pretty hard as we fuelled. We each tied down snugly before heading to the airport restaurant.

We hatched a new plan over lunch as we checked maps and weather reports. We decided to skirt the USAF Palmdale plant control zone, then turn south into the Los Angeles basin near San Bernadino, and shoot the final hundred miles into Gillespie Field.

Doug departed first, with me and Dennis following. Our takeoff runs were predictably short into such a headwind, and we turned southbound to stay west of Palmdale's control zone, only a few miles south. A pair of new USAF Boeing KC-46 air refuelling tankers were flying circuits at Palmdale, which I thought that was pretty cool to see.

Doug's impression, though, was that the tankers were unaware of us and that one was flying straight toward us. His reaction, naturally, was to change course and fly a different direction than what we briefed. Dennis and I lost sight of him against the urban sprawl of Palmdale proper.

Now we had a problem. We needed to rejoin with Doug over unfamiliar territory amidst moderate to severe turbulence. A fierce wind howled from the southwest storming over the San Gabriel Mountains a couple of miles to our right and creating moderate to severe lee wave turbulence and downdrafts. Dennis and I were near the top of the turbulent zone, but Doug was right down in the lee wave rotor. It was rough for us, but Doug was absolutely getting his teeth kicked in and was really struggling to climb out of it.

After fifteen violent and fruitless minutes of Doug, Dennis and I each describing ground features we were near or over, and Dennis and I trying to lay eyes on Doug's CT, it was time for another plan.

We were rapidly approaching the Cajon Pass, where I-15 drains into the LA basin north of San Bernadino. Once south of there, we had to join up or Doug would have to fly separately through some of the busiest airspace anywhere. We really wanted to be together as a flight of three.

I spotted a large and easily seen warehouse complex in north San Bernadino. Dennis and I flew directly toward it and I asked Doug to do the same. I knew now that he was behind us, and I asked him to stay five hundred feet above our altitude and no lower.

Once over top of the warehouse, which Doug had now spotted, Dennis and I began a left-hand orbit around it. Before long Doug was doing the same thing and we continually updated each other with position reports. After two and a half orbits I spotted Doug on the other side of the circle going north.

“Contact!”, I radioed. “Okay, Doug, I’ve got you northbound at my ten o’clock for three quarters of a mile,” I reported. “Continue your orbit. Dennis and I are turning in now to join on you. Dennis, confirm you still have me in sight?”

“Roger that,” he replied as I banked hard toward Doug who was now turning into the north end of the orbit area.

As we carved around to join him, I asked Doug to roll out southbound, and I dropped in to his eight o’clock a couple of hundred feet away. I could hear the relief in his voice as he called me in sight. The old gang was back together again.

Now we just had to get through this airspace complex.

Dennis set up on my left side, and Doug stayed on my right as we switched over to SoCal Approach for flight following through to Gillespie. The next 45 minutes was some of the most intense flying I’ve ever done as we worked with one controller after another to get through the area.

We received a steady stream of vectors, altitudes changes, traffic alerts and at least a dozen frequency changes, before finally being handed over to Gillespie tower. Added to that was the typical reduced and hazy visibility of the marine layer that permeates the area. At one point I looked out a few miles ahead at a FedEx MD-11 at our altitude flying east to west. It was headed for Ontario airport, a major cargo hub in the region. There were only a few moments of relative quiet for us, and during one of them I looked out my right side to see Doug just off my wing snapping pictures, waving,

and grinning broadly. It was funny as hell, and as unexpected as it was welcome.



Six o'clock shot of Stu's Cavalier on the last leg to Gillespie Field at San Diego. By Doug Eaglesham.

We lined up in trail before switching to Gillespie tower. The controller was miffed that I didn't have the ATIS, but I replied that I hadn't had time and only had one radio. He vectored us to the right downwind for 27 right for spacing behind an inbound King Air.

We dutifully followed directions, but were shortly headed for some rapidly rising terrain.

"Gillespie tower, experimental Bravo Quebec Romeo," I called. The King Air was going past us on final.

