



Voyage Across the Sky

A Light Plane Odyssey

By Stu Simpson

Photos by Stu Simpson & Geoff Pritchard

Thick grey cloud completely swallowed the mountain peak directly ahead of me. But there was 400 feet between the bottom of the cloud and a lower notch in the mountain. Not a lot; just enough. And that gap was all Geoff Pritchard and I needed to sneak through to the other side. I turned my plane a little more to the right and headed straight for it. Geoff banked his plane, too, and followed. The shortcut over a ski resort near Fernie, BC, would save us a few miles enroute to Cranbrook.

The mountain's emerald forests and shimmering meadows contradicted the jagged gray edges thrusting above the tree line. The wind cascaded over and around the summits and ridges, bucking us gently.

It was from Calgary that Prichard and I had flown to reach that lonely mountain crest. We were on the first leg of a big flying trip; the first leg of what would turn out to be the biggest adventure of our lives.

I flew my Merlin, an amazingly capable airplane actually classified in Canada as an ultra-light. Pritchard was in his Aeronca Champ, a 66-year old example of one of aviation's classics. Heavily laden but still managing nicely at this high altitude, our airplanes carried us, our baggage, and our flying gear. Were we to admit it, each of us also packed a little bit of fear.

Where Should We Go?

The previous autumn I determined that I'd run out of places to fly. I'd flown my Merlin all over Canada's three westernmost provinces, and some of the north-western US states, and I'd done so more than once. I was getting bored. I needed somewhere new.

The problem is I'm an aeronautical voyeur, an interloper, traveling across the sky not just for the love of flying, but also with a greedy desire to see more, to feel more, to simply *experience* more. I want to add more cities and towns to my list of flying experiences, my collection of spots about which I can say, "Oh, that place. Ya, I've been there... and in my own airplane, too." I hope you can forgive me, because I can't seem to stop.

Like an addict who continually loses the secret and torturous battle between desire and common sense, I chose San Francisco. God knows why, but Pritchard agreed to join me.



Champ pilot and fellow aerial adventurer Geoff Pritchard

Day 1

On a cool morning in early July, 2012, we set out from Kirkby Field, just a little east of Calgary, to fly our two airplanes more than 2600 miles and have a hell of a story to tell at the end of it. We planned to spend our first night in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. We'd have to cross the

Continental Divide, route through Cranbrook and Creston, and clear the border at Porthill, Idaho.

Our flight felt good to the spot near Fernie where we slipped between the mountains and the clouds. The air was smooth and the scenery stunning. The land was greener than I ever remembered; a product of the deluge that southern Alberta and BC had absorbed that spring and early summer. Turning westward into the Crowsnest Pass was comfortable and familiar as well known towns and landmarks revealed themselves one after the other.



The author in the cockpit of 'Merl'

A quick shortcut over the Coal Creek Road put us over Fernie where we discovered our little bolt hole at the top of the ski resort. From there we saw the Kootenay Valley and a clear path to Cranbrook. On the way up the valley we talked with Darren Scarlett, who was about 80 miles north of us at 12,500' in his RV-7. He wished us well, for which we thanked him.



Over the Elk Valley, BC, near Fernie. We're headed for that little notch between the cloud and the mountain.

Wow! Has there ever been a lot of rain here, Geoff and I remarked as we flew toward Cranbrook. The river was well above its normal level, and standing water flooded many of the crops in the valley.

As we fuelled at Cranbrook a couple of other light planes flew in and parked nearby, one being a Piper Cub. The pilots were clearly interested in us because they don't get enough planes like ours - and theirs - at Cranbrook. We bragged a little, I guess, about being on our way from Calgary to San Francisco, and one of them remarked, "Wow, that's barnstorming!"

It was as fine a compliment as he could have ever given. And it meant more coming from a fellow airman who gets it, who really understands what we were doing. I smile now remembering it.

The other fellow told me about his Cub and I took an instant liking to it.

Turning to Merl, he asked, "What's this plane?"

"It's a Merlin," I answered.

He pondered for a second, then, "There's a guy up in Calgary with a red Merlin named Stu Simpson. He writes in the COPA newspaper sometimes."

"Ya, that's me," I grinned as we ducked under the wing. "I re-covered and re-painted it a year and a half ago."

He examined Merl as I felt flattered and a little proud that he recalled my name from something I wrote. I hoped it was something that touched him.

I may have been imagining it, but I think those pilots were envious of our adventure. I wished we could have taken them along.

We launched from Cranbrook and headed straight south. The daytime heating was giving us some turbulent grief as we coursed through the valley near Moyie. The Champ bobbed along steadily a little way off my right wing, its red and white colours glowing nearly fluorescent against the forest and water.

Geoff was a bit distressed, though, at having trouble maintaining altitude against the downdrafts he fought. Over Moyie Lake I invited him to the east side of the valley to take advantage of the updrafts I'd discovered. I've gotten pretty good at surfing the mountain winds and finding the currents that support my hunger for altitude. Pritchard slid over my way and soon he too was supping from the chalice of free lift.

We landed at Creston to add a bit more gas for our hop to Coeur d' Alene. There was a bit of a delay because the pumps weren't working, so we passed the time chatting with Ron Janzen and his partner who own an RV-9. Their plane originally came from Kirkby Field, where Troy Branch kept it. They were also getting some gas before heading back home to Lethbridge.

Finally, well gassed and happy, we fired up and made the 3-mile hop to the Porthill border airstrip. This crossing was the easiest yet of the four that I've made there. It seems the eAPIS process has become quite streamlined and efficient. That's nice to see in something that comes from government.



Our pretty, but capable airplanes rest on the grass at the Porthill, Idaho, border crossing.

The Bonner valley south of Creston and Porthill is one of the most idyllic places I've ever seen. It features a gently wandering river with prosperous looking farms and colourful crops lining its banks. Honestly, I think it may have actually been built for a postcard photo and then just left in place because it was so pretty.



The Bonner Valley from just a few hundred feet up as Geoff climbs out from Porthill

We finally ended the flying day in Coeur d' Alene after fighting 15 to 20 mph headwinds all the way from the border. I wrestle with myself over winds like that. On one hand, such winds are to be expected on a trip

like this. They're part of the game. If you're not prepared to deal with them, save yourself the grief and stay home. On the other hand I think, "Come on, can't we catch even a bit of a break here?"

But there's no use in bitching at the wind, so we flew on.

Day 2

We awoke the next day in Coeur d' Alene to meteorological misery. Thunderstorms and rain rolled through the city and the wind shook everything it touched. I checked the weather over and over on my computer and convinced myself we might be able to make it through to Bend, Oregon, that day.

I also convinced Geoff we should at least go to the airport and give it a try; a manipulation for which I now feel genuine shame.

We dropped our rental car at the FBO and hauled our gear to the airplanes. I started to have my doubts, though, as we began our pre-flight inspections. Even in our semi-sheltered tie-down area, my plane rocked hard from side to side as the 20 to 30 mph gusts slammed into it.

I finally came to my senses as I checked my oil. Ashamed of myself for even considering flight in this weather, I walked across the ramp and admitted to Pritchard that we should stay on the ground today. Visible relief showered over him as he realized there would be no fight with the sky today.

We tied our airplanes back down and returned to town.

Day 3

I've often found it amazing how the simplest mistakes have the potential to lead to the most dire consequences. I came face-to-face with that reality when Pritchard and I tried for the second time to leave Coeur d' Alene.

We had no thought that morning of any danger awaiting us; far from it, in fact. The weather was perfect; the sky was clear and there was very little wind. We even had a turbine Beaver on amphib floats with which to share the ramp. We were really looking forward to getting back in the cockpit again after being grounded for a day. Air time really matters when you're on a flying adventure.

We took off on runway 01 and made an immediate right hand turn to head southwest. I caught a faint whiff of burning oil. That happens

occasionally in Merl, so no big deal. I concentrated on setting the right course to slip between Spokane's airspace to the right, and Mica Peak to the left.

There was that oil smell again, though. Why wouldn't it let me be? Maybe we should go back, just double check. Then I smelled it again and suddenly I knew why. I really hated what I was thinking, but I knew I was right.

"Number one to number two," I radioed, "we have to go back. I've got a problem and I need to land right away."

"Roger that," Geoff replied. "I'll follow you."

I spotted Geoff and banked into a right turn, reversing course back to Coeur d' Alene. He wanted to ask more, but he didn't, realizing he needed to keep the radio clear for me. I made the appropriate radio calls for the airport and kept a steady eye on my gauges, especially the oil pressure.

Nine minutes after our departure we were back on the ground again. I taxied to the nearest ramp and shut down, terrified of what I'd find when I opened the door.

I climbed out and saw the right front side of my plane coated in engine oil. My heart stopped as I thought our trip, our big adventure, was over and done already. I had a fleeting sentiment of sad gratitude that at least we were only a day's drive to home and an airplane-hauling trailer.



Geoff trotted over and stared wide-eyed at the apparent hydrocarbon catastrophe in front of us. "What happened?!" he gasped.

"I was an idiot, is what happened," I said disgustedly. "Yesterday when we were pre-fighting in all that weather, I was adding oil when I decided to cancel. I think I left the oil cap off."

Scared of what I'd find under the cowl, I quickly unfastened the latches and peered inside. Just as I thought, the oil filler neck was wide open. But where was the cap and dipstick assembly?

And as per my usual habit, thankfully, I'd placed it atop the right side cylinders. I shuddered imagining what might have happened had it slid forward from the cowl into the propeller arc.

We quickly assessed our situation. We were safe on the ground. Merl still had all its parts and was still fully serviceable, though utterly filthy. And we wouldn't have to try to find an oil cap and dipstick on July 4th in the US.

Bottom line: The trip was still on.

At that moment I also couldn't help realizing a strange coincidence. The previous owner of Geoff's plane had an almost identical incident in the Champ a few years earlier. I wondered briefly about that ironic twist of fate.

Forty-five minutes later, after sopping up a thick and seemingly endless film of oil all over the side and belly of my plane, not to mention the engine bay, I poured about 3/4 of a quart into the oil tank to bring the level back to where it was when I started the day.

We were soon airborne once more, headed out to cross the desert to Richland, Washington. Little did we know that danger wasn't yet through with us that day.

Deserts have always attracted me. I thoroughly enjoyed seeing the land beneath us morph from lush forests and valleys near Coeur d' Alene, to open range farm land southwest of Spokane, and then into the parched and scalded basin of central Washington. Monotone in its sandy gray colouring, the dessert was punctuated by low scrub and the odd series of irrigated plots, especially near the Columbia River. It could hardly be described as a visual treat, but its mysterious allure was for me absolutely magnetic. There were several places where I'd have been quite content to make off-airport landings (Merl's specialty)

and spend the rest of the day tramping the dry, dust blown landscape. If nothing else, experiencing the emptiness and solitude down there would have been intensely evocative.

The Columbia River scarred its way through the landscape near the Tri-Cities area as we carefully approached Richland, our first fuel stop. I checked the map and the GPS to be sure we stayed clear of the Pasco airport and the Hanford nuclear reservation, which bracket Richland's airport.

