

The Journey, not the Destination

Life's a journey, not a destination. How many times have we all heard that cliché? Our trip to Sun 'n Fun 2010 sure goes to prove how true this cliché really is. The trip did not go off as routine in any sense, but, in retrospect, I'd do it again in a minute. Life's ups and downs are what make it all so interesting.

It was with a mix of fatigue and anticipation that I arrived at RRL airport Saturday morning, April 10th. The fatigue was due to the lack of sleep the prior night, I get that way before a big event. The fatigue also caused me to be, regrettably, a little snappy to my dear wife, who chauffeured me there so early on a Saturday morning. For this, I'm truly sorry.

After a bit of bumbling and fumbling in the dark, Steve & Karen in the Champ, Lyle in his Rans and I in my trusted Kitfox-heavy were off, into the predawn darkness. I was amazed, taking off third, how quickly I lost the other two planes, so I stayed my course to the east of their direct path to the meet-up at Stevens Point (STE). We chatted excitedly on "UL" through the almost one hour trip to Point. One hour to STE, a tail of headwinds to come...

As STE approached, we were joined in conversation with Paul Buss and Jim Shnowske who were a bit ahead of us. Landing at STE we gathered and were soon joined by the rest of the throng, all heading toward Lakeland. Now a party of 10, Paul Buss in his Avid, Jim Zeitlow in his Avid, Bill Reed in his Kitfox, Jim Shnowske in his Kitfox, Karen & Steve Krueger in their Champ, Arlen Krueger in his shiny Aircoup, Patrick Eron in his C150, Lyle Banser in his Rans and I in my Kitfox. With all gathered, a few photos taken, we were off to our first gas-stop, Poplar Grove, Ill (C77).

Paul's Avid gave a little trouble on start-up but was soon sorted (or so we thought) and we were on our way. Chatting on our agreed upon frequencies we flew in our three loose groups of three all the way to C77 with a little bit of juggling and shuffling. Our staggered arrival into C77 allowed (surprisingly) quick fueling and preparation for the next leg. Again unfortunately, Paul's plane gave some oil pressure problems on start-up but a solution was found (again, so we thought) and we were off to Coles County, Ill (MTO). A few minutes out of Poplar Grove, however,

Paul made the decision that his oil pressure woes were too troubling to continue. He regrettably, but wisely, turned for home while we soldiered on into the headwinds with a bit of a heavy heart at losing a member of our quest. His tailwind-hastened trip home was without incident. However, as of this writing he still has not gotten his oil pressure issues sorted.

Prior to arriving at MTO we were told horror stories of the high winds of Central Illinois by Jim and Bill during their last trip to Lakeland. So with a bit of trepidation (for myself at least) we approached MTO, whose runways split the wind direction perfectly so that everything was cross-winded. I landed one wheel at a time, tail, left main, then finally right main at a ground speed close to that of a brisk walk. We gathered for fuel at the FBO and watched the motorcycle safety class practicing a couple hundred yards away.

Soon we were off again, bound for Carmi, Ill (CUL). We landed at CUL as the afternoon boiling of heated air was beginning to really take its toll (on me at least). After the shortest hop thus far, I

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was happy to get out of the plane again for a walk and a stretch. A topping of fuel and we were off again, this time for Jasper, TN (APT).

At this time, known only to a couple of members of the group, Steve and Karen were cleaning a bit of oil-spray off their windshield. It was only a little, so it was thought to be the sign of some hard running and would get some attention later. (Insert hominess musical chord here.)

We left for APT as the evening was approaching. We would now bend our course a bit to the east and the wind would finally favor us a little, for a change. Tooling along at a good pace, Steve and Karen now openly spoke of their oil-on-the-windshield problem because it was definitely not going away. We lost, then after a bit found, Avid Jim. This was surely a sign that the fatigue was beginning to show on all of us. Tightening our groups a bit to keep together we soldiered on. Deviating a little to the north east we went around Nashville (or was it Memphis?) and pushed on into the lovely, now smooth, evening air.

