

OSHKOSH BY ULTRALIGHT

Living in southwestern South Dakota has some distinct advantages... also some disadvantages such as being around 760 miles from Oshkosh. My wife, Linda, and I had decided last year to fly our recently built Challenger II to Oshkosh along with three other Challenger pilots that we would meet along the way. Sunday's departure day from our Rapid City home arrived with overcast skies and occasional rain showers throughout the day. We were to fly to Colome in south central South Dakota and spend the night with our friend, Chan Shippy, a retired farmer who has a single place Challenger. Chan and I had met over the internet in 1999 on the FlyUL email list while we were each building our planes.

Anyway, we would then depart Chan's farm at first light Monday morning and, upon arrival at Wisconsin Dells, WI, meet two more Challenger folks from Norfolk, NE. All of us had planned on two days of playing tourist at the Wisconsin Dells then flying on to Oshkosh for two or maybe three days, depending on weather, and returning home. A weather day before and after our trip itinerary had been plugged into the schedule for good measure. I had decided on a go-no-go time of 4 o'clock that afternoon to allow for travel and visitation with Chan upon arrival.

Four o'clock arrived with light rain showers and no sign of letting up, so I sent an e-mail to Chan saying I would not be departing as planned due to the weather. We now planned on flying out at first light Monday morning, meeting him, then continuing on from his place that morning. I finished packing the plane's belly bag with our tent, a sleeping bag and bag pads, as well as our clothes so we could just get in and go when the time came. I would sit on the other sleeping bag draped over my seat and seat back while Linda would carry our toiletries and sit on our towels. About 5:30 the rain started easing up and by 6 o'clock it had cleared out with lots of blue sky showing nicely. I called Huron FSS who said it had also cleared out at Kadoka where we would be refueling at their truck stop on I-90.

Winner, SD, located about 10 miles northwest of Colome, still had some low clouds but the briefer said they would be gone by the time we arrived at Kadoka. I called Chan to see how his weather was and he said it had stopped raining. Quickly checking my GPS, I found that we would arrive about 17 minutes after sunset if we were airborne by 7pm and the winds held true. I told him if he didn't hear from us within 45 minutes, we were on our way. I ran to the house where Linda, having seen me running, asked rather concerned, "What's wrong???"

I said, "Get your stuff, we're going!"

We scurried around getting last minute things and pulled the plane out of the hangar at 6:40.

We locked up the house and called folks to let them know we were leaving after all. The little Rotax fired up with anticipation and we strapped in. She was warmed up in short order and we taxied out to our paved country road via our neighbor's driveway since we were too heavy for our 1100' strip with 30' obstacles at each end. A radio call to Rapid City Regional Airport's tower gave us our clearance to enter their Class D airspace and depart our place. As we waited for a couple of cars to pass by, the strange looks on the drivers' faces told us they didn't have a clue. We taxied onto the road giving full power as we lined up on the "centerline". Our 885 or so pounds lifted off crisply in the light wind at 6:57 and we turned south to skirt along the south side of Rapid's class D airspace.

The leg to Kadoka was routine with gorgeous views of the Badlands and, with a nice tailwind, we were there in about 40 minutes or so. After landing on an old gravel road running parallel to I-90, we taxied over to the truck stop and took on 4.2 gallons of premium auto fuel. A couple of rubberneckers came over to ask questions and take pictures. That's just got to be our favorite refueling stop!

Departing Kadoka, we turned southeast toward Chan's farm with the GPS now showing our arrival at 12 minutes after sunset. The tailwinds were even better to the southeast and our ETA held true. Chan was glad to see us and we didn't stay up much later before getting to bed since we had decided to takeoff by 6 o'clock the next morning which meant waking up about five. All the weather had moved out by morning so we downed some toast and orange juice, checked over the planes, and were gone. Our next stop was Tyndall, SD where Chan's lady friend, Gert Zwanziger had gas waiting for us at a private grass airstrip north of town. We visited a bit, then departed for our third stop, Sheldon, IA. Sheldon was a really nice stop where we refueled and were off in less than 30 minutes.