Richland's sun-broiled asphalt caused me no end of thermal grief as I floated and floated down the runway before finally lurching to earth in a horridly violent semblance of a landing. We fuelled, borrowed a car from the FBO, and headed into town for lunch. We got a bit turned around on the way back because I insisted we take a different route than the one we drove to the sandwich shop. I love exploring, and getting lost just meant a little extra exploration to find our way again. We got to see a bit more of Richland, and I liked it. We arrived back at the airport a few minutes later.

I must mention here that I am an accomplished proptologist. Pritchard coined the term because I'm always hand-propping the Champ for him when we fly together. This is a perfectly normal and legitimate method of starting some airplane engines, and it really casts us back in time. You should try it if you have the chance.

After I'd proptologized Pritchard, we launched into a hot afternoon with expectations of a long fight against headwinds and afternoon thermals. We turned almost straight south to avoid the Boardman military operational area and what appeared to be a large weapons depot just over the Oregon side of the Columbia River. Once clear of there we turned more south-westerly to make for Bend.



An apparent weapons storage depot south of Richland. That's the Columbia River beyond.

The landscape there is much like Alberta's foothills with open and sometimes rolling farmland. I appreciated the number of airfields scattered among the farms and small communities below us.

As Pritchard and I chatted on the radio, another pilot joined our conversation. We learned he was flying a Piper Pacer westbound across Washington to the coast. He asked where we were heading and what we were flying.

I've noticed a pattern whenever I fly with Geoff, or rather, whenever I *land* anywhere with Geoff. We'll set down somewhere and get chatting with other pilots, at which point I become nearly invisible. The pilots we're chatting with always exhibit the same behaviour, especially the older ones. They fixate on Geoff's Champ. They become a little dreamy and sentimental. They inevitably – and longingly - reminisce about when they flew a Champ, back in the day. The one they flew was never as nice as this one, though, but they still remember it as one of the best things that ever happened to them in the sky. I've gotten used to it, but Pritchard still eats it up like a kitten slurping cream.

Our distant Pacer pal was no different. He told us how much he liked Champs, and I could tell by his voice, even with the fading radio reception, that he too was in his own little time warp right then.

It was getting hotter outside. We could easily feel it in our cockpits and see it in our oil temperatures. The terrain was rising, too, so we were a little more inclined to ride the thermals higher to stay cool.

There was something ahead I hadn't expected. I'll describe it as a badlands, composed of jagged, barren canyons and deep gulches that offered no place to set down safely should the unthinkable occur. The area possessed a stunning beauty, but I was nervous as we approached its the northern boundary.

"Stu, I've got a problem here," Geoff radioed suddenly. "My engine's losing rpm!"

"Rog. Do you know what the problem is?"

"No. I'm going to circle and look for a place to land."

"Okay, make sure your carb heat is on," I replied. I turned to spot him. I wanted to keep the radio clear so Geoff could transmit when required.

The Pacer pilot added his own advice, quickly telling Geoff to check his mags. Then he stayed quiet. He too knew that Geoff had radio priority.

Several tension filled seconds passed. "Do you have an update, Geoff?" I queried. I had turned to find him, but couldn't spot the Champ.

"It seems like it's recovered a bit," Geoff reported.

Then there was a pretty good chance it was just carb ice. But how? The air felt really dry, and was also intensely warm. I wondered if it was residual moisture from the mess that went through yesterday. I pulled my own carb heat on.

"Rog. Are you still going to land, then?"

"Negative, but I don't like where we were heading before," he responded. I still couldn't spot him.

"I agree. Let's make a turn to the west. It looks like better terrain that way." The land west of us had fewer deep canyons and a few more options for forced landings. But where was Geoff? If he went down, I'd need to find him to be able to help, especially if I had to land nearby to do so.

"Give me a heading, Stu," Geoff called. He sounded a little calmer now, but I knew he was glued to the gauges and didn't want to be messing with maps.

I checked my GPS. "Okay, fly heading 250. That's 250. We'll head toward Madras."

"250, roger," he replied. My heart was beating a bit faster, but not as fast, I suspected, as Geoff's was at that moment.

"Oh, it's happening again!" Geoff called.

"Roger. Is your carb heat on?"

"I just put it back on," he answered. The fear in his voice was evident, but he was still collected.

"Okay, leave it on now and let me know if it helps. Also, double check your fuel switches. When you get a second, give me your position, please."

"Okay, that seems to be helping. It's definitely not the fuel," said Geoff after several more empty seconds that seemed like hours.

"Good, where are you?"

"Heading 250. I don't have you in sight."

Geoff and I found each other several minutes later. Only after trading information on the landmarks we were each near did I eventually spot his Champ. He was out ahead by a few miles and westbound over a comparatively shallow gully. It was about five miles wide, after which the terrain became flat farm land again.

I gained on Geoff as we crossed the canyon and I set in a new course for Madras, Oregon. It sat thirty miles north of Bend, but would give us a chance to catch our breath and get some gas.

About 45 minutes later we each performed terrible landings in Madras' blazing temperature, but were quite content to be on the ground again. We re-hashed the last leg and were shocked that Geoff's C-85 could get carb ice at such high temperatures. I recalled the carb ice chart and realized the humidity must be much higher than we thought to permit ice in today's warmth.



Pritchard, very relieved to be on the ground safely, refuels the Champ at Madras, OR.

The sweat poured off me as we refuelled. In such an oven, every movement was the very definition of work. With Geoff still a little shaken, we flew the last few miles to Bend without any problems and gratefully shut down for the day.

Day 4

This would be an easier day, I assured Geoff at breakfast, but back at the airport, I was having my doubts. It was still early and the temperature was already nearing the mid-20s. Bend sits at roughly the same elevation as Kirkby Field so density altitude was definitely on my mind.

We hadn't fuelled yet, either. We were just too knackered the previous night and decided we'd gas up this morning. I regretted that choice now watching all the other planes in line for the fuel pumps ahead of us. We'd be delayed.

Bend has a pretty interesting airport, in terms of the variety of airplanes it features. I was really impressed to see everything from Cessna and Hawker business jets, to all manner of homebuilts, including a flex-wing trike, a Columbia 400, a Zenair 601, a Harmon Rocket and a Titan Tornado. Each of them was up and flying that morning, too.

The pilot of the Harmon Rocket said he and his wife were flying back to Everett, Washington. He reckoned it would take a little less than two hours. He offered me his business card and invited us to call him when

we got to Everett. He'd give us directions, he said, to a pair of outstanding aviation museums.

For a moment I envied the man in the Rocket and thought how easy it would be to fly around in a fast airplane like his. You'd get to where you're going in practically no time. There's power to spare and you'd rarely worry about density altitude. You might even have an autopilot to do some of the flying for you. In fact, Pritchard and I could've gotten to San Francisco in a day and a half in planes like that. Yes, it would be easy.

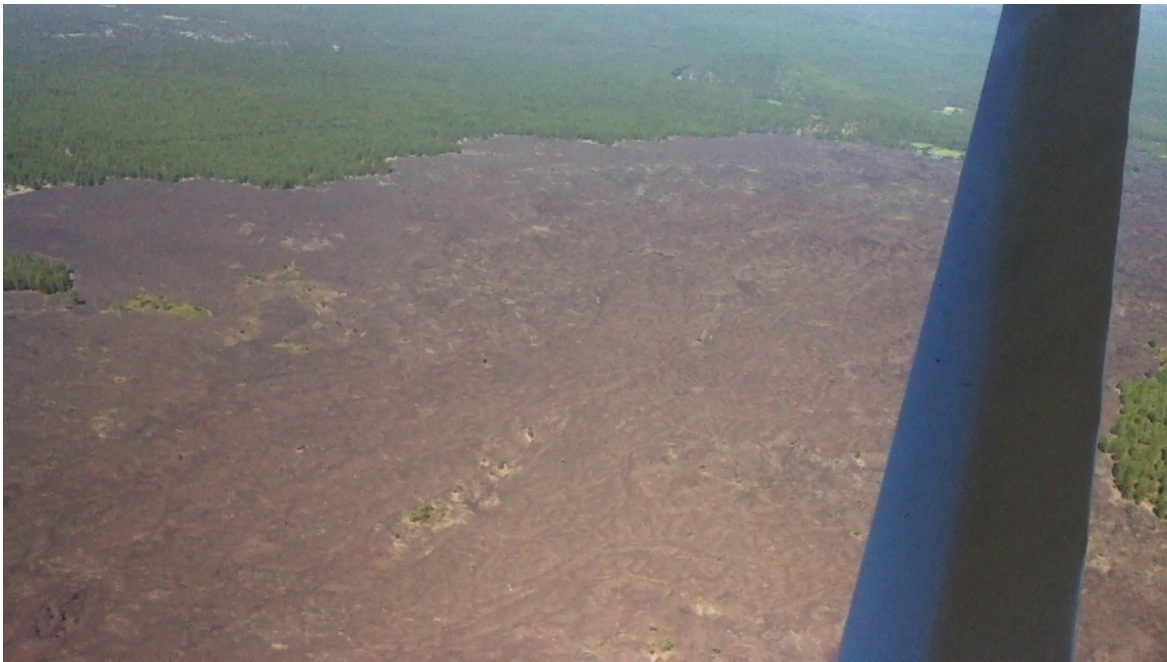
But then I chided myself for wanting to take the easy way. I remembered we didn't sign on to this trip hoping for it to be simple, and I felt a little ashamed for thinking it would be better if we could only go faster. I recited to myself what I've always taught my two boys when witnessing their frustration with difficult tasks: "You don't quit on something just because it's tough." I decided to stop whining to myself and get on with it. After all, we were here for the adventure.

Besides, I smiled to myself, Geoff and I were going to have a hell of a lot better story to tell than the Rocket man.

Launching from Bend, the density altitude was immediately evident. The AWOS put it at 5400'. We started a slow and steady climb to match the visibly rising slope of the terrain ahead. Our next landing spot was a place called Klamath Falls, about 135 miles distant.

Each of us was worried about a repeat of yesterday's engine problems, so we decided to follow the highway below. If one of us went down, at least we'd be close to any help arriving by road. There was nowhere else to go; we were surrounded by the thick evergreen forest of a national park and virtually no development existed outside of the road boundary. Pretty good Sasquatch country, I thought.

Not long out of Bend we spotted a huge swatch of blackened ground approaching. We each guessed it to be the corpse of a recent forest fire. But as we got closer, we knew the blackness belonged to something else. It was a lava field, the geological effluent from one of the many volcanoes comprising the Cascade range to the west.



An ancient lava field south of Bend,OR.

What would happen to Pritchard and me, I wondered, if one of those volcanoes lit off, like Mt. St. Helens did in 1980? We might have a fifty-fifty chance if we could make it to a safe landing spot. I guess I've had worse odds.