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

"Tower, are we okay to turn base here before we smack into this mountain coming up?"

"Experimental Bravo Quebec Romeo flight, turn right base for runway 27 right."

I cranked the Cav into a right turn, avoiding the mountain ahead, and the one to our right that now separated us from the airport. I felt quite familiar with the difficult terrain, even though I'd never flown here before. Well, not in real life. Once more my flight simulator proved to be a huge help in familiarizing myself with the area.

The tower cleared us to land and we were soon on a surprisingly steep final approach leg that I'd warned Doug and Dennis of earlier. Despite being ready for the approach, I was still surprised at how challenging it turned out to be. I had to fight hard to keep my speed down for landing.

We made our way to the transient parking and tied down. The nearby Enterprise car rental agency sent a man to pick us up just before they closed, and then we were on our way to find a hotel for the next few nights in San Diego.



Strapping down on the transient ramp at Gillespie Field. On a right-hand downwind and base leg, you fly around the mountain in the distance before turning final for 27R. By Stu Simpson.

## **Days 4 and 5**

Our primary goal, or excuse, here was to visit the Midway aircraft carrier museum, but it didn't open until late morning. There was another maritime museum at harbourside, though, and it featured a couple of tall ships, a coastal steamer and two retired submarines – one American, the other Russian. The subs were the highlights of the museum for me.



Up periscope! Dennis plays submarine commander. By Doug Eaglesham

We thoroughly enjoyed the Midway and its unique presentation of history. I was happy to buy a few souvenirs at the gift shop. Things like that, usually t-shirts or ball caps, always remind me of the fun I have on these adventures. I very highly recommend the Midway museum if you're ever in San Diego.



The aft flight deck of the Midway as seen from PriFly, the primary flight control deck. The ship's four arrestor wires have all been removed. By Stu Simpson



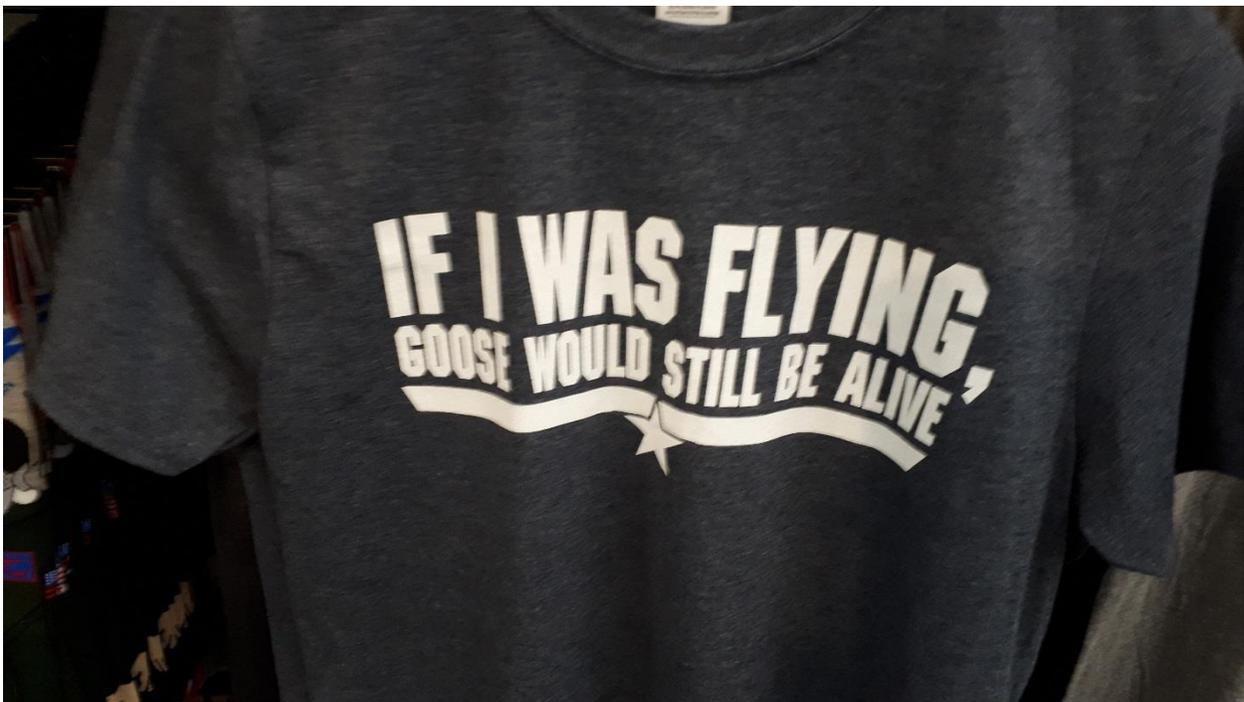
The forward flight deck. The Midway, an older carrier, featured two bow catapults, rather than the standard four like other carriers. By Stu Simpson