Shortly Steve announced that fuel was beginning to be a concern and they were going to make a quick splash and dash at Lebanon, TN (M54), who's FBO, was luckily still open. Kitfox-Jim stopped with them to keep them company. After a slosh of fuel and a windshield cleaning they followed behind the rest of us.

Meanwhile the rest of the group approached APT. This is a lovely airport nestled in a valley at the beginnings of the Tennessee hills, made famous by Dan Marlena's telling of the tail of the "Promised Land". The fatigue, of what would be (for me at least) a 10.5 hour flying day, was showing. After starting a turn to down-wind for what was actually the interstate, I needed assistance finding the airport. Patrick lent me a hand, or at least a voice over the radio and we were soon on the ground preparing for our first night's camping. Within a half hour we were all together again, Steve, Karen and Jim having caught up.

We were all in the mood for some food after not eating more than a granola bar or a handful of trail mix all day. A call to the local Western Sizzler yielded a ride to their

restaurant by the manager and a recruited buddy. Lyle's daughter and her boyfriend joined us there and spent the night camping with us, too.

After a chilly night's camping we were to set off for LaGrange, GA (LGR). Examination of Steve and Karen's Champ soon concluded that the front seal must be leaking a bit and would need to be replaced, probably at Lakeland where parts could be had. With that "settled" we fueled and were on our way.

Climbing through the smooth morning air we went up to 5500 feet to clear the Tennessee hills with a little extra altitude to spare for good measure. 30 minutes or so into the leg, something happened.

A very quick, terse call was made by Steve stating that they were "Having an emergency. I've lost my prop. I have a field and I'm putting it there." Steve said. Watching out my left window, I saw the Champ was losing altitude quickly. Someone made the call to watch out for the rest of the group so as to avoid another catastrophe, a mid-air collision. With this in mind I stayed safely up high

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at 5500 feet and circled to the left to watch the dramatic landing unfold. There were calls for other usable fields, but by this time Steve and Karen were wisely committed to the one that was chosen and they were going there. I watched as Steve deeply slipped the Champ to drop down into their field. From way up at 5500 feet, the landing looked picture perfect smooth as they rolled out and made a turn to the left on the ground to avoid an approaching fence line. All the while, watching the landing I was almost chanting to myself, Don't flip. Don't flip. Don't flip! A few moments after they stopped, I saw Steve jump out of the plane and move to the cowl-ing to examine the engine/prop problem. To me, this meant that Karen must be okay if Steve was looking at the plane and not to her.

In the mean time, Arden had made the discovery that there was an airport just a couple of miles from Steve & Karen's landing site. Lafayette, GA (9A5), properly pronounced "la-FET" by the locals. Arden announced that he was headed there. After gathering Avid Jim, who had been following Steve and

Karen, we were all soon landing there, too.

I'll let Steve and Karen tell their story elsewhere in more detail, but suffice it to say they were not going to continue to Lakeland with the rest of us. In the end, they spent what turned out to be a couple of very enjoyable days in northern Georgia, making new friends and rolling with the punches life threw at them.

By 2 pm that Sunday we were getting ready to continue again. Lyle had given rides to every enthusiastic member of the Hicks family, who were Steve and Karen's impromptu hosts. With a very heavy heart, not only to us flying away, but for those staying on the ground, we prepped to leave Steve and Karen in Georgia, with their own mini-adventure.

The remaining seven members of the group continued on to LaGrange (LGR), for our next scheduled fuel stop. After a very quiet, uneventful leg, we landed for fuel at LGR. Gathering together in the FBO there, we decided to deviate from our plan and stop for the night at Americus, GA (ACJ). A very friendly attendant let us have use of the FBO building and the

courtesy car for the night. We discovered much to our dismay that Sundays in that particular county are dry, so the much needed drink we all wanted with our dinner would have to wait for another day.