As we flew through the morning sunshine, we worked our way steadily higher until we knew we could clear the higher terrain that the map showed in front of us. The highest point we had to hurdle was at 4800', which, because of the temperature and density altitude was more like 7500' as far as the airplanes recognized. But for some reason the thermal fairy had forsaken us. Merl and the Champ had to fight for every foot of altitude, a battle that the occasional downdraft only made worse.

Things improved as we burned off more and more fuel, though, and every now and then, just for the hell of it, Geoff and I each pulled on our carb heat. We were slowly winning this day.

I was suddenly very taken by the story that I realized we were living. There we were, piloting a pair of tough, simple little airplanes above a stunning mountain wilderness on a true-life flying adventure. Some men's dreams are made of these moments. But, far from dreaming, we were living the whole thing right out loud. It was incredibly challenging, sometimes dangerous, and utterly unforgettable.

Who needs a Harmon Rocket? I laughed to myself.



The calm, glassy surface of Klamath Lake.

Just before lunch, Klamath's controller cleared us for a straight-in to runway 14. As I touched down I noticed an arrester cable recessed into the pavement near the end of the runway. Fighter and attack aircraft use these cables in the event of emergency landings, and I reckoned there must be a fair bit of military air traffic at this airport.

Turns out I was right, as the next thing I noticed was a squadron of F-15 fighters at the Air National Guard base on the field.

Our fuel truck showed up shortly after we shut down, but the fuel price was \$6.20 per gallon! It was the most expensive fuel we found in the US (I can't be bothered to do the math to compare it to the astronomical price we paid in Cranbrook). Once again, the ramp was stifling hot.

We grabbed some lunch at the airport restaurant and saw quite a parade of military aircraft. A pair of Navy F/A-18s landed and taxied in while I ate my sandwich, and as Geoff was spooning soup into his mouth, six F-15s taxied to the button of the runway for takeoff. By the time we paid our bill and made it back to our planes, the Eagles were taking off in pairs and pulling nearly straight up.

I spent a few minutes before we fired up talking with a guy who flew in with his Avid Magnum. It was pretty evident he didn't often get to talk to guys like Geoff and I; the guys at the slower, simpler, more daring end of aviation. He clearly envied us our trip, our camaraderie, and our adventure. I felt terribly guilty having to put him off so we could return to the sky. I may have mentioned that Pritchard had an appointment with his proptologist.

Very soon after takeoff I knew we'd have an easier time with our altitude than we had in the morning. The thermals were many and strong, and Pritchard and I roped everyone we could find. I truly appreciated each little gift of lift as we flew on.

Mount Shasta loomed ever closer, dominating our southern horizon. It peaks at a little over 14,000' and is one of the highest mountains on the continent. We surfed our way to the glorious height of 8700' as we passed its northern slopes. I know it's ridiculous, but I was actually a bit nervous being so close to Shasta in case it suddenly erupted while we were near.

As I surveyed the lava cliffs and outcroppings below us, I realized we'd actually made it to California in our own little airplanes. I was pretty damned pleased with that.

The next town beneath us was a place called Weed. Who on earth would name a town 'Weed'? Certainly, someone out there knows the answer but I haven't found out. I'm quite content to remain ignorant because I think it's funny as hell.

An enormous cinder cone sprouts from the western slope of Mt. Shasta, south of Weed. This cone, called Black Bluff, is completely black and sits at less than half of Mt. Shasta's height. Were it anywhere else, it would be a pretty fair sized mountain. But here, it's merely a servant waiting eternally at the foot of its master.

"Stu, are you getting this downdraft that I'm getting?" Geoff asked worriedly.

"Roger that," I replied, "It's from the wind hitting the mountain and then running downhill."

"I can't maintain altitude," said Pritchard.

"Me either, but I think we'll fly out of it pretty soon."



Mount Shasta and a cinder cone called Black Bluff in northern California.

In fact, it took about 20 miles before we could actually maintain altitude or even climb a little. The downdraft never amounted to much at any one time, but it cost us 2500' that we'd worked really hard to get. Luckily, the terrain that ran southward follows roughly the same downhill slope as our descent took. It was frustrating, though, and more so because of the headwind we faced.



Geoff in the Champ over the Shasta Valley

The narrow Shasta Valley led us further along toward Redding, our next overnight stop. Shasta Lake, a huge man-made reservoir, sits at

the south end of the valley. Its waters are brilliant green and contrast sharply against the bright red shoreline. Numerous boats scooted across the water trailing skiers and tubers. It looked like fun.



The stunning Shasta Lake.

Redding was hot. Actually, it was way beyond hot and had risen to the status of hellish. Surprisingly, the airport ramp was nearly empty. I wondered if we were even supposed to be there. Pritchard was clearly relieved the day had passed with no problems other than the laborious climb out of Bend.

“Hey, you guys are from Canada, right?” said a voice from behind us.

“We sure are,” I responded, turning to see who was asking.

“I thought so. I could tell from the registrations on your planes.” He was an older fellow who had a big smile on his face. He was pretty pleased he pegged us as Canadians. He owned a Van’s RV, he said, and he knew where Vancouver was, but not Calgary.

He saw we were sweating our faces off and said the heat was pretty normal for that time of year.

“Wait right here,” he suddenly announced, “I’ll be right back!” Then he raced off in his golf cart toward a row of hangars. We set to work tying down for the night.

A few moments later he returned with a cold beer for each of us! I had to refuse because I’d soon be driving our rental car, but I sure envied Geoff as he drank his down.

“I haven’t been on the ground ten minutes and I’ve already got a cold beer in my hand!” Pritchard grinned. “I like California!”



Notice the palm trees in the background. We’re both pretty pleased that we’d flown our little airplanes all the way to California!

Day 5

“Tell me again why we live in Calgary, Geoff.”

“I can’t remember,” he replied wistfully, staring at the morning. I couldn’t blame him.

I too stared out at what seemed to be weather perfection. The sky was clear, save for some smoke from a forest fire burning southwest of us. The warm air breezily caressed us while we unstrapped Merl and the Champ. Palm trees lined some of the roads on the way to the airport that morning, and our driver remarked how it was a big deal that a little bit of snow fell in Redding a few years ago. How do they find the strength to go on, I wondered humorously?

Instead of pondering reasons why I should move to California, I figured it best to concentrate on my pre-flight inspection.



Pritchard and his Champ at Redding's Benton Field on an utterly perfect morning.

We soon left Redding behind and turned our planes south into the Sacramento Valley. This was the day we'd been waiting and working for. If all went well we'd finally make it to San Francisco.

The perfection we found on the ground followed us into the sky where a faint wisp of tailwind eased us gently along. The only ripples in the air came from our craft passing through it. This flight was mesmerizing, the stuff of aviator's dreams.

"I'm flying completely hands off, Stu," Pritchard remarked contentedly. "That's never happened before. This is absolutely surreal."

I don't recall what I answered, but do know I didn't have the words to convey my satisfaction with the moment. I was speechless.

The Sacramento River meandered lazily along the valley floor casually doling out its life-giving succour for miles on either side of its banks. It seemed to be running low and I spotted some gravel bars onto which I'd have dearly loved to land Merl.

The wide bottom of the valley showed every shade of green imaginable, with most plots laid out in grid squares, and the rest crammed into every other available corner of land. I reckoned nearly every example of fruit or vegetable you could name was growing somewhere below us. If the Canadian prairie is North America's bread basket, this was certainly the produce aisle.



Geoff's view of the fertile Sacramento Valley.

Bright yellow crop dusters zipped back and forth over the produce below. We could easily pick out the younger, more aggressive pilots just by their hard and steep turns. One guy actually banked beyond the vertical at the end of each pass. The older heads, on the other hand, made gentler, slower turns, knowing the odds stacked higher and higher against them the more they flew near the edge.

I wondered how ag pilots pick out the correct fields to spray. I figured they must use a very sophisticated GPS to get it right. It'd sure be a shame to spray a load of chemical on the wrong crop and end up creating three-headed cucumbers.

Geoff and I set down in Colusa where again the extreme heat bouncing off the runway played cruel and vicious tricks with our

landings. But we were getting used to that, and after the dream-like flight that brought us there, we shrugged it off pretty quickly.

After fuelling, we escaped Colusa's staggering heat and climbed out for our last southward leg of the trip. We passed over more green fields, and towns I'd never heard of before. Places like Arbuckle, Cottonwood and Davis carried on business as usual while we sailed happily overhead. On the land where it was too hilly to plant crops, the golden grass shone as brightly as an Alberta wheat field ready for harvest.



Stu's Merlin getting closer to San Francisco.

We turned southwest near Vacaville, cut across a high ridge, and headed for Napa. I felt a tremendous surge of satisfaction and excitement as I spotted San Francisco's skyscrapers poking up through the distant fog.

Yee, ha! We actually made it!

We passed Sonoma and its wine country next. I found the airfield where we planned to be tomorrow to see all the vintage aircraft based there. But our destination now was Gness Field at the town of Novato. The airport is very close to the town, and both are a few minutes north of San Francisco.

Ten minutes later Gness Field appeared. The AWOS reported the wind as calm. According to the flight guide we were to use runway 13 in calm winds, so I began setting up for the correct approach.

“Gness Field traffic,” I announced, “Merlin Charlie India Delta Delta November, plus one, is currently five miles east descending out of 2500’ for the left-hand downwind for runway 13.”

“I’m at your six o’clock and a hundred yards back, Stu,” Pritchard informed me.

“Rog, thanks.”



Turning the Merlin onto final approach at Novato, CA, just north of San Francisco.

We flew the pattern (the American name for the circuit) and as I turned final I warned Geoff to watch out for sea gulls circling at a landfill about 1/3 of a mile north of the runway. Wouldn't that be great; to die in a dump after a bird strike. I touched down with another less than pristine landing, but I didn't care. I'd just flown my own plane to San Francisco!

Smiling hard, I taxied to a tie-down spot and looked out to see the Champ way too high on the approach.

“Gness traffic,” Geoff called, “the Champ is going around for runway 13.” He sounded stressed but I knew he'd nail it on the next approach. He got caught in a huge thermal over the garbage dump, which put him way too high for a safe approach and landing. As expected, he landed safely on the next try, then taxied in and shut down.



Geoff and the Champs taxi triumphantly on the ramp at Novato.

After congratulating each other for actually having flown this far, we tied our planes down and arranged for our rental car. We met the airport manager who used to teach flying in a place called Leadville, Colorado. Leadville's at 9900'. It'd be murder to get a Cessna 172 airborne from there on a hot summer day!

"Yup," he recalled, "there were some days we just couldn't go."

We got our rental car and went looking for our hotel in San Rafael. It turned out to be a dump next to another dumpy hotel in a warehouse district crawling with bums and hookers. We cancelled there and found much better rooms in Novato near the airport. After some dinner we headed into San Francisco for a quick look around.

What an epic experience for Geoff and I; we were on the Golden Gate Bridge at the edge of the Pacific Ocean on a beautiful summer evening having flown our little airplanes – a so-called "ultra-light", and a 66-year old Champ - all the way from Calgary! How could I top, or even match, something like that?

