

Robie Hensley

Story # 4

I was at Decker Airport one day when the phone rang. On the other end of the line was Steve asking, "how much will a half acre of tobacco cost us?" He had just taken our old Stinson over to the Johnson City Airport to pick up his friend John Warden. The three of us were getting ready for a trip to Seattle, Washington to deliver the Stinson to a man that lived in Canada, but was meeting us in Seattle. If the plane met his approval, he would buy it and send us home on a commercial airline.

The old Stinson had been in use at Decker Farm Airport on the Nolichucky River for a year or more. It was out of license and almost beyond decent flying condition. Of course Steve was joking about having to land in a tobacco field because he was really calling from the Johnson City Airport. Fortunately for us, there was a mechanic friend of Steve's visiting there when he taxied up to the terminal. The mechanic's trained ear detected engine noise that wasn't quite right. He told Steve that it sounded like the engine's timing was off. After a couple of checks, sure enough, it was 35 degrees out of time. Together they corrected the problem. I've always believed in guardian angels. That old plane probably would not have made it to Seattle without that last minute adjustment.

Back at Decker's we loaded our survival gear consisting mostly of sleeping bags and other essentials for our long cross-country experience ahead of us. The Stinson sounded much better now and was raring to go. Except for a few flaws that were in Steve's words, "no problem." The plane's generator was out, so that meant there was no battery, therefore, no radios. The electrical gas gauges were out too, as was the artificial horizon and DG was out too, also one more negative malfunction, the air speed isn't working at all. However, we still had the magnetic compass and altimeter.

It was mid afternoon when we finally got underway with Steve's friend John Warden, who was the instructor of Botany in the ETSU science department. John Warden was seated in a little space in the back seat. Steve was at the controls, and me in the co-pilot's seat (I like to call it co-pilot, makes me feel important) I sat right up there where I could observe all the instruments, which, by the way, are not working. With the help of our sectional maps which would guide us across the states, west towards the setting sun. