

Chapter 12 - Long Cross Country Flights

Within all of us is a varying amount of space lint and star dust, the residue from our creation. Most are too busy to notice it, and it is stronger in some than others. It is strongest in those of us who fly and is responsible for an unconscious, subtle desire to slip into some wings and try for the elusive boundaries of our origin.

C. K. O. Eckland, 'Footprints On Clouds'

A strange but interesting paradox of commercial travel is that the airlines charge less for a flight from Boston to San Francisco than they do for a thirty minute flight from Erie, Pennsylvania to Pittsburgh! Various economies of scale come into play in setting airline ticket prices. Large airplanes are much more efficient on a passenger/mile basis than commuters. This works well for bi-coastal folks who do business in or near big cities. For the rest of us, however, it can become a prohibitive financial burden.

Our grants consulting clients tend to be smaller hospitals, school districts, municipalities and assorted nonprofit organizations located in rural areas, far from major cities. To reach them via the airlines is expensive and such travel requires multiple, time wasting connections through various airline hub cities along the way. For example, we had a client in Helena, Montana that I visited monthly for nearly a year. This was long before I bought an airplane. Each trip out and back was a nightmare. It involved connections through Detroit, Minneapolis, and Billings, Montana before reaching Helena. I would typically depart Buffalo around 2pm and would not arrive into Helena until well after midnight. Any delays along the way, and there were many, would almost certainly result in a missed connection and an unplanned overnight stay at some airport hotel. Even more frustrating was the round-trip coach class ticket price of nearly \$2,000 . . . and this was nearly 15 years ago!

The problem is getting worse rather than better. The economic woes of the post September 11 environment struck the airlines hard. To survive, airlines reduced services to rural communities and those that they continued to serve command astronomical ticket prices. Flights into many of these communities were reduced to only one trip in and out per day. One could easily spend five or six hours waiting for a connection into a rural destination city. My worst experience in this regard was a trip from Buffalo to East Texas. I was scheduled to attend an early morning board of directors meeting. My plan was to depart Buffalo at 4:30pm the night before on a commercial airline flight, arrive at 9:50pm, spend the night in a hotel, then meet with my clients in the morning. The itinerary called for plane change in Atlanta before reaching Dallas. In Dallas, I was to rent a car and drive 90 miles northeast through the rolling hills of East Texas to a little non-descript town of Tatum, Texas.

I knew this was not going to be a good trip when the airline announced a two hour delay

in Buffalo. This would cause me to mis-connect my outbound trip from Atlanta. “Not to worry,” said the ticket agent behind the counter. “We will book you on another flight out of Atlanta.” Hmmm, I have been through this drill before, I thought. This delay meant that I would not get into Dallas until midnight, and I would still have to drive another hour and a half. Oh well, I concluded, “Time to spare, go by air.”

Tired, but eager to press on, I arrived in Atlanta and walked quickly to the departure gate for my connecting flight. There I saw a big crowd of people pressing up against the check in podium. This was not a good sign, I thought. I listened carefully to a public address announcement.

“Ladies and gentle, we regret to inform you that the inbound aircraft for flight 245 to Dallas has been delayed in Chicago. We expect it to arrive here in Atlanta at 11:32pm.” If this worked as the airline promised, I would not be getting into Dallas until about 2am Texas local time.

Sadly, it did not work as the airline promised. Our flight did not leave Atlanta until 2:20am. This put me into Dallas at 4:30am local time. And I still had to drive 90 miles in a rental car. Averaging 60 miles per hour, I could make Tatum by 6:30am. Of course, I had to allow time to find the rental car agency, sign for the car, then maneuver out of the airport.

Exhausted and unshaven, I had to find a shower somewhere along the way. I spotted a Holiday Inn just outside of Dallas and pulled in around 5:30am. I explained my dilemma to the young man behind the desk. He rented me a room for an hour, just long enough to shower and shave. This gave me just one more hour to drive the remaining 70 miles. Needless to say, I was a bit late, but I did make the meeting . . . and, surprisingly, I closed the deal with the client!

That was one of my last frustrating forays with business airline travel. After that, I vowed to one day own and operate my own airplane. Having realized that vow, I went on to have dozens of business trips to remote communities around the nation without the burdensome delays, irate fellow passengers, nasty ticket agents, and arrogant flight attendants wishing they were in some other line of work. But I must admit, however, that my later experiences in my own conveyance were not without their troublesome quirks, but they were never as frustrating as airline travel.

Traveling long distances in a privately owned aircraft presents a number of challenges not typically encountered by recreational pilots whose flights remain close to their home airport. A recent flight from Buffalo to Goodland, Kansas provides a good example of this.

Favoring winds enabled me to fly half way across the continent nonstop in about five and one half hours. Goodland is located in northwest Kansas, about 30 miles east of the Colorado border. I departed Buffalo around 5pm and expected to arrive in Goodland at about six hours later. It was a hot, July evening when I lifted off Buffalo’s Runway Five. Climbing through 1,500 feet, I was cleared on course to flight level 180 and headed west directly across Lake Erie. As was my custom on long flights alone, I was dressed in shorts, t-shirt and sneakers. I carried along a six pack of bottled water, several sandwiches, and a large mouth empty bottle for other necessities along the way.

The GPS navigation system displayed my route of flight. It would be 1,059 nautical miles along a great circle route that would take me over Ontario, Canada to just north of Detroit. From there, I would fly westward over Kalamazoo, Michigan, then directly over the City of Chicago and across the Mississippi River at Davenport, Iowa. It would be on to Omaha, Nebraska and the

northwestern portion of Kansas before arriving at my destination.

A large high pressure system pushing down from Minnesota was producing picture-perfect weather throughout the central portion of the nation. I fiddled with the oxygen line, setting the correct pressure as I passed through the 10,000 foot level on up to 18,000 feet. The combination of seatbelt harnesses, headphone cables, and plastic O2 lines can become constraining unless they are properly positioned for long distance flight. I loosened my seatbelt and harness as I generally did when the weather is good. Unlike passengers, required crew members on any aircraft are required to remain buckled throughout the flight.

Supplemental oxygen O2 required of all pilots when flying in unpressurized airplanes above 12,500 feet for 30 minutes or more. Most people, including myself, begin to experience O2 deprivation in unpressurized flights over 10,000 feet or so. At night, people begin to lose visual acuity without O2 anytime they exceed 8,000 feet. The alternative is a pressurized airplane, or remain in the lower, bumpy altitudes.

Time passes slowly on long trips and this was no exception. Even with upbeat music being channeled through my earphones, the drone of the engine as I motored into the setting sun made it difficult to remain awake after the first several hours aloft. Part of the problem was created by the near perfect weather. The air was so smooth you could balance a pin on the instrument panel. Even the landscape passing slowly below offered no stimulation. At 18,000 feet, it was difficult to distinguish one landmark from another. Cities and lakes, of course, stand out well, but everything else appears as a patchwork quilt of differing shades of green and brown.

My back was getting sore sitting in the same upright position, so I maneuvered myself over to the right seat. Sitting there would tax different muscles and the change of visual perception would be a welcomed change. The dangling earphone cord and O2 line made this seat transfer a bit difficult.

The sun slowly set below the horizon as I crossed over the Mississippi River where Illinois joined Iowa near the City of Davenport. The unusually clear air made it possible to visually track the Mississippi from the northern horizon to southern horizon. I thought back to my middle school reading of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* as Tom and Huck Finn rafted down the muddy Mississippi. I began to feel a little like Tom Sawyer myself in my own makeshift airborne raft. Such fun, I thought. And I'm getting paid to do this. Life is good.