We spent an hour or so driving around and exploring the heart of the city and some of the suburbs. San Francisco is magnificently alive and just teeming with people out and about. The architecture is beautiful and classic. At some moments I thought I'd stepped into a Humphrey Bogart movie, while at other times I wondered how we found ourselves in such a ghetto. The city is extremely diverse and absolutely iconic.

That night in my hotel room I reflected on what Geoff and I had done; about having flown our planes all this way. I felt proud, and a little astonished that we'd actually made it.



Driving on the Golden Gate Bridge after having flown our planes - an ultralight and a 46-year old Aeronca - from Calgary to San Francisco!

Oh, sure, you can make all the factual and statistical arguments you like about how we'd be expected to make it if our planes were in good condition, if we had enough time, and if the weather allowed us to pass. But each of us felt an intensely personal satisfaction in being there. We'd spread our wings, conquered a bit of the sky and flown farther than we'd ever flown before. It might not be much to some, but it meant a hell of a lot to us.

Now all we had to do was get home.

Day 6

This wasn't a flying day, but was still very much an aviation day. We visited the Sonoma Skypark, also known as Schelville among vintage airplane buffs. It's a Mecca of vintage aircraft, and Saturday morning is when the owners open their hangars and roll out their planes.

Pritchard is also a huge vintage aircraft buff. Along with his Champ, Geoff owns a 1930 Fleet 2B biplane. He's tied in quite well with other vintage aircraft aficionados and speaks fluently their unique and ancient language.

We saw so many rare and obscure airplanes that we could hardly believe it. And these were planes that were either flying or on their way to flying.

For instance, there was a Monocoupe dating from 1933. It flew away for a while and then returned around lunch time.



A Monocoupe at Schelville.

A Fairchild 24R occupied a hangar loaded with nearly two dozen Ranger engines arranged on the floor, not to mention the dozens and dozens of aircraft carburetors, instruments and other parts that lined the walls and display cases in the hangar. The owner, Richard Ramos a gentle and generous man, was a wonderful, welcoming host to us.

Richard and Geoff became fast friends and spent nearly two hours talking and touring different hangars together that morning. They each seemed to have found a long lost buddy in one another. For every subject that came up, one or the other had some level of knowledge about it. What they didn't know, they completely enjoyed learning from the other. It was magical to watch.



Richard Ramos and his Fairchild 24

For some of the morning a Ryan STA was flying aerobatics above the field. It's pilot has owned it since 1962! Another Ryan monoplane, this one an SC-W, was just down the taxiway. Only twelve were ever made. It originally came with a Warner Scarab radial engine, but this one had been redone with a Continental E-185 and a pressure cowling. It was simply one of the most appealing airplanes I've ever laid eyes on. It also flew for a while that day.



A Ryan SC-W, with a Continental E-185 engine instead of a radial.

There was a collection of warbirds, like the P-40 that was giving rides; the AT-6 Texan that flew twice when we were there; the P-51 that sat on the ramp and oversaw the two Stearmans that were also hopping passengers.

One hangar possessed a Grumman F3F biplane undergoing a nearly completed restoration that was apparently “top secret”, or so said the owner. People in there were a little pretentious so we didn’t stay long in that hangar.

There’s also a Lockheed PV2 and an old Douglas DST. The DST, or Douglas Sleeper Transport, was the immediate predecessor to the DC-3. But this one was an actual, and very rare, DST and certified as such! It, and the PV2 haven’t flown in decades, but they seem to be remarkably well preserved as compared to similarly inactive airplanes that we see in western Canada’s climate.

Visiting Sonoma/Schelvile was a fantasy come true for Geoff, and it was very reluctantly that we left there that day. The place really is a field of dreams.

Day 7

Pritchard and I spent Sunday bopping around San Francisco proper. But I’ll skip all that because this is a flying story. The important part of the day as far as aviation is concerned, came after we left the city.



Pritchard and one of San Francisco's iconic street cars.

We returned to Gness Field to check our planes, fuel up and give them a hug. It was there we met Mark O'Neill. Mark is a former USAF tanker pilot and test pilot who flies a corporate twin Cessna while he waits for an airline job to open up. He also runs the fuel operation on Gness.

We got talking to him as we fuelled. He was very interested in our airplanes and appreciative of our adventure. We thoroughly enjoyed his company and knew we'd made a new friend. We also enjoyed getting our heads back into our airplanes again, and starting to think about beginning our flight back.

Day 8

Time to leave San Francisco, time to start heading home. But that didn't mean our adventure was over. Not by a long shot.

Gross Field was socked in that morning, though we could see the edge of the overcast several miles away. This is typical San Francisco weather in July. After we loaded and pre-flighted, we got talking again with Mark O'Neill. He and Geoff discussed vintage aircraft.

"If you're into old airplanes," said Mark, "There's someone you have *got* to meet. I'll bet he's over at his hangar, too."

The sky said we weren't going anywhere for a while, so we all crammed into the cab of Mark's fuel bowser and headed across the runway to the far southeast corner of the field. There, Mark introduced us to John LeNoue.

John was the one who built the Vickers Vimy replica that from 1994 through 2005 recreated several record setting flights from the post-World War I era. He lead the team that constructed the plane, which took 25,000 man hours over a year and a half.

In 1994 the reincarnated Vimy embarked on its first big journey from London to Sydney, the original flight of which took place in 1919. Then, the team, including John as one of the pilots, flew the Vimy replica from London to Cape Town, South Africa, replicating a 1920 odyssey. National Geographic made this flight the subject of an extensive magazine article.

Finally, John's Vimy re-enacted one of the most famous flights in history when it re-traced the footsteps of John Alcock and Arthur Whitten Brown, who in 1919 were the first to fly the Atlantic Ocean non-stop. It was Steve Fossett and Mark Rebholz at the controls on the re-creation flight.

Right away John impressed us. Firstly, he stopped his busy day just to talk to a couple of wandering aviators he didn't even know. Secondly, since Geoff and I have both built airplanes, we knew what an enormous undertaking it must have been building a behemoth like the

Vimy. And finally, based on our own airborne journeys, we had an inkling, just an inkling, of what John and his crew mates might have endured on their Africa flight.

“Where are you guys from?” John asked, after introductions.

“We’re from Calgary, in Canada,” Geoff responded.

“Okay, I know where that is.”

“We’re on a flying adventure,” I chimed in, and I told him about our flight.

“What are you flying?” he asked.

“Geoff’s got a Champ and I have a homebuilt,” I said. “It’s called a Merlin. It’s very much like an Aeronca Chief.”

“And you guys flew here from Canada?”

“Sure did,” I replied.

John looked at both of us in turn, then without a word, simply nodded his head.

We knew in that instant that he got it, that he understood what we were doing and why. For Pritchard and me, it was an unforgettable moment and connection.

John showed us around his hangar, where on the wall hung one of the props from the Vimy replica. He walked to a box on a pallet and returned with two slab shaped cardboard boxes a little over a foot square. In each was a stunning coffee table book entitled, “The Vimy Expeditions”. The book documents the exploits of both the original Vimy and the replica John constructed. The book is simply breathtaking. He very graciously signed each copy for us.



John Lenoue signs a copy of "The Vimy Expeditions" for Geoff and I.

John took us to another hangar where he was building a replica of the Ryan NYP, better known as the Spirit of St. Louis. The beautiful one-piece wooden wing hung from the rafters varnished and uncovered. There's a group that aims to replicate Charles Lindbergh's famous flight. I reckon they came to the right guy to build their plane.

We said goodbye to John and went with Mark to the hangar that keeps the airplane he flies. It's a Cessna 414, a large and very capable twin with a thoroughly modern panel. It was a treat to crawl around in it and enter a world so different from our own cockpits.

What incredible good fortune to have met Mark and John. Our morning with them was a perfect, almost dreamlike ending to our time in San Francisco.



Mark O'Neill and Geoff at Novato.

As you can imagine, we left Novato on an absolute high. Quickly outrunning any lingering fog and low cloud, we turned north to travel back up the Sacramento Valley. It felt good and natural to be back in the air with the stick at hand and some sky beneath us. It's where we belonged.

We were headed to Red Bluff, California, just a little south of Redding. The heat climbed constantly as we made our way north. The patchwork of green crops below contrasted very sharply with the surrounding desert.

We had some big trouble landing at Red Bluff. Once again, the staggering heat reflecting from the pavement caused each of us to float quite a distance down the runway. Then Geoff nearly destroyed his airplane.

When he touched down, a violent vibration overtook the rudder pedals. The tail-wheel shimmied like hell and Geoff suddenly had no steering control! In a split second the Champ careened off the runway heading for the weeds. Pritchard frantically braked to gain some semblance of control and managed to bring his plane to a stop just a few feet from a deep ditch in the desert scrub. Badly shaken and with his heart

pounding, Pritchard gingerly taxied the Champ to the ramp and shut down.

When we inspected the tailwheel we saw that the right side steering control arm had bent upward nearly 90 degrees from its correct position, and the steering chain, though still connected, hung limply between it and the rudder horn. The tail-wheel shimmy bent the arm, but what caused the shimmy? We figured it was a result of the sun-stoked turbulence we encountered just above the runway.

The bent steering arm was real trouble. Bending it back could easily snap it off, depending on the type and hardness of the metal. But leaving it bent would almost certainly spell disaster on the next landing, especially if there was a crosswind or turbulence.



The bent steering control arm on the Champ; a very serious problem.

What about replacing the part? Not a big deal, so long as we could get one. We had no idea if we could, or where to even start looking. We also had no idea what we'd do if a broken airplane trapped us in Red Bluff.

At this point, my mantra of conducting flying adventures as much as possible on weekdays paid off. An aircraft maintenance shop sat just a couple of hundred yards away. The doors were open, and guys were working on airplanes. We headed down the ramp

The staggering heat and the apprehension we felt made a hundred yards seem like a mile, but we soon found salvation. We spoke to one of the engineers and he assured us that we could bend the arm back

to the correct geometry without it snapping. This time, anyway. Of course, the more we bent it the more apt it was to break. Then he generously offered us a couple of large wrenches to use.

We trudged back to the Champ with some new hope, and bent down to work. But when we knelt down the scorching pavement burned our knees through our pants! We awkwardly crouched and finally positioned the wrenches just so. We each held our breath as Geoff gingerly levered the arm back down.



It was the best we could do and we could only hope it would be enough. We returned the tools, said a huge thank you to the engineer who loaned them, and spun up for our next leg.

Climbing north out of Red Bluff we hitched a ride on the afternoon thermals, going ever higher to get past the towering peaks ahead. At 7500' after having traversed the length of the Shasta Valley, we again shook hands with the mighty volcano Shasta and flew steadily on.

More places that we'd never heard of floated by beneath us. Hornbrook, Yreka, and Montague all went by; and of course, there was Weed, which made me laugh again.

Two hours after leaving Red Bluff we touched down in Medford in 33 degree heat. We didn't have as much trouble this time with the landing and Geoff's tailwheel held together.