We set out, bright and early for the final couple hops into Lakeland. The morning was bright, beautiful and incredibly smooth as we flew into Cross City, FL (CTY) for our final fuel stop on the way down. All fueled up, we went through our arrival procedures and strategy to keep together as a group. We left for Lake Parker (the first step of the arrival procedure). We kept the speed down in order to stay tight.

Over Lake Parker, Jim was contacted by the approach controller. Jim explained that we were arriving as a group and we were passed into the tower and on to land at Lakeland (LAL). This was a little disappointing in that I never got to rock my wings! There was a little drama getting into the airport with one of our group landing with the heavies on the other runway, 9 right, but all in all we were there and within 30 minutes we were all tied down to-

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gether in the Homebuilt Camping area. (With exception of Arden, who had gone on to the Classic area to meet up with friends and other Aircoups.)

We spent the rest of the day Monday and Tuesday at the show and had a good, albeit expensive, visit there. We were treated very well by Mary and her family who were, as usual, hosting the Homebuilt Camping area. We decided as a group that we would head out first thing on Wednesday morning. The Tower opened at 7 am, so that was when we were hoping to be leave. Before we left, Avid-Jim decided that he was going to stay another day in Lakeland, then move on to the east to visit some relatives in Florida and make his own way home via the new home of his Comanche in Alabama. Now our group would be down to six planes and their respective pilots.

Wednesday morning dawned clear and beautiful. The five of us (Arden would follow as he could) pushed out to the taxiway at just about seven and made our way to the departure area. After what seemed like 20 miles of taxiing, we arrived at the hold short line for runway 9 right,

and there we sat. 5 minutes. 10 minutes. 15 minutes. Finally Kitfox-Jim transmitted to the tower, "Good morning Lakeland tower. Is anybody home there?" No one was. Jim eventually contacted someone on the ground control frequency and got a clearance from them to leave. By the time Jim came back to the tower frequency his announcement that we should go quickly, was stepped on by the rest of the group's frustrated chatter. Never the less, Jim pulled out onto the runway and departed. We all followed suit figuring he knew something we didn't. (As was the case!)

The leg was beautifully clear, smooth and scenic as we went up the west coast of Florida to Cross City, our first stop for gas. As we were fueling, Arden came along in the Aircoup to join us. We were off again, six of the original nine planes. Our next stop was LaGrange and then on to Lafayette to collect Steve & Karen. Our trip north went very smooth. We had the wind at our back most of the day, severe-clear over our heads as we counted power plants beneath us as we went on our way. We arrived at Lafayette, on time, about 4 pm, with Steve & Karen waiting for us.

Introductions were made to their new friend, Kevin, a local county deputy and part time helper at Gann Aviation. Then we all met Carlus Gann, the owner of Gann Aviation. Ironically, Gann Aviation is a business on Lafayette's airport that is renowned for aircraft engine building. Steve and Karen, quite by accident, had their little "incident" right by one of the more prestigious engine builders in the country. Talk about lemons into lemon aid!

After an awesome dinner which included some real southern fare like hush-puppies and fried okra, we settled in for the evening. For the record, I'd have to say, Carlus' couch in his office was extremely comfy and I slept like a rock! By now, I had had enough of tents and air mattresses.

Thursday morning dawned beautiful and we were soon off again. This time we were up to eight people in the six planes! Kitfox-Jim and I had each acquired a passenger. However, in order to do this, we each left our camping (and most other) supplies with Steve & Karen's gear to

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be picked up by ground transport, at a later time.

The weather was good, on the way north from Georgia. We made the hop to Carmi, Ill, again for auto-gas. This time we stopped for a little while. We commandeered their two (2!) courtesy cars and went to Subway for lunch. Afterwards we again checked the weather for the final push home. There had been a stalled out line of rain and thunder storms across WI and IA we were watching. Things were looking good, for the moment, so we departed for Poplar Grove.