As we climbed thru 1500 feet AGL, I shut off the aux fuel pump used when taking off. A moment later the engine lost some power. Linda announced her concern with a predictable expletive as I switched the pump back on. Everything came back to life so, deciding to check it again, I turned the pump back off and lost some power again. Linda definitely wanted to know what the heck I was doing and why! I explained that I was trying to determine what was causing the apparent fuel starvation on the main fuel pump and she stayed nervously quiet. I found I could reduce power below about 5800 rpm and things were okay. This still gave us a cruise of 68 to 70 mph which was okay so we continued on. I figured my main fuel filter had picked up some dirt so told Linda I'd replace it at Oshkosh.

The 12 mph tailwinds were holding nicely for us and we made our fourth stop, Forest City, IA near lunch time. The FBO offered us their courtesy van which we used to find the local Subway restaurant and lunch. Climbing out from Forest City we headed for Decorah, IA, our fifth stop. I switched off the main pump and climbed to altitude on the aux pump without any problems. Fueling up with our typical 5 to 6 gallons of fuel, we departed heading for Wisconsin Dells.

Approaching the majestic Mississippi River, we climbed up almost instinctively to 4000 feet then gradually let back down near the other side as we headed on toward "The Dells". We wanted to stay within gliding distance should we have an engine problem. Five o'clock saw our arrival at our sixth stop, the Baraboo Airport just south of "The Dells" and north of Baraboo, WI. The manager told us we could park our planes over in between some hangars and pitch our tents by them. The other two planes, with Challenger guys, JD Stewart (who runs the Challenger e-mail list) and Curt Heggemeyer, along with a motor home driven by two other Norfolk Ulers who were learning to fly, Bryan Reed and Ray Olson, had already arrived and were parked there. We set up our tents then took the motor home into Baraboo for supper. We returned to the airport about 8:15 and relaxed.

Shortly after dark, we witnessed the slow rising of a beautiful yellow moon just over the trees and, from our vantage point, seemingly guarding our Challengers as it hung over them. It was a splendid sight and we snapped a few pictures. We sat around shooting the breeze for an hour or so then turned in. I got a chuckle out of Linda when we snuggled down in our sleeping bags pads in the tent. She looked at me with this slight frown on her face and said, "You know, we've had a really nice camper for two years now and here I am in a tent, sleeping on the ground again!" I smilingly agreed and gave her a hug goodnight.

Tuesday morning found us up and ready to play tourist. After fixing breakfast, we headed into "The Dells" for some fun. We thought it was a bit cool for the water parks so decided to hit the go-kart tracks. Digging into our wallets for \$35 each gave us access to a whole day's worth of fun! The park held a dozen or so go-kart tracks as well as 4 roller coasters and the lines were short. On the first track we drove, everyone (except me) was being polite to Linda. HOWEVER, Linda wasn't into returning the favor as she was bent on having her own brand of fun. Although the signs said "No Bumping" she decided they didn't really mean that as long as the employees didn't catch you doing it. Also, if one of us tried to pass

her, she would weave back and forth so we couldn't. If she was somewhere out of the employees' sight, you didn't want to be near her or she'd whack you good with her kart! Then, after we had finished that track, I told them that she used to race at the Black Hills Speedway in Rapid back in the day and so many years ago.

Don't you know they decided right then and there that she could fend for herself and the competition was on!! A couple of the kart tracks went over to other buildings on the top floors. How cool was that!! Needless to say, we had a terrific time the whole day! The roller coasters were fun but we had so much more fun with the go-karts. We left at the 8 pm closing time with big smiles on our faces and hungry for something to eat. We had supper at a huge pizza place, stopped by a Dairy Queen for dessert, and headed back to the airport where we relaxed while telling our tales of competition all over again.