The Medford Air Center gave us an unbelievable welcome. We only bought about 20 gallons of gas between us, but the staff there treated us like we bought 200! We got a golf cart ride from our planes to the office - which really meant something in that heat - and I even got to ride in a '57 Chevy to the car rental office! There are a lot of companies who could learn a lot from these people.

Day 9

Once again Medford Air Center treated us like gold as we made ready to depart. Vancouver, Washington was the destination today, just across the Columbia River from Portland. It looked like it would be a couple of easy legs and then an enjoyable afternoon exploring the city.

Apparently, this day had other plans for us.

We took off into a perfect blue morning with a light tailwind and beautiful mountains all around. We turned west, following the highway toward Grants Pass. It was a few miles north of there that our plans began to fall apart.

An ocean-spawned mist was building in. I think the locals call it a marine layer. I call it a pain in the butt.



The low, wispy clouds north of Grant's Pass, OR, just before things started to sock in.

Low, wispy clouds sheathed the mountain tops in gentle looking tendrils of white. But utter ruin awaited any pilot who tried to challenge that deceptive appearance. By the time we reached Wolf Creek Pass,

it was pretty evident we'd not be going much further without an IFR rating. This was really disappointing and frustrating.

"Geoff, I think we're going to have to set down," I radioed, reluctantly.

"Roger that. Are you thinking of Roseburg?" he queried back. It was our best choice due to its size and location.

"Ya, I think we can make it. It looks like we can get under this stuff and get in there. Let's begin our descent."

"Okay, I'll drop in behind you."

The main part of the weather had a clearly discernible boundary to it, which we were rapidly approaching. Another few miles and we'd be on top of it, instead of below, where we could still see the ground. The mountain peaks that showed on both my map and my GPS were out there, hidden in those deadly clouds. I didn't need any more convincing. I pulled on the carb heat, pulled off the throttle and started on down.

As we descended, weaving our way through the valley approaching Roseburg, the air took on a distinctly humid smell, and the moisture was palpable. Just after I made the radio call that we were five miles back and inbound for the runway, my engine stumbled from carb ice. It lasted less than a second, but it had precisely the same effect as someone belching in church. You simply can't miss it.

"Geoff, I just got some carb ice, so be sure your carb heat is on."

"Oh, ya," he responded, "mine's on full."

Mine was, too, but I still pulled a again on the control knob, foolishly trying to add just a little more heat.

We got a nasty surprise below the cloud layer. My GPS showed the headwind with this system at about 20 mph. Terrific. And we still had 180 miles to fly today.

Merl's engine purred perfectly while we sailed down the remainder of the approach into Roseburg. My landing was even good. Geoff's was, too, because he made a wheel landing instead of a three-point touchdown. He reported that this technique really helped, and that he got no tail-wheel shimmy. The cloud cover helped, as well, preventing a blast furnace from coming at us off the runway.

Despite the delay, unexpected treasures continued to adorn our adventure. At Roseburg we discovered a Piper Cub painted in World War II desert camouflage and military markings. The owners were a father and son on their own air adventure. This weather also stranded them in Roseburg.



Father and son (sorry, I didn't get their names) had flown their Cub all the way from San Antonio, Texas. That's one hell of a trip for two guys and a Cub. Both of them were slim with smaller statures which helped the Cub's performance a little bit. The Cub also sported a Continental A-75, which gave it a little extra horsepower than standard. Still, they knew they had to keep the weight down, so they packed lightly.

"We each only brought two changes of clothes," Dad told me. "We've been washing the other change each night in the hotel."

And it turns out their plane wasn't technically a Cub.

"You know what an L-4 is?" Dad asked me.

"I sure do." It was the US Army's version of the Cub during World War II. The Army used it for battlefield observation, air ambulance and liaison duties. It cruised about 65 or 70 mph.

“Well, that’s an L-4,” he declared. “In fact, it’s the last L-4 to roll off the assembly line. I’ve got the paperwork to prove it, too.” I was impressed. That made it a pretty unique airplane, indeed.

Dad was a retired commercial pilot and his son a recent hire as a first officer with Alaska Airlines. The airline had just assigned him to Portland, so he and Dad were moving the plane up there. They planned to make Vancouver today, same as us.

Dad and Junior were also frustrated with the wind, they said. I felt for them. A 20 mph headwind affected those guys a lot more than it affected Merl and the Champ. I tried to take some solace from the fact that it could be worse for us. It helped for a couple of minutes, anyway.

Geoff and I grabbed the courtesy car and headed to town for an early lunch. When we got back to the field, the camo Cub was gone. I wondered if we’d see them again.

The clouds had lifted enough for us to head out, but the visibility was still only six or eight miles. This was another frustration to add to the day’s growing list. I had really been looking forward to the Willamette Valley leading to Portland. I didn’t think I’d be seeing much of it.



Cruising up the Willamette Valley to get to Portland and fighting a 20 mph headwind all the way.

This was a bit of a downer day for me; they happen on long expeditions. I didn’t like feeling the way I was feeling, especially since my frustration was over something I could do absolutely nothing about.

The Calgary area had exceptionally poor weather all spring – lots of rain and wind. One of the reasons I suggested Pritchard and I fly this trip in July was because that's when the weather begins calming. Not so this year. It seemed the poor conditions were tracking us almost everywhere we flew on this trip.

Being a pilot means dealing with the weather. I get that completely. I guess I was just tired of dealing so frequently with weather that was against us. I was also missing my family a lot, and feeling guilty for being gone so long. I hadn't been away from them for such a lengthy period before this trip.

We flew over Creswell, where I'd originally planned to make our first stop for the day. As we passed the airport, I called Pritchard.

"Hey, Geoff, that Cub is down there on the ground. I can see it at the fuel pumps."

Silence for a few seconds. Then, "Oh, ya, I see it, too."

"Man, those guys have balls," I remarked.

"Can you imagine?" Geoff asked rhetorically, "All the way from Texas."

"It's not too much different from what we're doing," I said, "They're just doing it a bit slower. Okay, a lot slower."

A little over an hour out of Roseburg, we left the mountains behind and found ourselves over Eugene. We should have planned a stop here, because it looked like a very nice city, one that'd be very enjoyable to explore.

We flew on, fighting 20 to 30 mph on the nose no matter what altitude we picked. The thermals and mechanical turbulence continually kicked us in the teeth. The visibility was maybe eight miles in haze, and it was hot. Sweat dripped continually down my face and I worried about our fuel. I assure you, this was work.

The ATIS and AWOS stations I dialled in all reported high temperatures, but calm winds on the ground, and what they called 'unrestricted visibility'. What on earth do they mean by 'unrestricted visibility'? I asked myself. I tried to pass it off as the automated systems simply getting it wrong, but some of the data came from human observations. Was visibility in this region normally so bad that six or eight miles qualified as unrestricted? If that's so, the pilots here

must lose their minds when they can actually see twenty miles down the road.

I concluded we'd run out of gas if we didn't stop for fuel. The headwind and the distance we had yet to cover made that fact inescapable. We decided on Albany, and again Geoff reported a good landing by using the wheel landing technique rather than three-point. This day was a fight, and an unpleasant one at that, but we were winning. Slowly.

Portland would be our next big challenge, nearly 80 miles away. There's some pretty complex airspace around there and I wanted to be sure to do things correctly. We droned on through the afternoon, the visibility staying the same and the wind, too, still strong on the nose.

About 25 miles back from Portland I called the approach frequency and told them of our intentions. The controller vectored us toward Beaverton, a Portland suburb on the southwest side of a large ridge separating the two cities. The ridge was littered with large radio towers reaching up for us. Then another problem arose.

As we got closer to the built-up urban area of Portland my radio started acting up. I could hear the controller okay, but my transmissions to him were almost completely unreadable! This was absolutely infuriating for me, and more than a little embarrassing. I have no idea why it happened, because my radio normally works very well. Earlier in the trip I talked with Darren Scarlett when he was 80 miles away.

"Experimental Delta Delta November, plus one," the controller called, "turn right, now, and head directly toward the center of the airport."

"Roger that. We'll head toward the airport," I tried.

"Experimental Delta Delta November you're nearly unreadable. Head directly toward the airport, not below two thousand five hundred. If you copy, squawk ident now." I pushed the button on my transponder. Why was my radio so troublesome?!

"Experimental Delta Delta November, I got your squawk," the controller said. "You'll see a 737 on approach for 28 left. He won't be a factor."

Along with my radio troubles the headwind we fought wasn't helping our case much, either. Controllers like airplanes to move quickly and we were by far the slowest things he'd likely seen in a while. But I've got to hand it to this guy, he was a pro. He was patient and stuck with

the routine of having me squawk with the transponder to acknowledge his instructions.

We passed over top of PDX as passenger jets large and small took off and landed on the parallel runways below. Then the controller finally vectored us into a descent and on to a long final for Vancouver's runway 26.



Downtown Portland, Oregon.

Pritchard and I switched frequencies and set up for landing. We really got our teeth kicked in on final approach from all the wind and the thermal activity. The last quarter mile of the approach put us right over top of a scorching shopping mall parking lot. Once past that little rodeo, I intentionally landed long so as not to crowd Geoff on his landing. He had quite a crosswind to contend with.



Short final at Vancouver, Washington. The shopping centre right in front of us creates enormous thermal turbulence in the hot afternoon.

Our flying day was finally over, four hours later than planned. There was no love lost as I kissed it goodbye.

Day 10

Fog and low cloud shrouded the airport when we arrived, but it was burning off quickly. And we found a pleasant surprise awaiting us, too. The Cub we saw in Roseburg had made it to its new home. Geoff and I were both very happy to see it on the ramp just a few parking spots away.



The Cub we saw at Roseburg tied down beside Geoff's plane at Vancouver.

We killed some time fuelling, and Pritchard disposed of the oil he'd drained from his engine yesterday after landing. His Continental C-85 lacks an oil filter so he has to change his oil every 25 hours. He was within minutes of the allotted time when we landed the day before.

The weather steadily improved and I was in a much better mood, too. There was still some haze and low cloud when we took off, but it was dissipating quickly as we turned north along the Columbia River. We passed a Coast Guard helicopter going the opposite way, its orange, black and white colours glowing brightly in the morning sun.

It was a brilliant morning to be up flying. Numerous meadows and hay fields ambled by below us, calling out to our little tail draggers, inviting us to land. Our planes' designers had just those kinds of fields in mind when they started thinking about Champs and Merlins. We sincerely wanted to oblige the invitation, just to exercise the special freedom that such rugged airplanes offer. Instead, though, we flew on.



Making our way toward Seattle on a brilliant summer morning.

The only irritant on the day was once again the wind, which hit us on the nose once more at 25 mph. Knowing that flying against the wind wouldn't last as long today, I had a much better frame of mind about it.

We passed one town after another, their citizens busy with the day, getting things done, making plans for tomorrow and next week. As we passed each little community, I could hardly wait to see the next one.