Doug surveys flight operations from PriFly. By Stu Simpson



Stu on the aft flight deck with an F-4J Phantom II, and downtown San Diego in the background. By Doug Eaglesham.



If this t-shirt from the Midway's gift shop doesn't make you laugh, there may not be any hope for you as a pilot. By Stu Simpson

That evening we returned to Gillespie and took about an hour and a half to change out my starter solenoid.



Replacing the Cav's starter solenoid at Gillespie Field. By Stu Simpson

The following day we found ourselves at the San Diego Air and Space Museum, a top notch facility in the famous Balboa Park. We got talking with one of the docents who arranged for us to tour the shops in the basement. There, volunteers were working on a display replica of Howard Hughes' H-1 Racer, as well as a Zenair CH601. Doug and Dennis, being car nuts, took a couple of hours after lunch to tour the adjacent car museum while I explored the city a little more.

After dinner we sat down to examine the weather, which now posed a serious threat to the rest of the trip. We'd planned to leave San Diego northbound, work our way to northern California, and hopefully fly along as much of the Pacific coast as the weather would allow. We'd fly into Oregon and Washington, and maybe into the Lower Mainland of BC to return home.

Fat chance of any of that now, though. The forecast showed the entire west coast of the US north of Los Angeles was about to be set upon by a gigantic weather system featuring clouds, rain, wind and even snow in the higher elevations. The system was forecast to move eastward across the continent and it was questionable as to us getting anywhere north, even home, without being stranded at some point.

Ultimately, we decided to get out of Dodge while the getting was good.

## Day 6

We couldn't head north in California, so we chose to scoot directly home and just try not to get stranded along the way. We picked an ambitious but direct route, planning to depart Gillespie eastbound into the desert and then turn northeast for the Las Vegas area to refuel at Boulder City. Then we'd go on to Provo, Utah, at the south end of the Salt Lake City airspace complex. It would mean a total of just over 600 statute miles. I've gone further in a day, so this seemed doable.

Doug led us out eastbound and the controller seemed happy to be rid of us as we cleared his airspace. Twenty miles east, where I-10 turned south to continue its journey to Arizona, we turned northeast, cleared the ridges of Mt. Laguna, and set out for Boulder City.

Despite flying over pure desert, the thermal activity wasn't that bad. The sun shone brightly, and the terrain was captivating to see. We clipped the north end of the Salton Sea, then drifted over Jaqueline Cochran airport, southeast of Palm Springs. The chart showed it as 115 feet below sea level. Couldn't really tell from the air, though.

The desert alternated between bursts of barren mountains, slabs of hardscrabble and salt flats, and waves of sand dunes. Small towns punctuated the desolation, while occasional highways or dirt tracks wandered across it. Through it all coursed endless thousands of gullies and arroyos showing where water flows if any ever falls there.

As we neared the Las Vegas area a meteor-like beacon caught my eye just below the horizon to the north. We got nearer and saw three enormous tower-mounted mirrors, part of a solar powered energy plant. The facility is marked on the map because the mirrors could easily be a flight hazard. I don't quite understand how that plant all works, but Doug does, so you can ask him.