The Kansas City Air Route Traffic Control Center handed me off to Denver Center. I had crossed nearly one-half of the continent in about five hours. Even with the prevailing westerly headwinds, I was making good progress. The sense of excitement I felt lifted me out of my drowsy mental state. I began to wonder what I would encounter on the approach to the Goodland, Kansas Airport. The ground, still three miles below, was pitch black. Cities, towns, and villages are far between in Nebraska. The GPS indicated that I still had about 150 miles to go before reaching my destination. Another hour to go. I cranked up the music in my earphones and begin looking for the approach plate for my landing at Goodland. Even though the sky was clear and the visibility was unlimited, I requested the GPS approach. Denver Center quickly accommodated my request and began giving me vectors and descent instructions to the final approach course.

Global Position Satellite or GPS was the most significant advancement aircraft navigation since the advent of Very High Frequency Omi-Directional Radios (VORs) in 1941. Arriving on the scene in the late 1980s, GPS eliminated the need to track the patchwork quilt of Victor

Airways that encircle the continent. Not only was navigation made simpler, GPS also reduced travel time by straightening what otherwise were many turns and bends between the departure point and the destination. Referred to as *free flight*, pilots using FAA approved GPS units can now plan straight line routes to their destination. With GPS/autopilot interface, autopilots are able to steer the airplane along the GPS computed course line thus reducing pilot workload in half.

I began the descent by reducing power by two inches of manifold pressure and setting the autopilot for 300 foot per minute descent rate. N4720Y seemed to appreciate its reduced power demands as the steady hum of the engine was reduced to a gentle purr. The dry, cool air coming through the cockpit vents took on a warm, clammy feel as we passed through the 6,000 foot mark. The temperature on the ground was 86 degrees on this hot, July night. I adjusted my seatbelt just as Denver Center issued my approach instructions. I switched frequencies and gave five short clicks on the microphone button to turn on the runway lights. Suddenly, the runway appeared out of the ink black ground below. There was no moon out, no operating airport beacon, no stars, nothing. It was just plain black outside.

Night landings at unfamiliar, non-towered airports always cause me the jitters, especially if there are no visual approach slope indicator (VASI) lights to monitor the descent angle. I always fear encountering trees or power lines just before the runway. Consequently, most of my night approaches are high, necessitating long landings and hard braking. This evening was no exception.

As I rolled to stop I was instantly overwhelmed by an indescribable smell! What was that? The pungent smell reminded me of a zoo or farm on a hot day, but it was much stronger. I rolled off of the runway to a dimly lit taxiway, then motored toward a set of hangars dimly outlined by a lamp pole on the north end of the airport. Nature's pure high altitude air was a stark contrast to the putrid, dank air I was now breathing. The surrounding darkness provided no clues as to the source of this overwhelming stench. Approaching the hangars revealed no signs of life. There were no cars, no airplanes, no open doors, nothing except a single light on top of a pole. Everything was closed up tight.

I parked the airplane, opened the aircraft door, and stepped slowly from the cockpit. My legs were stiff from the long flight. The surrounding air was hot, humid and still. I pinched myself, half imagining that Rod Serling, host and writer of the 60's television show, "The Twilight Zone," might soon appear walking across the ramp. I had left civilization and was entirely on my own. I walked over to what appeared to be the FBO office. The door was locked. A rusted, metal sign on the wall advertised a local taxi company's telephone number. I pulled out my cell phone and, surprisingly, there was a strong signal. I called the taxi and quickly received a response.

"You are where, asked the person on the other end?"

"At the airport," I responded.

"Okay, I'll be right over," he replied.

As promised, the taxi appeared in about ten minutes. "Can you take me to the Adams Motel on Highway 519," I asked? As was my practice before leaving home, I booked a room near the airport. Preferring to stay with any of the big chain hotels, I had no choice on this trip but to go with a mom and pop operation. In fact, it was my only choice.

"Sure enough," said the driver. "I'll take you right over." He offered no other

conversation and I took the hint and remained silent.

“How’s chances of getting something to eat somewhere nearby the motel,” I asked?