What is it that makes some men want to wander while others are content to stay put? Why do some continually seek what's around the

next turn, or over the next mountain? Is there ever enough for people like that; for people like Pritchard and me? I suppose that deep down we know we'll never catch the horizon. As for me, I don't want to catch it. I just want to see what's on the other side of it. And someday, I just might.

Seattle beckoned from the distance, but we weren't going to make it against this wind. Not without some extra gas, anyway. We landed at Centralia – Chehalis airport, topped off and lit out once more. We were heading into the busiest airspace in this part of the world.

And busy it was! We had to avoid a military operational area south of Seattle, then enter the Mode C veil surrounding SeaTac airport and make our way up the east side of Seattle's airspace.



Stu concentrates on flying in the busy Seattle airspace.

My radio was acting up the whole time, too, just like it did yesterday in Portland. For some infuriating reason whenever I got over a large American urban area my radio would become nearly unreadable. I was able to hear the tower just fine, but they couldn't get any readable transmission from me. I value professionalism and this was hardly professional. I think the problem has something to do with the intense concentration of other radio signals in these urban areas. Strange that it doesn't happen in the Calgary area.

The controller was a really good fellow, though, and like his colleague in Portland, allowed me to acknowledge his transmissions by squawking my ident.

At one point the controller called out some traffic of a Canadair Challenger whose call sign was Flight Check and who was five miles west of us at our altitude. I think these are the planes the FAA uses to check the calibration of nav aids around airports on a regular basis. Transport Canada does the same thing. The Challenger reported he had us in sight, then proceeded to buzz us! He passed so close behind us that Geoff and I took evasive action to avoid this idiot! If he missed us by 200 feet, I'd be surprised.

We continued up the east side of Seattle fighting the turbulence from the afternoon heat and trying to stay within our altitude bracket. The city and its suburbs splayed out all around us, jammed between the ocean and the mountains. I've seen Seattle this way before, but the metro area's sheer enormity still amazed me.

After an hour of flying over Seattle's surrounding suburbs, Snohomish Harvie Field finally appeared and we began our descent. The controller cleared us to change frequencies and told us to remain VFR. We switched over to Harvie's frequency, flew the circuit and landed.

"That was the most intense hour of flying I've ever done!" Geoff declared when we met at the pumps. "I was stuck in formation with you like glue." He feared we'd get separated and then he'd have to find me in controlled airspace with my bad radio.

We also exchanged how angry we were at the Flight Check goof who buzzed us. I suspect he set off all sorts of proximity alarms in the tower by pulling such a stupid stunt.

We taxied to the transient tie downs and unloaded our gear. The temperature easily hit the mid-30s and the humidity was ridiculous. I was soaked with sweat by the time we lugged all our luggage back to the airport office.

A half hour later, though, with a rental car in hand we set out to explore Seattle for the next day and a half, and all the aviation related offerings it had for us.

Day 11

We spent this day as airplane tourists, which was fun. Our first stop was at The Flying Heritage Collection Museum, a living flight museum featuring fighters from World War II, including a P-40, P-47, P-51, an

FW-190, ME-109, Me-163 rocket plane, and so, so many more. Many of these airplanes are actually airworthy and fly occasionally.

Across the field is the Historic Flight Foundation, featuring an F7F Tigercat, F8F Bearcat, a Spitfire, a Staggerwing; and my favourite, a DeHavilland Beaver. Then we hooked up with one of the museum's docents who graciously allowed us access to a B-25 out on the ramp. Museum staff were getting ready to fly it to the Arlington air show the next day. That was an incredible treat for both of us.



Geoff and a very rare Grumman F8F Bearcat. It still flies occasionally.

We also visited the Seattle Museum of Flight's annex building, where numerous airplanes are on display and under restoration. All these museum are on Everett Field. They are the museums the Rocket Man spoke of in Bend.

It was an astounding contrast to stare at history reaching back 70 or more years, then step outside, look across the street and see dozens of Boeing airplanes that are among the most modern in the sky. 787s, 777s, 767s and 747s, littered the ramps around us.

We then drove to the Museum of Flight on Boeing Field, where I left Geoff to his own devices for a couple of hours while I toured around the field proper. I also visited the gift shop which has the best collection of aviation books and videos that I've ever seen. I was pretty proud to look at the shelves and realize that my personal collection pretty closely matched the stuff I saw there.

By the time we sat down for dinner on the waterfront, we'd been completely saturated in airplanes. Aviation tourism is the best kind of tourism.



A brand new Boeing 777 at Everett's Paine Field, home of Boeing Aircraft.

Day 12

Weather set us back, again. We arrived at the field to look up at low scuddy cloud, rain, mist and a series of thunderstorms moving in. The thing is, the cells, which were loud and very close, were moving from southeast to northwest. I've been a weather watcher since I was a teenager and I've never seen thunderstorms move that way. I don't know, maybe it's pretty common around there.



Waiting out the weather at Harvie Field.

After a three hour delay, things had improved enough for us to head out. The sky was still well overcast, but the ceiling had risen to about 1300'. Visibility was up to near eight miles. We rolled down runway 15 on our last sea level take off. Even heavily loaded, our planes jumped into the sky at the low elevation and cool temperature.

We set a course southeast through a broad valley to intercept I-90, the road we'd follow through the Snoqualmie Pass. We flew over a bright blue prison and lush green forests as light rain fell down on us. Geoff and I kept a close lookout for planes headed the opposite direction to Arlington. The marginal weather forced us to dodge the odd low cloud and stay over the lower parts of the valley.

"This cloud is pretty low, Stu," Geoff said, sounding worried.

"It's well over a thousand above ground level, and it's rising with the terrain. You okay if we give it a little longer?" I asked.

"Roger that," Pritchard replied, sounding less than enthused.

I was pretty confident we'd be okay. Previous flights through this area showed that the weather improved as we got closer to the pass. There were a couple of airfields on the route we could use if needed, and the cloud ceiling was definitely rising with the terrain.

At Fall City we flew over the Snoqualmie Falls, which tower 280 feet. Funny how I'd missed them all the other times I'd flown this way. Even from a thousand feet in the air, they were spectacular. I really wanted to land and visit them up close.

We intercepted I-90 and headed into the mouth of the pass as mountain walls closed in from either side. Geoff was still apprehensive and I couldn't blame him. The weather wasn't getting much better, but it also wasn't getting much worse.



Tracking I-90 toward the Snoqualmie Pass in some marginal weather.

Patches of blue sky showed up every now and then, and the ceiling, evidently only a few hundred feet deep, was still okay. Visibility had dropped to about four miles, though.

The weather was still okay for Merl and the Champ, but it was nibbling at our limits. In 15 miles, or so, we'd either be through the pass or headed back to where we came from.

We flew on, scraping through the lower cloud bottoms, which seemed to be breaking up a bit. More and more blue leaked through and patches of sunlight dappled the mountain sides giving them, ironically enough, a somewhat camouflaged look.

Finally, two miles back from the pass, as the road really started to climb, the weather broke. We banked around the Snoqualmie Summit and stared into brilliant sunshine and a wide, flat valley heading east. Geoff was very relieved, and I was really glad we didn't have to turn around.

We drifted ever higher, chasing thermals again, searching for height. Whiskey Dick Mountain sat about 40 miles ahead and we needed about 6000' to cross it and get to Ephrata. It's an old bomber training base from World War II. We'd land there, get some gas and scoot east to Sandpoint, Idaho, for the night.

Where we really wanted to go was Castlegar and Nelson, in southern BC. My dad's in Castlegar, and Pritchard used to live in Nelson. But if we flew there today the coming weather would cage us in for days. Those places rest in very deep, narrow valleys and the odds were pretty high that the forecast weather for the next few days would leave us utterly trapped there. I had previous experience getting out of Castlegar in bad weather and didn't care to repeat it.

Instead, Sandpoint is in a broad, low valley and joins another low valley leading to Cranbrook. Our chances of making it through in that direction were infinitely better.

Once we cleared the mountain ridge we stayed high to combat the heat of the desert down below. Ephrata's AWOS claimed a temperature on the ramp in the high 30s with high humidity, too. How odd to have such humidity in the middle of a desert. Quite frankly, I took it as an omen, an evil omen, of the weather to come.

Geoff nearly lost control again on landing as the tail wheel shimmied uncontrollably until he slowed enough for it to stop. The steering arm we'd straightened in California was bent once more, and we both knew instinctively that it'd snap off should we try to bend it back. Geoff would simply have to do his best and stay off the tail and on the brakes as much as possible.

I don't recall ever having experienced heat and humidity like we had in Ephrata that day. Fuelling up was simply hell on earth. After that I spent half an hour replacing a fuse in my GPS' power circuit. I spun Merl around to an angle where the wing would provide some shade while I made the repair. My God, it was hot; utterly knackered!



Making minor repairs to Merl at Ephrata, Washington. The heat was absolutely stifling.

We shuffled to the airport lounge for a cool drink of water and a respite from the sun. After we pottied and filled our water bottles, I turned to Pritchard;

"You want to sit in here for a while and cool off?" Up till now he was strangely quiet here, but I put it down to his concern over the Champ's tail wheel.

"No," he said quickly and firmly, "Let's get the hell out of here." I was taken aback and it showed. "There are too many ghosts here," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"Too many kids left here and never came home," he said somberly. I understood and appreciated his sensitivity. This was a former WWII bomber training strip. We headed back to our planes, fired up, and continued east.

As we flew on, the world again transformed beneath us, switching steadily back to fertile farmland and then low alpine mountains near Spokane. We crossed over Deer Park, then Priest River, and soon angled north for the last few miles into Sandpoint.

Sandpoint was every bit as hellishly hot and humid as Ephrata. We laboured again with fuelling, unloading and tying down. A terrific kid named Darren, who was the assistant airport manager, drove us the short distance to our hotel. Formerly a California surfer, he decided to

give aviation a try and found he was really enjoying the experience. Darren was a very welcome saviour at the end of a long, long day.

Day 13

Sometimes it sucks being right, especially about the weather. The omen I'd felt in Ephrata had proven accurate. Thunderstorms rattled through the night and well into the morning. Low wispy clouds tore at the tree tops in and around Sandpoint, and a hard rain fell. We resigned ourselves to another day of being weathered out.

After breakfast, when the rain had eased, I walked to the airport to get some exercise and to see if we could rent a car for the day. But as I got closer to the field, it seemed the clouds were breaking up a bit. I decided to wait on the car and instead used the computer in the airport building to monitor the weather.

An hour later things were good and getting better. We could fly. Darren very kindly lent me his truck so I could collect Geoff and all our gear. In short order we prepped our planes to the point where all we had to do was spin the props and be gone. Then we ran into another delay.

Of course, we were about to cross the border back into Canada. Thus, we each had to file a flight plan, and then a border crossing notification with the Canada Border Services Agency. I fully understand and support these measures. The problem came in having to wait on hold for 15 minutes to even begin filing a flight plan. Then the very well-meaning briefer insisted on telling me the weather that I knew better than he did because I'd read it countless times already that morning. Then Geoff had to file his own flight plan, but at least we could use the same briefer.