Our approach and landing at Boulder City went smoothly, despite once again having to fight punchy thermals and heat-fuelled surface gusts. We gassed up, peed behind the fuel tank, and were on our way again.

We pressed on, passing over Lake Mead with the Hoover Dam out our right side, and Las Vegas out to the left. The landscape on this leg featured more red and brown rock to start, changing to nearly white in spots as salt flats proliferated along the route.



(Above) Three mirrored towers of a solar electric plant near Wheaton Springs, California, just a few miles from the Nevada border. By Doug Eaglesham.



Lake Mead off the Cav's right wing at the start of a 350 mile leg to Provo, Utah. By Stu Simpson.



The colourful desert landscape of southern Utah. By Doug Eaglesham.

North of us, the weather was marching steadily eastward and we wanted to reach Provo before it hit there. We had about 350 miles to cover on this hop. It's easily doable, but honestly, the Cav has more range than I do. My butt gets sore if I'm flying much longer at a single stretch.

This leg was a grind, just hard flying as fast and straight as we could go, trying to outrun fate. We bounced along through the afternoon turbulence, chatting about all sorts of things, and occasionally updating each other about our positions in our loose formation. Every now and then Dennis would weave and turn out on his side of the sky just to kill some of the boredom. Even at the 145 mph that Doug and I were flying, he was flying at a fraction of his plane's normal power setting.

The sky darkened in the distant west as thunderstorms clawed their way across the mountains and into the sky. We were pretty sure we'd beat the weather into Provo, but not a hundred percent sure. And what would it mean for tomorrow?

Provo tower vectored us to the right hand downwind over the lake adjacent to the field, and I wrestled my hydrophobia while trying to concentrate on the approach and landing.

We got a car, got a hotel, got some supper and got to bed. Tomorrow was going to be a big day of flying and trying to get home before the weather got us.

## **Day 7**

I worried when I woke up about what the day would bring. A glance out the window showed conditions were overcast and gray but still VFR. How long would it last?

We weren't sure if we could make it all the way home today since that meant 800 miles of flying. If we didn't, we'd almost certainly be stranded somewhere in the weather. That's not the end of the world, of course, but I've been there and done that, and I can think of better things to do.

We chose to use flight following again through the Salt Lake area. There was about 75 miles of busy and complicated airspace to our west, and mountain peaks between 9,000 and 12,000 feet to our east. Threading through all of that would be a lot easier with someone looking over our shoulders.

There simply wasn't enough room for us to fly in a V-formation here, so we went through in trail with me out front handling comms, and Doug and Dennis following. The overcast stayed high, though there was a little bit of rain before the approach controller kicked us loose north of Hill Air Force Base. Now it'd be a pretty simple matter of following I-15 to our first stop at Idaho Falls.

North of Logan, Utah, straddling the Idaho border is Oxford peak, a north-south mountain about 35 miles long. It was right in our way, so we had to track along either the east side or west. Clouds and rainfall obscured the higher reaches of the mountain above eight or nine thousand feet. The weather was noticeably better on the east side, so we picked that path. We found out later it was a good choice.

We flew through some scattered rain and occasionally tickled the cloud bottoms, but we didn't see any snow, either in the air or on the mountain itself. More mountains appeared ahead, but without any rain or low cloud to

block our way. We scooted through a low pass over I-15 that led us back out to the flat valley east of Atomic City.

We landed at Idaho Falls, which had obviously just been rained on. Inside the FBO I chatted with the pilot of a Piper Geronimo parked on the ramp. He said he'd tried earlier to get south along the west side of Oxford Peak but had to turn around because of the weather there. I told him of our journey up the east side, how the conditions there were clearly worsening for us, and that he'd made a really good choice to turn around. With that information he made up his mind to stay overnight in Idaho Falls. Good move, I thought.

We all decided to shoot for home today. We still had plenty of daylight and the speed to make it happen if we could avoid the weather's grasp.