The high altitude air along with the supplemental oxygen I had been inhaling for five hours left my throat dry. I was eager to sit down for a relaxing supper and a cold drink. The driver offered to drop me off at a Kansas saloon about a block away from the motel. I accepted his offer and began to prepare myself for what could prove to be a very interesting meal. The saloon was right out of Hollywood set. It had saw dust on the floor, several cowboys at the bar, and a crusty old bartender carrying on a conversation with a couple of waitresses. An ancient jukebox was playing strains of Hank Williams. I ordered a basic hamburger and large diet Coke and struck up a conversation with a fellow at the next table.

“What is that terrible smell,” I asked?

“Smell, what smell,” he replied with a disinterested look on his face. He quickly figured out that I was a stranger, and like all strangers, I probably could not be trusted.

“Oh that’s the stockyards out by the airport.”

“Stockyards,” I replied?

“Yep, they got over 60,000 head of cattle out there all bound for slaughter.”

That explained the horrible smell that I could not escape since landing an hour earlier. I finished my hamburger and Coke, paid the \$3.95 bill and walked over to the motel. Here, again, my expectations were not very high. Far off the beaten track of business travelers, this little “mom and pop” motel looked like it had been around since World War II. A pleasant elderly gentleman greeted me from behind the counter. Putting down his cigarette and turning his attention from the small television, he asked if how long I would be staying. “One night,” I said.

“Fine that will be \$32. Cash or charge?”

Hmmmm, dinner and hotel for less than forty bucks. Try doing that in a big eastern city! My night in the motel and my business meeting the next morning were uneventful. I had met some nice people, signed on a new client, and learned a little bit about Kansas living. It was time now to begin the next leg of this trip.

Returning to the airport around noon, I marveled at the sparseness of the airport. Arriving late the night before, I had not really seen much of the airport until now. Its only taxiway and runway had grass growing through the pavement seams. Its two hangars were in poor repair, and a torn windsock looked like it had been there for many years. The one thing I noted, of course, was the huge cattle stockyard immediately to the west of the airport. N4720Y was sitting there serenely. If it could talk, it would be saying, “Take me from here!” She was like lady outside of her element. I, too, had the same feeling.

Fortunately, this old airport offered fuel service, but judging from the age of things around there, I wondered about the quality of fuel. The flight out from Buffalo the night before consumed about 75 gallons, leaving me just 43 remaining. I could stretch the next leg without adding fuel, but decided against it. The old man driving the fuel truck assured me that their fuel was fresh so I reluctantly had him fill the main tanks only. This would assure me enough fuel to get to Bismarck with legal reserves.

I called flight service on my cell phone and filed for a direct routing to Bismarck, North Dakota, about 400 miles to the north. The two and one-half hour trip would take me northward over western Nebraska just west of North Platte, then over central South Dakota passing just

west of its capitol city of Pierre, then north over the 90 mile wide Cheyenne Indian Reservation, and up through the middle of North Dakota to its capital city of Bismarck. This route passed just 110 miles east of the geographic center of the continental United States.

Like the day before, the weather was near perfect with winds blowing lightly out of the west. I filed for 17,000 feet knowing that emergency landing sites along the way would be few and far between. The extra altitude would extend my engine out gliding distance if I needed it.

The western portions of Nebraska are about as remote as you can get and still be in the United States. The only area more sparse would be the Dakota Badlands immediately to the north. I was not concerned about being able to put N4720Y down safely if I needed to in an emergency. I could do that almost anywhere along the route. My only fear was, how long would it take for somebody to find me before I starved?

I taxied to south end of the runway, completed the pre-flight checklist, and launched into the crystal blue sky. As the ground passed away below I began to see for the first time just how desolate this area was. There was nothing . . . I mean nothing but flat, grassy plains in all directions. The landscape was divided evenly into huge rectangles made distinguishable by the kinds of crops that were planted and by an occasional straight line, two lane highway. Even the nation's interstate highway system seemed to have by-passed this area. I called Denver Center and picked up my clearance. Outside of radar coverage, they requested a position report before issuing the clearance. They replied, "N4720Y, you are cleared present position Bismarck direct, climb and maintain 17,000, report reaching 10,000, squawk 2349."