Next it was a call to the Canada Border Services Agency. Another wait on hold, then two more individual filings for crossing. Our agent was very good at her job, though, and once we got underway things went smoothly. All tolled, the phone filings cost us more than three quarters of an hour.



Some of the weather we skirted as we made our way north to the Canadian border.

We said our goodbyes and a sincere thanks to Darren, and headed out to the planes. We took off heading north, and forty minutes later the Porthill border strip slipped beneath us as we crossed back into Canada. It was good to have northern Idaho to our rudders.

I glanced west at the Kootenay Pass, one of two choices that would have been available to us for getting out of Castlegar. The violent morass of clouds chewing on the mountain tops instantly justified flying to Sandpoint, instead. We wouldn't have had a chance at Castlegar.

Nonetheless, we were back in Canada, and within a day of home. At least now, if we had any problems we'd have them in our home country and within driving distance to Calgary. With that realization in mind the ride to Cranbrook was a little better. But as we worked our way closer, I started to worry.

Thick clouds crowded the northern sky and more seemed to be spilling from the east over the mountains and down into the Columbia Valley. How bad was it on the other side of those mountains in the Elk Valley and Crowsnest Pass? We wouldn't be sleeping at home tonight if they were locked up. What about north; might that way be an option? I'd have to do some pretty careful weather investigation after we touched down.



Worsening weather near Cranbrook, BC.

We landed, did our customs thing and got fuelled as quickly as possible. We walked to the passenger terminal to get an internet connection for checking weather. Oh, boy, it didn't look good. A 15-mile wide circle of good weather sat over Cranbrook. Beyond that circle it was crap. A series of highway cameras showed intermittently good cloud ceilings in the Elk Valley and the Crowsnest Pass, and then the clouds would be nearly down to the ground again a few minutes later. Anywhere north toward Invermere was simply terrible and shut down to us completely.

We faced a maddening dilemma. At times the Elk Valley and Crowsnest looked passable, but what if it socked in while we were flying through? We'd have no back door, no means of escape. What were the chances it would close in during the twenty or thirty minutes it would take us to get from one end to the other? I suddenly became acutely aware of all the 'gotta get home' crash stories I'd ever heard.

"How's it look, partner?" Geoff asked, peering over my shoulder.

"Piss poor, actually," I replied in frustration. "There's maybe a chance we can make it through the Elk Valley and the Crowsnest. Once we're through, we'd have to head to Pincher Creek for gas because we won't make it north along the Cowboy Trail, that's for sure. From Pincher, it's pretty low, flat terrain north to home. But it all depends on what's in the Elk Valley."

Geoff pondered my remarks for a moment, then: "What do you want to do?"

Good question, I thought. A look out the window revealed that the clouds were still spilling over the mountains into the Columbia Valley. It was a pretty strong indication of what lay on the other side in the Elk. But there just might be a chance.

If we went to have a look, could we turn around if we needed to do so? Yes, I decided. The Columbia Valley between Cranbrook and the mouth of the Elk had remained clear enough for visual flying all day, and the Elk Valley was broad enough, even down low, that our little planes' tight turning radius' could get us around and headed the other way if we had to run. There was also an airstrip at Elko, right at the mouth of the Elk Valley, that we could use if things got really bad down in that direction.

"I want to go have a look," I said, finally. I explained my logic to Pritchard, and he agreed it was worth a peek. He wanted to get home, too.

As we saddled up, a nearby Cessna 182 was also turning over. He radioed his intentions to the tower, taxied out and took off. A few minutes later we too were airborne, taking off into some light rain. We angled southeast to track the Columbia Valley toward the mouth of the Elk.

The rain near Cranbrook only lasted about ten minutes, but as we went further the weather looked worse than I first thought. The cloud bank cascading down the mountain slopes to the east had thickened up along our flight path. Tantalizing swatches of blue dotted the sky above us, but patchy gray clouds hovered all around us at our altitude.

As we flew nearer the mouth of the Elk Valley my hopes, fragile to start with, began to crumble even further. The weather was worsening; the clouds were solidifying around us and visibility was dropping slowly, but steadily. I crossed my fingers that things would improve in the Elk, but my guts told me there was no way.

"Traffic in the Elko area, this is Cessna 182 Hotel Lima Tango, approximately ten miles north at 6000 feet. I'm heading toward the Elk Valley. Elko area traffic." This was the 182 that left Cranbrook just before us.

"Hotel Lima Tango," I called, "this is Merlin Delta Delta November, plus one. We're currently about seven miles north of Elko at 4800 feet. We're also headed toward the Elk Valley, but I think you'll get there

before we do. We'd be grateful for a condition report when you get there."

"Okay," he replied, "I'll let you know what I find, but it sure doesn't look good from here."

"Roger that. Thanks." His comment was no surprise. The clouds above were definitely worse and I don't know why he was up that high. We still had reasonable, though slowly diminishing VFR at our height. We flew on, getting closer to our decision point.

As expected, the 182 quickly passed us and the pilot reported poor conditions at his altitude. Just as Pritchard and I turned east into the mouth of the Elk Valley, the 182 pilot made his decision.

"Hotel Lima Tango is turning around and heading back to Cranbrook," he reported.

"Roger that, thanks," I responded. I kept telling myself he was too high, that the weather lower down might be okay.

Geoff had the Champ at my six o'clock as we turned east into the Elk Valley. Ahead, things looked pretty crappy, but still passable, at least up to the sharp corner that's five miles east of the entrance. The valley turns sharply north at that point. We were probably spitting into the wind, but there was still just a slight chance. I wanted to see what was around that corner.

"I guess this pretty much settles it, eh, Stu," called Geoff, sounding more than a little nervous.

"Not quite," I radioed back, "I want to see what's up around that corner ahead. It's just a couple more miles."

We flew deeper into the darkening maw, heading ever closer toward walls of rock and cloud that would force our hand one way or the other. Our altitude was still well above the valley floor, but I moved us more to the right side so there'd be plenty of room for the upcoming turn. Moderate rain fell now, and we cut through low scud coming down off the surrounding peaks. Rain water splashed into Merl's cockpit through every little opening it could find.

"This is getting really bad," Geoff pleaded.

"Just give me thirty more seconds," I said, "then we'll likely make the left-hand one-eighty and get out of here". 'Likely', I'd said. I realized instantly how absurd that sounded. No way were we getting through this garbage.

Sure enough, after what must have seemed an eternity to Pritchard, maybe longer, we came to the corner and I called it. I'd seen what I wanted to see; a gray fortress of cloud and rain piling right down to the ground, filling the valley to the north. I racked Merl into a hard, steep turn.

"Geoff, I'm in the left hand turn, headed back west," I told him.

"Roger. I'm right behind you," he said tensely.



Turning Merl around at the south end of the Elk Valley in impassable weather.

I looked over my left shoulder to see him close on my tail, only a couple hundred feet back, turning just as tightly. Remarkable, I thought, that even in such dark, gray and rainy conditions, that beautiful Champ still practically glowed against the mountain side.

Suddenly, I marvelled at the trust that Geoff had placed in me. He followed me straight into the mouth of a dragon, wanting with everything he had, and wisely so, to turn and run back to the light. But I told him there may be a chance, just the faintest hope, we might slip safely through and go on. So he came with me. And when I ran smack up against the limits, he was right there, too. His faith in me – this day and every day of our adventure - was deeply, deeply humbling.

In seconds, we completed the turn back to a much brighter future in the Columbia Valley. Disappointed and frustrated, but knowing we chose correctly, we returned to YXC. I tried to comfort myself with the improved forecast for tomorrow. We'd get home then, I thought, in one, maybe two, relatively easy legs of flying.

Boy, was I wrong.

Day 14

Each day of the trip I spent numerous hours writing a web log for our fellow flying club members back home. Here's an excerpt;

Day 14

Boys;

This is extremely frustrating. We're stuck here in Cranbrook due to the weather. It's great within ten miles of Cranbrook, but anywhere else is crap. The big problem is all the friggin' heat and moisture in the air which causes the clouds to build up as the air runs into the mountains. It's clogging up the Crowsnest and the route north has cloud right down to the ground at Radium.

There are a bunch of C-180s and C-185s here for a Skywagon convention that ended last night. They want to go in every direction, but they're all stranded, too. I'm spending all my time waiting in the terminal where I can get internet access for the laptop. We can access all the BC highway cameras and all the other weather info we need, too. As frustrating as it is, it sure takes the guesswork out of it.

Things may improve later this afternoon after the current bit of rain and moisture goes through, but there's another one within a couple of hours behind it. Guess we'll just have to wait and see.

Blue Skies,

Stu

We waited, and we saw. We waited until our asses were sore from sitting. We saw the weather either staying the same or getting worse. Two things were certain; we couldn't fly our planes home, and we wouldn't stay another night in Cranbrook. We'd had enough, been gone too long.

I've never left an airplane behind before and I didn't like the thought of it now. But just before noon, we made our decision and started looking for another way to get to Calgary. Geoff learned that a ride out on a Dash 8 cost just shy of \$400.00 each. I called a rental agency and secured a car for a total of \$250.00.

We headed out to Merl and the Champ, which we had earlier unstrapped, loaded up, and gotten ready go. We quickly began reversing all that. As Geoff was tying back down, a pretty blue and white Rans S-6 taxied in to the spot right beside the Champ. I concentrated on my tie down job, but I wondered how far from Cranbrook those guys had gotten before having to turn back.

Pritchard chatted with the Rans pilots and explained how we were stranded. They listened attentively, then one of them said;

"Well, you better take my truck to Calgary, then."

"Wha...? What did you say?" Geoff asked, shocked.

"I'll loan you my truck so you can get back to Calgary," the man repeated casually.

"But you don't even know us," Pritchard exclaimed.

"It's alright," the man said, "pilots don't steal from other pilots."

Utterly floored, Geoff strode over to me and Merl.

"Hey, guess what," he said, "we have a free ride to Calgary."

"What do you mean?" I asked him sceptically. He went on to explain what just happened and how the Rans pilot, Myles, as we soon learned, is the patron saint of general aviation in Cranbrook. He loves helping out other pilots in need.

As Geoff explained things, I too was soon flabbergasted by the gift before us. I quickly cancelled our rental and finished unloading and tying Merl down. Carrying all my gear, I trudged over to meet my new hero, Myles.

Myles Murtack owns Runners RV in Cranbrook, right on the main drag in the city. We drove to the dealership where Myles unloaded a few items from the truck, reluctantly took our contact information, and

turned over the keys to us. We promised we'd be back next weekend to deliver the truck and retrieve our planes.



Myles Murtack trades contact info with Geoff after offering his vehicle for us to drive back to Calgary.

"Okay, there's no rush," he said. Geoff and I were simply overwhelmed by his extraordinary generosity and willingness to help.

