

All of this is just from memory of events about 15 years ago so if anything is incorrect please just treat it as fiction.

We had two Pitts S-2Bs travelling about 1000 nm or so to Oshkosh and we were taking it in turns to lead the other in formation for one leg at a time. I had Cindy with me in the front seat. She hadn't been in a little aeroplane before at all. A little bit of baggage. Full fuel. Cruise at 145 kts TAS gave a safe range in still air of about 220 nm plus ½ hr reserve. We'd normally plan legs of no more than 200 nm.

Mark led for the first leg. After departing Afton airfield we immediately turned right through the blind canyon. Sounds dramatic but we were rapidly climbing so always plenty of options in case of an engine failure. We were soon at 12,000 ft to get us over the 10,000 ft ridge. A while later a climb to 14,000 ft to skip over a higher ridge.

At the first refuelling stop I took the lead. The tower ignored several calls from me in N727PS (that was the 50th Anniversary Pitts Special - some way to being an S-2C and later the S-2C prototype). Mark took the lead and the tower responded to his first call. That night he suggested that my accent may have confused them – thinking that I was an international 727 on the wrong frequency. That was disappointing as I thought I'd learnt the cowboy drawl pretty well by then. I knew that at breakfast “car fuel” would get me a bottomless cup for \$1 plus the \$1 tip. At dinner, if I wanted a very nice steak, I'd say “flaming yawn”.

At one overnight stop several months earlier I was given the keys to the FBO's truck and told that the best food was at Cactus Jane's a few miles out of town. Ordered coke to drink. “Sorry, we don't have any of that.”

“What do you have then?”

“Pepsi, Mountain Dew, Dr Pepper and Coke.”

“OK, I'll have coke then.”

“I told you – we don't have any of that.”

“Pepsi then.”

She dashed out the back and returned momentarily “Sorry, we're out of Pepsi, will coke do?”

This was our longest leg – about 220 nm. I had a good fuel flow indicator plus fuel totalizer and capacitive fuel contents indicator. Mark just had the standard fuel pressure gauge labelled with fuel flow plus the convoluted sight gauge so far away from the tank that its readings were vague. I had one of the new GPS/COM units which I'd never seen before. I asked Cindy to fly the airplane for a while so that I could learn how it worked and set the display up so that I could easily understand it. I'd slipped some distance behind Mark and he was a small but clear dot in the distance. I told Cindy just to keep him in the center of the windscreen and I'd pop my head up every now and then to check on things. Mark obviously got bored after a while as he was following the cloud streets and Cindy was handling things quite well. I'd had the avionics pretty well sorted out when I heard a scream and it all went black. The cloud street had got tighter. Back above the clouds all was easier.

The cloud cover increased as we progressed and we made the decision to descend underneath. We soon discovered the significant headwind lower down and judged that we didn't have many options at that time – proceed to the destination but we'd eat into our reserves. We planned a straight-in approach and considered that we'd eat even more into our reserves if we had to open the throttle on the Lycoming IO-540 and go-round. Only a few miles out my instruments told me pretty clearly how little fuel I had and Mark would've had the same but less sure of the situation.

My second time flying into EAA's Airventure at Oshkosh. At the end of the show we had volunteered to give rides to EAA volunteers and VIPs. One of my passengers was ex-USAF with

20,000 hrs total time and 2,000 hrs aerobatics so I handed over to him as we climbed out. He did a loop and fell out. I gave him some advice for the next one as it was many years since he'd last flown. Fell out again. I said I'd talk him through the next one and recall that the last thing I said to him was "this is a flat inverted spin". He forgot to tell me that he'd never done aerobatics in a propeller-driven airplane before.

The next task was to go to the aerobatic contest at Fond-du-Lac to help out and give some more rides. After that both aeroplanes were going to Oklahoma City but I'd have a different sidekick. We flew the first leg in company with a Sukhoi and an Extra. For our lunch stop we chose what appeared to be a large airport on the Sectional Chart on the basis that it would probably have a nice cafe. Small biplanes don't have much space to carry stuff and the US airport guide was a big book and we were unable to easily get info on the place at the last minute (these were the days before the internet). As we approached we saw the enormous runway but then some-one on Unicom pointed out that the big runway was not yet finished. Narrow, short runway instead. Lunch was a Mars bar and a coke.

We arrived at Page Airport just outside Oke City in time for the BBQ reception for the World Aerobatic Championships. I can remember standing talking to Mike G when a little old lady came up to me and asked if I was married. I immediately recalled the effort that I went to in obtaining American pilot and drivers licences. "I only have an Australian licence and I haven't converted it yet so ... " She just looked strangely at me and turned to Mike with the same question. "Nope ma'am." She pulled a sixgun out of her handbag and pushed him away ... it all happened very quickly after that – lots of shouting and gunshots but we all survived. Great show. I left the aeroplane there for a couple of weeks then returned to pick it up. But it wasn't the same.

Propeller swapped with one to be returned for warranty work but the propeller wasn't bolted on. I got plenty of free advice (either too busy themselves or liability issues it seems) and people were happy to loan tools for the job. Some-one had ran into a runway marker so I also had to repair the wheel fairing.

I had organised a business meeting in Denver on the way home so I postponed that for a day. Next morning there was a big thunderstorm sitting over the top of the airfield so I waited until late afternoon before I got going. Visibility was 3 nm. No matter what height I flew at. 2000 ft AGL seemed a good compromise between seeing enough of the ground, not scaring myself with the high towers and staying away from the jets. I soon learnt that a darker shade of grey indicated a thunderstorm not far away. Only one leg this day so still a long way to go. Postponed the meeting again.

Next morning low cloud so waited all morning (meeting postponed again) before the destination reported a base of 1500 ft AGL and the same where I was. A few miles down the track that changed to and I was down to 500 ft AGL. The weather seemed stable and visibility was good so I continued. View out the front of the biplane was inadequate especially regarding towers so I'd fly one large field at a time, looking across it for obstacles before I flew to the other side. Good to discover that the chart was quite accurate as far as existence of towers was concerned. The weather improved significantly for the last leg into one of the smaller airports in Denver. Been away from the mountains for too long and wasn't attuned to the density height so it was a firm landing. Meeting went well.

As I departed, the tower's standard phrase of "clear for take-off, watch density altitude". Thinking to myself I've got a small biplane with plenty of power, I don't need to worry about density height. Changed frequencies and advised that I'd be staying OCTA to the west alongside the Rocky Mountains. They warned me of plentiful microbursts. They looked pretty to me – clear blue skies, unlimited visibility just a mess of thunderstorms easily avoided. I reported my destination of

Rawlins and was warned of the violent weather and extreme winds currently being experienced there. No worries - if it didn't improve as I got close I'd go somewhere else. I normally followed the highway towards Cheyenne then through the pass around Elk Mountain but today was just beautiful so I decided to cut the corner. Up to 14,000 ft and direct to Rawlins – from here I could see that the weather had moved on and it was fine now. The final leg home to Afton went well – cruising at 10,500 ft over the high (about 7000 ft) desert plain then up to 12,000 ft to cross the last mountain range.

Blair welcomed me as I taxied in “I can tell its had a firm landing and I don't like the repair that you did!”