Poplar Grove was again being savaged by uncooperative wind when we landed (which actually caused me and Steve to do a go-around). Finally getting settled, we fueled up and checked the weather situation. After some discussion we decided we would make for Reedsburg, WI (C35) rather than straight north for home. There was a slot in the rain activity that looked favorable. The plan was to go to C35, get something to eat at the restaurant across the street, then make a decision to stay there for the night of press on to home. This was to prove a fateful decision.

Arden, Patrick, Kitfox-Jim & Karen landed at Reedsburg. Steve and I were 4th to get there, just as the rain started. Lyle and Bill, who were 10-15 minutes behind Steve & me, were monitoring our weather situation and made the wise decision to divert to another airport, initially Prairie du Sac, WI (91C). As they turned for 91C, Lyle saw Baraboo-Dells, WI (DLL) right off his nose, only a few miles away. They made quick time to DLL and Lyle landed first, on the grass runway. Bill, who had been tight behind Lyle decided to go around to give Lyle time to clear the runway.

Only Bill knows exactly what happened next. He landed hard, very hard, just off the airport property, rolling his Kitfox, end over end. As of this writing, Bill is still hospitalized in Madison and is recovering from his injuries. We are all hoping and praying for his speedy recovery.

As soon as the weather allowed, we (quickly) flew from 91C over to DLL where we met up with Lyle who had been, to this time, still with Bill. After discussing the situation and deciding that there was nothing more we as a group could do for Bill, he was in the very capable

hands of the EMTs and Hospital personnel; we got a shuttle to one of the resorts in the Dells that rent cars.

Arriving at the resort, the process of getting a rental car, after hours, began. Mind you, there were now seven of us, so a van was what we needed. The only car available was a Nissan. It was definitely not a van. We loaded our meager supplies in the trunk and began to load into the car. It was apparent, to me at least, that seven people were not going to fit; so I took one for the team and climbed into the trunk. (Where I believe I was more comfortable than any other member of the party!) The ironic part of all this was: I was really the only member of the group familiar with the area for driving directions.

We found hotel accommodations in Baraboo for the night, at a more reasonable rate. Lyle, Steve and Jim went to try and see Bill, while Karen, Arden, Patrick and I went down to the attached bar & grill for some well deserved food and a badly needed drink, (or three). After a short time, the guys returned and joined us. After giving what infor-

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mation they had been able to get about Bill, Karen interpreted the medical code language to mean that Bill was very critical, but still with us. After a stress relieving gab session and another drink or two, we retired to our rooms.

The next morning, Lyle headed for home right away in order to make it to work. Jim took him to the airport and he made a very bumpy, headwind filled trip back to RRL. We regrouped at the hotel, had a bite to eat and finally set off ourselves. Jim and I returned the rental car (we were down by one more so I didn't have to ride in the trunk any more!) and were shuttled back to the airport.

For me, it was a very melancholy feeling, knowing that one of our members was not going home, anytime soon.

While reviewing the weather, Lyle called us announcing his safe arrival at home. His trip was bumpy and windy, but safe. At that point we set out. Patrick and Arden headed direct to Antigo, while Jim & Karen in Jim's plane and Steve & I in mine headed for Merrill. Other than 30+ mph headwinds, the trip was uneventful. Jim & Karen went to Jim's strip where he then drove his truck to Merrill to deliver Karen, while Steve & I finished the trip landing in Merrill at about 11 am, Friday April 16th.

As a side note, Avid-Jim made a safe trip and arrived home Sunday the 18th at around 2 pm after overnighting Thursday night with family in Florida, the new owner of his Comanche in Alabama Friday and his daughter in Kenosha on Saturday.

As you can see, the majority of this tale is in the journey. The destination was incidental. One member of our throng is still on the journey. We are hoping for him to complete his journey home very soon. Despite the lows of this trip, I would surely do it again in a minute for the highs. The journeys taken in life are always more spectacular than the destinations.

Larry Wenning

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