The drive to Calgary lasted four hours. Of that time, there were perhaps 45 minutes when it wasn't raining. Much of the time it rained hard. Some of the time it rained torrentially. The cloud was often down to forty or fifty feet above the ground. We wouldn't have made it in our airplanes.



The weather conditions on the drive home. There's no way we'd have flown through this.

All the way back, we spoke repeatedly of Myles' amazing generosity and our good fortune to have been right where we were at the moment he taxied in. A few minutes either way and we'd have missed him completely. We agreed that when such a gift falls into your lap that way it's crucial to pass it on whenever possible.

We were finally back in Calgary, but our adventure was far from over.

Day 15

Seven days after we left our planes, we returned to Cranbrook to fly them home.

Geoff had instructions from Myles to leave the truck at the airport, so after we gassed up and fed ourselves, we headed straight there. But as we drove up the airport access road, a bolt of fear shot through me.

Huge pine and spruce trees, some 80 feet tall, lay scattered throughout fields on either side of the road. A terrific thunderstorm with an extreme gust front hit Cranbrook the night before. Dozens of trees were snapped off and lay like match sticks dropped on the ground.

What had the wind done to our planes?

We parked the truck, grabbed our gear and headed for the airplanes. Geoff's looked just fine as I walked past enroute to Merl. It too looked good from this distance. I breathed huge sigh of relief as I set my gear down under the wing and began my pre-flight.

Then I stopped in my tracks, because what I saw shocked me. My windshield was snapped right into two pieces!

"How's your plane?" Geoff yelled.

"I'm screwed!" I hollered back, "utterly and completely screwed."

He trotted over, a very worried look on his face. "What's wrong?" he asked.

I pointed to my windscreen. It's a large piece of Lexan that curves around the cockpit and under the wing. For some reason, it had snapped from top to bottom at the front left corner bend, leaving Merl with a gaping hole there.



The Merlin's windshield snapped into two pieces.

A fleeting idea crossed my mind... no, that wouldn't work. It's too much to hope for.

"I think we can fix this," Geoff stated. "Do you have any tape?" Strange that he'd voiced my very thought right then. But if he thought so, too...

"I always carry tape in my plane. It's saved my bacon more than once."

We pushed the two pieces together to check the fit. It was rough, very rough, but if we could set it so the side piece supported the front piece, we could pull this off.



The application of some foil tape saved the day.

Using foil tape that I carried for use on the prop's leading edge, we carefully positioned the windshield pieces and started layering it on, both inside and out. The tape job turned out to be pretty solid. I'd know for sure one way or the other within seconds of starting the engine, but I was pretty sure I'd be able to avoid a bus ride home.

We untied, finished our very careful pre-flight inspections and loaded up. Then came the moment of truth. I turned the key and after a few blades the engine tumbled to life.

The windshield held! I reached forward to check how it felt. It wasn't moving a bit. Yup, I'd be flying home! I radioed Geoff with the good news.

We were soon airborne off runway 16 and turning north up the Columbia Valley. I kept a very close eye on the windshield repair, but it was absolutely solid.



Merl departs runway 16 at Cranbrook with the windshield staying intact.

Barry Davis, was waiting for us in Invermere with his Zenair 600. He couldn't make the flight to San Francisco and we had sorely missed him. But he wanted to fly the last leg home with us from Invermere. Barry's touching gesture meant even more since he had to fight headwinds up to 40 mph to get there earlier in the day.

Geoff and I had a tailwind for this leg, and though it wasn't much, it was still a treat we thoroughly enjoyed. Our ground speed registered anywhere from 85 to 100 mph, and we had a very short ride to Invermere.

On touch down, Pritchard had trouble with his tail wheel, again, which was now just barely holding together. Both steering control arms were bent up nearly 90 degrees from their correct positions. Fixing it would have to wait until we got home, but we only had to make one more landing, and that would be on grass. Our adventure had certainly taken its toll on us and our very tough little airplanes.

Barry and his Zenair were waiting for us. Seeing him again really brought back the memories of when we three flew to Spokane for a weekend the previous autumn.



Barry Davis and his Zenair 600 at Invermere to escort us the last leg to home.

We quickly fuelled and after a pre-flight briefing returned to our planes to fire up. But Barry's plane wouldn't start. We spent half an hour trying to fix a vapour lock issue before his engine finally roared to life.

Our next challenge was simply leaving Invermere. Getting airborne was easy enough, but there was no wind to speak of. I lifted off the runway into 25 degree heat at 2800 feet ASL, got thirty feet into the air, and pretty much stayed there. The trees ahead worried me, but I had anticipated this. I simply slid my airplane a few feet to the right so I was over the highway. Just like magic, the heat from the highway gave me the lift I needed.

Merl started climbing well toward the high terrain ahead, aided just enough from the little thermal. We all continued working the lift and the mechanical updrafts as we made our way toward the pass at Radium only a few miles distant.

We banked eastward into the narrowest pass I've ever seen, and continued clawing for height. The 4800' summit slid under us several minutes later and we angled north up the Kootenay Valley.

This valley was wide and very green, and thick cumulus clouds hung around the mountain tops. There was no danger from them here, though. They were well above us and staying that way. Visibility was excellent in the dry mountain air.

Turning at Kootenay Crossing, we entered the narrower Vermillion Valley. Our three planes inched steadily higher as we traveled its

length. We wanted about 6000', preferably a little more. The Vermillion Pass, which grants passage into the Bow Valley, sits at 5700', so some extra altitude couldn't hurt.

We cleared the Vermillion Pass and popped out into the Bow Valley and were finally back into Alberta. Landmarks more familiar to us appeared left and right, welcoming us onward toward home, barely 90 minutes away now. Sulphur Mountain was there with the chateau on top where those poor souls who couldn't fly had a view nearly as good as ours.



Banff slips away beneath Geoff wing as we eagerly head home to Calgary.

As we approached Banff the roughness kicked in. And kick it did! For twenty minutes we were merely at the whim of moderate to severe turbulence as it threw us about like twigs on river rapids. Finally, the valley widened out near the Kananaskis Highway, and the ride smoothed out considerably.

For the next half hour we flew on, sailing easily over the foothills and the brilliant emerald prairie, descending smoothly as Calgary grew bigger in our sight. Downtown was visible from forty miles away. Now *that's* unrestricted visibility!

We curved around the south end of the city, headed a few more miles east, and finally entered the circuit for Kirkby Field and home. My landing was terrible against the gusty 20 - 25 knot west wind that was blowing. Fortunately, Kirby's runway 26 provided plenty of room for my transgressions. I gratefully taxied up to my hangar and shut down.



Geoff fights the afternoon turbulence to land back home at Kirkby Field.

Geoff clearly had some trouble with the turbulence on his approach and landing but managed to use the brakes to make it safely back to his hangar. Barry landed safely, too.

Now our adventure was over.

In Summary

"This isn't a memory; it's a tattoo," Geoff told me a month after we returned home. "I keep re-living little vignettes of the trip in my head."

I knew what he meant. For the first week or so of being home, without even knowing it, I'd find myself wandering through some little piece of the adventure; like driving in California, realizing we really flew our planes to where there are palm trees. I recalled my silly nervousness flying near volcanoes; and looking down onto the ramp at Cresswell, Oregon, at the last L-4 ever made that a father and son flew all the way from south Texas.

I think Geoff got more out of this journey than either of us reckoned he would. He underwent a remarkable transformation. He began with tentativeness and uncertainty, since this was only the third cross country flying trip he'd made since gaining his pilot's license many years prior. Then one day he set out to fly to the edge of the continent.

As the trip progressed, as he conquered each new challenge that arose, he became less and less worried about things like mountains, wind and rougher terrain. His confidence and ability grew further each time he landed the Champ with a bum tail wheel in turbulent conditions, and while it definitely worried him, he'd figured out how to handle the problem.

When I was feeling down and frustrated on some of the tough weather days, Geoff encouraged me. He reiterated that this was an adventure. He reminded me that anyone could fly to San Francisco, but only a few could fly there the way we did.

Pritchard very much impressed me.

My world is larger, too, for having made this voyage. My aerial voyeurism, my desire to see, feel and experience more, both in the sky and on the ground, has been thoroughly sated. The places where we flew have touched me, and I will remember that touch. I'm proud of what Merl and I did, of the stories we can tell.

I did make some errors when I plotted our San Francisco trip, and many of my expectations were completely incorrect. There was a lot more mountain flying than I anticipated, much more wind, and more weather delays. I learned that we really are spoiled flying in southern Alberta.

In mathematical terms, we travelled 2700 miles in about 32 hours of flying, which is pretty big stuff for little airplanes. We made 23 landings and takeoffs at 20 different airports, rented or borrowed (thanks, again, Myles) 7 cars, stayed in 10 different hotels, and were 14 days gone.

It's hard to tell others about our flight unless they're pilots, too. Normal people can't quite grasp it, and how could they? Unless you've been there, how can you know the pure cold fear of an impending engine failure 500 miles from home over terrible terrain in a craft you dearly love because you built it yourself? Can non-pilots fathom what it is to fly right to the edge of a wall of weather, knowing it will kill you if you don't turn around? And if people don't fly, how can they know the

serenity and the flight perfection that we knew over the Sacramento Valley?

As incredible as this journey was, very little of it unfolded as we thought it would. Nearly everything we did, every leg we flew, took longer or was more difficult than we expected. Wind, weather and mechanical problems, sometimes on their own, sometimes in combination, meant that virtually no plan went unchanged. And it's these unexpected trials and troubles that formed the soul of the adventure.

When I started seriously thinking about and planning our expedition, places on the map were merely dots of different colours. They lit my imagination, and made me want to know what was there, but each one had no more soul or character to me than an ink blot. There was no *connection*.

But that's all different now, changed forever.

As Pritchard and I either landed at these spots, or flew over and simply laid eyes on them, they took on new meaning. Villages, towns and cities – like Richland, Redding, and Novato - that before were just ink spots, transformed into so much more. They crystallised as places where people make their homes, where they love their kids, realize their dreams, and live and die. These places finally became real. To have seen them, to have touched them in some small way because our airplanes took us there, is a gift beyond measure.

But it is the people we met, the ones who helped us, or who simply and kindly befriended a pair of winged vagabonds along the way, who made the deepest impressions. We may have met them for only a few moments, but they made a mark that doesn't rub off. People, like Liz at Southfield Aviation in Coeur d' Alene, who arranged a car for us on an instant's notice when we were stranded. There was the RV pilot at Redding that brought us cold beer on the ramp on a scorching afternoon, and the mechanic in Red Bluff who lent us wisdom and wrenches without a second's hesitation.

Richard Ramos, the Fairchild owner in Sonoma, has become a friend. The beautiful book we each received from John LeNoue will indelibly affix to our story, and our memories, the remarkable hour that we spent with him and Mark O'Neill. And, of course, we can't forget the extraordinary kindness of Myles Murtach, who selflessly rescued us in Cranbrook without so much as asking our names, simply because we were pilots in need.

They are aviators, each one, and we are very much richer for having met them, for they are the real treasures, the best part of what we discovered on our voyage across the sky.