We adjourned to the FBO's briefing room to plot our next move. It was important to avoid higher terrain, but that'd be tough since we still had about 300 more miles of mountains to cover.

"If we can stay to the lower valleys as much as possible," I told my wingmen, "we can likely make it through, or at least to Helena." I pointed out the route I thought would work, which was northeast to the Reynolds Pass north of Henry's Lake on the Montana border. I'd flown that way twice, most recently with Doug and Geoff Pritchard the previous year. We had much better weather then.

"The big question is what the ceiling and visibility will be when we get there," I stated. "The pass is pretty high, about 6800 feet. If we can't get through there, we'll have to come back here." The forecast indicated we'd have an open back door if we needed it.

After some more deliberation, and checking highway cameras in the areas north, Doug and Dennis agreed it was a good route to try.

The further north we got, though, the more dicey it looked. There were scattered showers – of rain and snow – and some light snow accumulating on higher slopes. Most of the surrounding mountain peaks were obscured completely.

I told Doug and Dennis that we'd make the final turn at Henry's Lake in toward the pass and check that we could see through to the other side. If it didn't look good we'd make the turn and scoot back to Idaho Falls.



Some of the better weather in east Idaho enroute to the Reynolds Pass near Henry's Lake. By Stu Simpson

We inched our way around Sawtell Peak as Henry's Lake slipped into view. We were scraping the cloud bottoms, but visibility was still good, about 15 miles or more.

Once established northbound over the western lake shore I could see over the pass and through it. There was some light rain or sleet falling in the saddle, but visibility was still good at the summit and beyond. I suggested we go for it. Doug and Dennis agreed.

We shot over the pass a few hundred feet above the road and scraping the overcast. Streaks of sleet coursed over my windscreen for several seconds before I passed the summit and pushed over for a lower altitude. Visibility north was excellent, though cloud still covered the sky and buried the mountain tops on either side.

Ok, only 160 miles to Helena.

The Ennis Valley was wide and deep, and broadened as we flew north. Numerous airports and communities dotted the way ahead. It was definitely colder here, too. Nearly all the higher terrain was covered in at least light snow, which fell occasionally in our path as we flew on.

We touched down at Helena late in the afternoon without any further problems. We filled up and made our way to the FBO to file for crossing the

border. With tablets and cell phones clicking and chirping away, we each completed our eAPIS filings, CANPass notifications and flight plans in about half an hour.

We had fifty more miles of mountains to weave through before we could hit the prairies again and shake our meteorological pursuers.

Once clear of Helena I contacted Great Falls radio to activate our flight plans. The briefer told me to call him again at Cut Bank for our transponder codes for crossing the Canadian border.

The mountain weather continued to chase us, but we were still outrunning it. Less than half an hour after departure, Mt. Cecelia whisked past my left wing and we turned north over the flat land once again.



The last of the bad weather, and the last of the mountains; Mt. Cecelia, north of Helena, Montana. By Stu Simpson

The mountains, and the bad weather they spurred, kept their distance now and the sky got a lot bigger for us. Great Falls gradually faded to our right rear quarter, and Cut Bank soon appeared ahead. Dashes of sunshine began slipping through the thinning clouds and we all felt relieved crossing the border back into Alberta. Clearing customs at Lethbridge was as routine as it always is, and we were each ready to fly the last leg to home; Doug back to High River, Dennis to Three Hills, and me to Kirkby Field.

We all shook hands and said our thanks and goodbyes. Then we saddled up and climbed back into the sky. Another air adventure was all but over.

The end of these trips always leaves me with mixed emotions, and I wrestled with them once more on the last leg. On one hand, I was really pleased to be back home. I looked forward to sleeping with my wife in our bed again, and to knowing the Cav was safe and secure in its hangar.

But part of me also wanted to turn away from home, to fly another 1400 miles in two days like we'd just done. I wanted to go more places I've never been, and see more things I've never seen. I wanted more stories to tell and more memories to recall.

But I knew couldn't. I knew those other adventures would all have to wait... for a little while, anyway.