I read back the clearance, adjusted the power setting for a 500 foot per minute cruise climb, switched on the autopilot, and set the altitude pre-select to 17,000 feet. If all this stuff worked properly, I would have nothing left to do but keep my eye on things for the next couple of hours.

It was at times like this that my historical curiosity emerges. I wondered what it was like 150 years ago during the great western migration. I imagined trains of covered wagons inching across these vast plains. I figured that those easterners who had made it this far had already negotiated the Mississippi River, the Missouri River, and at least a couple of Indian attacks. I wondered if they were prepared for the 11,000 foot high Rocky Mountain Range located just one more state to the west.

The featureless terrain below obscured any sense of altitude gain I was making. Only the altimeter and GPS gave hint that we were over three miles high and traveling about three miles a minute. The air was rock smooth thus enabling me to sit my ever-present tea cup on the plastic glare shield above the instrument panel without fear of it sliding off.

Every instrument pilot knows that the two most important things about instrument flight are . . . the next two things, whatever they may be. My next two things were to: (1) confirm that the altitude pre-select kicked upon reaching 17,000 feet, and (2) land about two hours later. Whoever said this stuff was hard?

The mid-afternoon sun, unhindered by smog, fog, or haze, spread warmth throughout the cockpit. The outside temperature on this July afternoon was minus 12 degrees Celsius. The warm sun combined with the hot air coming from the aircraft heater had its predictable relaxing effect on me. I closed my eyes and leaned my head against a pillow positioned against the left side door window. Now came the hard part. . . staying awake. I had still not recovered from the time change and a less than perfect rest in the motel. Fatigue is a serious occupational hazard among

commercial pilots. Long flights, late nights, and quick turn-arounds often leave little time to capture needed rest. I think that is why most commercial operations assign two pilots to the task. One to fly and the other to keep him (or her) awake.

I reached into my cooler and pulled out a bottle of water. The oxygen was drying my throat and the cool water did the trick. Looking down over the northern portion of Nebraska reminded me of images of the moon. The inhospitable terrain below appeared devoid of any form of civilization. The flat brown, grassy plains of Kansas began to turn gray as rolling rock formations punched up through the soil as I passed over Nebraska. The ground continued to darken as I moved slowing north into South Dakota. The notorious Dakota Badlands was well deserved moniker. It was a wonder that anybody survived this surreal environment.

Catching the northbound jet stream gave me a good push. Averaging a bit over 220 knots across the ground would put me into Bismarck about 30 minutes ahead of schedule. Apparently the weather forecasters did not expect the jet to be running that low. Winds aloft are measured by weather balloons launched several times a day throughout the United States. The information they provide is augmented by pilot reports. Knowing this, I gave Flight watch a call and relayed the winds aloft information as calculated by my GPS unit.

N4720Y: Minneapolis Flight Watch, N4720Y 90 miles southeast of the Dupree VOR with a pilot report.”

Minneapolis Flight Watch: This is Minneapolis Flight Watch, go ahead with your pIREP, 20Y.”

N4720Y: We are a Cessna 210 at 17,000 feet. Outside temperature is minus 15 degrees Celsius, sky clear, ride smooth, winds out of 200 degrees at 68 knots. Can you give me Bismarck current weather, please, over?”

Minneapolis Flight Watch: Thank you for the pilot report. Bismarck weather, as of ten minutes after the hour, is winds 270 at 8 knots, sky clear. It looks like it will remain that way for the rest of the evening, sir. Over.”