Wednesday was for the water parks. It was a fun time but not as much fun as the go-karts had been. We had decided to quit by 4 o'clock so we'd have time to depart Baraboo by 6 pm and make Oshkosh about 45 minutes later. A quick call to the Red Barn at Oshkosh to leave a message for announcer Frank "Woof" Beagle, completed our departure preparation. Frank who also owns (and teaches in) a Challenger wanted to know our group's arrival time so he could announce us to the crowd. We said we should arrive at the field about 7pm. The flight over to Oshkosh was nice with the four of us in a loose formation. We made the ultralight entry point as planned and headed north to enter their pattern. What a sight!

There were all sorts of aircraft in the pattern from powered parachutes, to trikes and fixed wing. The ultralight area is different from Oshkosh's regular field and runway area since the speeds are so different. Linda was pretty nervous with all the aircraft around us but decided to keep reasonably quiet. Arriving at 7:03, we made a fly-by and got back into the UL traffic pattern. Since there's no control tower for the ultralight area, they have a flagman at the approach end of the airstrip. It was my first time flying to Oshkosh and I'd been told that if they weren't waving any red flags at me to go ahead and land. Coming back around, Linda and I were number 3 in our group with Chan in the number 4 slot. The first two were waved off due to planes taking off so they went around a third time.

As we rounded the trees and turned onto final, I could see the flag guys at the approach end of the runway but was high so kicked in aileron and full rudder dropping into a pretty good slip. No flags appeared even though I saw a departing trike pulling up from the middle of the runway so I kept on slipping. My heart skipped a beat as I realized we were sinking way too fast because I had forgotten about our extra weight and our speed was now a bit slower than it should have been. We were really dropping fast! MAN!!! Now I've done it! I shoved in full power just knowing we were going to land hard but we didn't.

Mr. Rotax responded and it timed out just right because we rounded out under power, barely greasing it on which made me feel really thankful. Whew!!! I sure didn't want to bust a landing in front of a few hundred folks! We taxied off the field and over to a ground crew who marshalled us to the parking area entry gate and had us shut down. He remarked about our having chosen the busiest evening for our arrival. We were given a parking spot over near the Challenger tent and some other Challengers. We pushed the plane over to our spot, tied it down, looked at each other with a big grin and did a high five together! EeeeHaaaaa!!!! We did it... we really DID it!!!!!!

Bryan and Ray had the motor home parked over in a private campground near the Red Barn. We found them and pitched our tent near them then proceeded to enjoy Oshkosh for the next 2 days. The airshows were terrific and the WWII tribute on Friday afternoon after the airshow was especially impressive. We attended the Challenger forum Friday morning which was especially nice in that we got to meet

some of the guys from the Challenger e-mail list who's names I knew but had never met. I also found some of my EAA Chapter 39 guys and gals from Rapid at their campsite Thursday evening and visited for a while. I was really glad to have found them as we were becoming so packed with the publications we had and the souvenirs we'd bought, that we were really hurting for space. Jerry Peterson and Milo Shindler offered to take our sleeping bags, pads, and tent back to Rapid for us which was great. We gave them to Jerry the next day which really helped us a lot.

Saturday morning's weather was looking not so good. The powered parachutes were flying but the flying was finally cancelled about 9am due to the winds picking up and occasional light rain starting. We had planned on getting out by 7 o'clock but that wasn't to be. Checking the weather radar about 10, we finally saw a hole opening up over toward Baraboo and Decorah. The briefer said it should stay open so we decided to go. I let the other guys know that Chan, Linda and I were heading back since the weather was opening up a bit and Sunday's forecast was worse yet. They said they hadn't made up their mind about leaving.

Chan and I fueled up, did our preflights, and got an okay from the line boss to go. We pushed our planes over to the parking gate since no powered taxiing is allowed in the ultralight area. We got in our planes, cranked up with a crowd looking on and taxied over to the departure end of the strip. Engine runup was good so a windy, southeasterly departure found us heading up into an overcast sky. After departing and gaining altitude, we turned westerly only to find a 15 to 20 mph headwind component rearing it's ugly head for us. Due to the traffic, we stayed about 300' AGL until we were about 5 miles out then climbed up a bit more. A half-hour later we heard over the radio, the other 2 planes in our group getting airborne. I was really glad they had decided to head back after all. I know it was a tough call for them knowing they would miss Saturday's terrific air show but none of us wanted to chance Sunday's weather.