I thanked Flight Watch for the weather update and began planning my descent into the Bismarck area. I had flown N4720Y to Bismarck several times before. My last trip was in February and it was C-O-L-D. Being from Buffalo, I feel well qualified to comment upon the rigors of winter weather. When I say Bismarck was cold, it was cold . . . about 25 degrees below zero, as I recall! The memories of that cold night in Bismarck came quickly back as I set up for the approach to the Bismarck Airport. This time I saw green grass and trees rather than the frozen wasteland reminiscent of my previous trip.

Minneapolis Center handed me off to Bismarck Approach Control about 30 miles out. I checked in with Approach who immediately issued further descent instructions. This was the time I generally performed my cockpit cleanup. Several empty water bottles, a couple of flying magazines, a torn newspaper, and several charts were laying around the cockpit. This was an easy cleanup compared to some more adventurous trips in the past where the cabin was a disaster zone.

I recall one rather indelicate circumstance, in particular, where unexpected turbulence tossed me about so violently that everything I had on the seats landed on the floor. Unfortunately, it was on that same flight that I had forgot to bring along an empty pee bottle. When the need arose, I improvised by using a sick sac. It was water proof so I figured it should work just fine. After finishing the deed, I folded and sealed the end of liquid-filled sack and

placed it on the floor in front of the right front seat. Shortly after that is when the turbulence hit. The unexpected turbulence toss a four inch thick Jeppesen leatherbound chart book off of the right seat. It landed squarely upon the urine-filled sick sack sitting on the floor beneath it. Splat! The bag burst at the seams, discharging its nasty contents all over the front of the cockpit. That resulted in a major clean up!

The main wheels kissed the pavement with their customary squeak - squeak. I held the nose gear off as long as possible to protect this relatively fragile component of the landing gear system. My only remaining task was to taxi over to the general aviation terminal, park the airplane, leave my fuel order, and find transportation to the hotel. It took me all of about 15 minutes to accomplish all of this.

The City of Bismarck is about the size of Erie, Pennsylvania. It has a couple of brand name motels, two hospitals, and only a handful of restaurants. I checked into the Holiday Inn and promptly took a quick nap. Awakening about 30 minutes later, I grabbed a shower and quick change of clothes and made my way to a nearby small family-owned restaurant. I woofed down a grilled chicken salad and a dinner roll, then walked back to the motel, watched some television, then fell asleep for the night.

I awoke around 6:30am, showered, dressed, and then walked over to my hospital client. I planned on getting there early enough to grab breakfast in the hospital cafeteria. The early morning sun was just beginning warm the air. Looking around the city as I walked to the hospital, I felt a sense of similarity. Every city, whether north, south, east or west, has many things in common. The traffic signals, parking meters, store front windows. Like many frequent travelers, I had to stop and think for a moment, "Where am I today?"

I finished my meeting by noon and returned to the airport around one o'clock. I checked the weather and filed an IFR plan from Bismarck to Watertown, NY, direct. My next appointment was a dinner meeting with members of a local library board of directors. The schedule would be tight, but the anticipated 90 knot jet stream push could make this 1,095 mile mission possible. This meant that I could cover nearly one-half the continent in about four hours. Not bad, I thought, for a single engine, propeller driven aircraft. My ultimate plan was to finish the library board meeting by 9pm and then return to Buffalo by 10pm. I wondered if it would work.

The ramp service folks at Bismarck had N4720Y fueled and ready to go for my 1:30pm departure. I threw in a sandwich and a couple bottles of water. I also transferred my life raft from the rear baggage compartment to the floor behind my seat. Crossing Lakes Michigan and Huron had always been nail-biting experiences for me, especially at night or in the winter months. Their 80 to 100 mile wide spans exceeded the engine-out glide capability of my airplane. A night or winter ditching without a life raft is non-survivable. The Great Lakes year-around cold temperatures would sap out one's life long before rescuers could locate and reach you. Its no safe bet that a life raft will save your bacon, but it does add an element of comfort to the trip.

My planned route for this flight would take me due east over Fargo, North Dakota, over central Minnesota just above Minneapolis, northern Wisconsin, along the south shore of Lake Superior, over the Straights of Mackinac and the wonderful Mackinac Island that my family and I visited several years earlier.

From there, I flew east over the southern portion of Georgian Bay just north of Simco,

Ontario, then to my Watertown, NY destination. I filed for Flight Level 230 or 23,000 feet. This would put me at the base of the jet stream thereby generating a ground speed of 280 nautical miles per hour.

This was the third day of a three day itinerary and I was beginning to feel the fatigue. Like the day before, the weather was picture perfect, a far cry from many of the more sporty trips I had taken in the past over this same route. The Great Lakes spawn some of the nastiest weather in the world, but this day was an exception. The climb through 18,000 feet on the way up to my cruising altitude began to reveal the earth's curvature along with a darkening deep blue sky above. N4720Y was purring like a thoroughbred horse as it climbed upward at 700 feet per minute. Its supercharged induction system provided sea level power high into the rarified atmosphere above.

I leveled off at 23,000 feet and reduced the manifold pressure to 28 inches, retarded the prop to 2,300RPM, and reduced the fuel flow to 13.2 gallons per hour. Over the years, I found this to be the best high altitude power setting. I watched as the GPS groundspeed readout steadily increase from 200 to 230 to 250, and eventually to 280 nautical miles per hour. This represented a record breaking ground speed for N4720Y. Slow by jet standards, this was, indeed, the fastest I had ever piloted an airplane.

An uninterrupted flow of oxygen at this altitude is critical. I recall a recent trip when a former student, Pete Mancini, was traveling with me back from Cedar Rapids, Iowa. We were above 20,000 when Pete downplayed the importance of supplemental oxygen at altitudes below 30,000 feet. Okay, I thought. I invited Pete to remove his O2 canula to see how long we could remain coherent. Pete took my challenge, removed his life-giving oxygen, and continued conversing with me. In less than a minute, Pete's eyes began to roll in their sockets. His alertness noticeably declined.

"You okay, Pete," I asked?

"Sure . . . I am, uh, uh, I am OoooKaaaay," responded Pete in a slurred fashion that would have had him arrested by a police officer.

With that, I insisted that he go back on the oxygen, which he promptly and happily did.

The radio was remarkably quiet. Its silence was periodically interrupted by hand offs between Minneapolis and Chicago Centers of airliners flying much higher above. Very little flying goes on in the lower Flight Levels simply because nearly all of the general aviation and nonpressurized commercial flying takes place below 10,000 feet. All the airline stuff and business jets operate above 30,000 feet. Thus, I was pretty alone at 23,000 feet. The only problem is the absence of stimulation. Fair weather flying has its obvious benefits, but it can be, frankly, quite boring. Motoring along at high altitudes with the steady drone of the engine, the soft hiss of the oxygen flow, and the warm sun beating on your face can be quite intoxicating. Couple this with long absences of radio communication and you have the formula for . . . sleep. As in my trip out two days earlier, I had difficulty fighting off the urge to fall asleep.

True confession time. I failed in my struggle! I had been in the air about 90 minutes when I began to make out the shoreline of Lake Michigan. Well north of the Chicago east/west arrival and departure corridors, there was no traffic reported anywhere near my altitude. I had just been handed off to another Chicago Center sector with whom I would remain for the next 40 minutes or so. The autopilot was flawlessly tracking the GPS moving map course to my destination, so I leaned my head against a pillow pressed against the left side window and closed my eyes . . . for a minute, perhaps 20 minutes. It was not a deep sleep, mind you. It was more

like a doze; it was the sort of thing you do when sitting through a boring opera or dance recital. Granted, the image of me in this restful state would scare the heck out of an anxious passenger.

I heard my plane N number through my earphones.

“N4720Y, Chicago Center, do you copy?”

What was that, I thought. The call was repeated, “N4720Y, Chicago Center, do you copy?” Huh, what was that me they were calling, I wondered as I rubbed my eyes.

“Ah, Chicago Center, N4720Y here. Were you calling me?”