Approaching "The Dells", we could see all the tourist activities from the river tours to the water and go-kart parks. Reedsburg, IA was another 10 miles away and the first of seven stops on our return trip to Rapid City. We landed, refueled, walked across the highway for a bite to eat at Subway, then departed again, heading for Decorah. A strong, 20 mph direct crosswind greeted us there but the Challengers took it in stride. Parked at the fuel pump were a couple of Kitfox planes heading back to Colorado from Oshkosh. We visited with one of them for a bit after refueling, paid for our fuel, and were getting ready to depart when we heard the unmistakable sound of two stroke engines. Our stragglers had caught up with us so we waited for them to land and see what direction they might go from Decorah. We did split up there since they were heading farther south than we were.

The headwinds stayed pretty constant giving us ground speeds in the neighborhood of 50 to 55 mph. The turbulence was light but constant as we cruised across the lush green Iowa countryside with its rolling hills. We initially maintained our altitude of around 1000 feet AGL but climbed up to about 1500 AGL trying to find some smoother air. We finally got out of the overcast and cloudy weather about a third the way across Iowa. We arrived at Forest City's airport only to find no one around anywhere. Egad!!! We hadn't even considered or thought about small airports being closed on the weekend. We called the phone numbers listed in the pilots' lounge but none answered. Geez! Now what to do??

Well, I got to thinking and told Linda that I thought we should find their courtesy van, go buy a fuel can, and make however many trips it took into town and back to get gas for us. She didn't think that was a good idea but Chan said, "What are we waiting for?" I found the van's hangar unlocked and keys in the van so opened the hangar and drove the van out. Linda stayed with the planes while Chan and I went to town. We found a Pamida store, bought the largest plastic fuel container they had which was blue, held 5 gallons, and was labeled 'Kerosene'. It took 3 trips

into town to get our fuel but we got it along with a 2 hour delay in our trip. Leaving the blue container behind for the use of their van, we departed once more.

The leg to Sheldon was 112 miles and the headwinds had not changed a bit so we settled in for the ride. About 30 minutes later we decided to try and get out of the winds if we could. We went higher and lower without much luck, finally dropping down to around 100 feet AGL but gaining about 8 mph with the lesser wind that close to the ground. Flying along the rural Iowa countryside and it's rather straight highways at that altitude not only gave us a magnificent view of the lush green fields, but the sparse traffic on their rural highways provided an emergency landing strip if we ever needed it. Occasionally our westbound road would end at a north/south road. We would simply fly over to another section line to pick up another east/west road, and continue on... wonderful!

As we flew along, we would occasionally encounter a really small town of 8 to 10 blocks in size with a park somewhere on an outside corner block of town and folks playing ball or something there. They would wave excitedly as we flew by and we would happily wave back. A couple of times we flew by a farmhouse with the occupants out in their yard enjoying the nice afternoon. It felt so neat at that moment waving back to them as they waved to us. It made me want to circle around and land for a short visit with them. I just knew they had to be wondering who we were, where we were going, and where we had been.

The remaining 60 miles or so to Sheldon were flown like that and was one of the most enjoyable flights I've ever experienced. We arrived at the Sheldon airport just as the last sliver of the sun's golden light was dropping below the horizon. We climbed up to pattern altitude, called their unicom, and entered the traffic pattern with no one in sight. As I turned final, I told Linda I was going to cut the engine and dead stick it in. As she asked, "Why?", the engine went silent and we became a glider. "Why did you do that???" she asked excitedly. I told her I just wanted to land quietly with the wonderfully serene sunset before us. A short but gentle 'squeak, squeak.... squeak' signaled our arrival on the ground once more. I restarted the Rotax and we taxied over to the fuel pumps. As we were taxiing along, Linda said, "Jimbo!!, please don't do that again." I just smiled to myself and said, "Okay."

No one was around but a phone call soon remedied that. We sort of hated getting anyone out late like that but didn't really want to try it at 5 o'clock the next morning. We refueled and were offered the use of a vehicle to go into town for a bite to eat which we gladly accepted. Full bellies told us it was time to return to the airport and crash on the couches and chairs in the pilots' lounge for the night. It wasn't as restful as a motel bed might have been but it was okay.

The 5 o'clock morning sun came early so we got up and went out to the planes. We wiped the morning dew off the windshields, untied the planes and did our preflights. The Vari-EZ homebuilt we had tied down alongside was still bowing to the east as we departed the flight line for the runway. Tyndall was next in our sights as we rose up into the cool morning air. The multi-hued, green countryside was gorgeous with thin fingers of fog laying down in among some of the draws and low lying areas. An occasional pickup truck on a road signaled the start of the day for those that were earthbound. Also, our headwinds had slowed by 5 to 6 mph.

We made the private airstrip at Tyndall where Chan's lady friend, Gert, was once more waiting for us with fuel. We fed the planes and Gert fed us.... what a deal!!! She took us to her home where she fixed a wonderful breakfast for us. Ten o'clock rolled around and Chan said he would stay behind to "help Gert clean things up"... yeah, RIGHT! Naturally, Linda couldn't resist the opportunity to give him a bad time about that comment. Hey, retired folks gotta have a life, too, ya know!! Well, they took us back out to the grass strip where we departed leaving Chan to

fend for himself. I heard later that he did make it home okay but much later!

Flying on to Chan's place the winds remained about the same. The green countryside gave way to brown as we crossed the Missouri River. Arriving at Chan's farm, we refueled with the gas that Gert had left for us while we were gone. We took a nature break, and departed for my favorite refueling place... Kadoka's truck stop. The Badlands with it's craggy landscape was still somewhat intimidating yet beautiful. We kept a reasonable altitude and enjoyed them as we cruised along.

Kadoka's truck stop with it's giant American flag waving proudly finally came into view ahead of us. Sweeping down over I-90 for a landing on that old gravel road east of the exit, we had about a 12 mph crosswind. As we setup on our final approach, I noticed a small westbound car that slowed down alongside us over on the interstate, took the exit ramp, and stopped at the stop sign below. We landed and taxied down to the side road then they went on across, got onto the on ramp and drove on. They had apparently been waiting to see just what we were doing.

We waited for a semi-truck to pass by in front of us then taxied on over to the outside pump island with a group of about a dozen or so Sturgis-bound motorcyclists watching as we taxied in. Sturgis, SD is to motorcycles what Oshkosh is to aircraft. I shut down and got out saying, "Okay, you guys have Sturgis, we have Oshkosh!" A couple of smiles told me some of them knew what I was talking about. Several of them came over to visit with us and ask questions... lots of fun. Some of them had friends or relatives that had been to Oshkosh before. One couple couldn't believe we'd actually flown to Wisconsin in "that little thing".

We fueled up and departed with 4 or 5 bikers taking pictures and video as we taxied back up that gravel road. After turning around a couple hundred yards up the road, we took off waving to the bikers as we flew by. I punched in 'Home' on the GPS and climbed up to about 1000' AGL. The remainder of our trip was uneventful. I called Rapid's tower... "Rapid City tower, Experimental 142 Julie Lima."

"Experimental Two Julie Lima, go ahead" was their reply.

"Roger tower, 6 miles east, request entrance into Class D and transition to the Hayward Place."

"Transition approved. Where y'all been? Haven't heard you in a while. You go to Oshkosh?"

"Roger that," I replied. "It was great!"

"Glad to see you back." was their reply.

"Thanks... us too." was all I could think to say.

It had been a really fun trip for us. We touched down on our strip at 2:37 Sunday afternoon. Our trip had taken 8 days, covered 1530.2 miles according to the GPS, and taken almost 24 flight hours, 11.2 going, 12.4 coming back. This did not include ground time spent at each stop. Yes... we were tired but very happy campers! We shut down, got out, and unloaded a few things. After making the appropriate phone calls to friends and family, we put the plane away and walked into our house crashing for about 3 hours. It was a great trip and one I would not want to repeat again anytime soon, but... hmmm, maybe next year.