“Yes, sir. We called you several times. How do you hear this radio?”

“Loud and clear. I must have been on the other radio.”

That was a bit of a fib, but controllers fib, too, when they do not answer calls, saying that they had been on the land line. I glanced at the GPS moving map, then I looked out the window as the eastern shoreline of Lake Michigan was passing by below. What happened, I wondered? Had our ground speed increased dramatically? Were we off course?

What I discovered was that I dozed longer than I expected! During this time I had covered the eastern half of Wisconsin and all of Lake Michigan! Chicago Center now had my full and complete attention. They instructed me to contact Cleveland Approach Control.

“Cleveland Center, Centurian 4720Y, Flight Level 230.”

Cleveland took the handoff and bid me a good afternoon. I had survived another serious infraction of the rules that could have easily been a career-ender for a corporate or airline pilot. Oh well, I will be on the ground in another 90 minutes. Besides, I was wide awake now and eager to do something. I began to wish for challenging weather. A good old-fashioned line of thunderstorms would have at least kept me entertained on both the radar and stormscope. No such stimulation this afternoon.

It was not long before I could see the City of Toronto nearly 70 miles to the southeast. The visibility was crystal clear. I could see the entire eastern half of Lake Erie and the western portions of Lake Ontario and, of course, the Straights of Niagara, which is better known as the Niagara River (recall that a straight is the name for a body of water that connects two larger bodies of water. I had seldom been this high over this very familiar terrain.

The remarkably fast ground speed and high altitude required that I begin my descent about 90 miles before Watertown. Toronto Center quickly approved my request for lower as I began planning my approach into this northern New York airport. I marveled at the remarkably clear air on this late midsummer afternoon. Running eastward, away from the setting sun made for a very short afternoon. I could easily make out the cities of Toronto, Ottawa, Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, and Utica from my vantage point about 50 miles north of Lake Ontario. N4720Y was racing downhill at over 300 miles per hour. I felt a sudden sense of jubilation. I imagined it to the same feeling a test pilot receives as he or she breaks another personal speed record. I had this overwhelming urge to give the control yoke a quick turn to the right, with a little forward pressure and a touch of right rudder. This would have put N4720Y in an aileron roll to the right, something it was prohibited to do. “Oh what the heck,” I said to myself. . . . but just then, my sense of responsibility returned and I refrained from performing this simple maneuver. I was no test pilot and this airplane is placarded against rolls, spins, and other such aerobatic maneuvers. So it was back to transport pilot status for me.

I had landed at the Watertown Airport many times in my flying career. My wife, Jo, was raised in Watertown and much of her family remained there. The airport, itself, was quite old but

well maintained, unlike the airport in Kansas that I had landed at three days earlier.

Toronto Center had passed me off to Cleveland Center about 30 minutes earlier. In turn, Cleveland passed me on to New York Center, who then instructed me to contact Wheeler-Sac Approach Control for the final approach into Watertown. N4720Y was about 500 pounds lighter than it was when we departed Bismarck about five and one-half hours earlier. I reduced the throttle back to about 22 inches of manifold pressure and advanced the mixture about two turns of the knob to the right, and fed in ten degrees of flaps to get the airspeed down to a point where I could safely lower the landing gear.

The next two sounds I heard were, the gear lowering, then the squeak of the tires touching down on Watertown's Runway 28. I taxied over to the general aviation hangar where I met my wife's niece, Nicole. She and I had a quick supper together before arriving at my meeting site. After two hours of consultation, I returned to the airport, climbed back into N4720Y and flew about one hour back to my home base in Buffalo.

My three day itinerary was about over. I had covered nearly 3,000 miles and met with three clients in three different states all in three days. No air traffic delays, no invasive security searches, no annoying passengers to my left or to my right and, most importantly, I had a kick doing it all!

In comparing driving to flying, a friend of mine once quipped that you can build a mile of highway and travel a mile; you can build a mile of runway and travel forever! You know, he was right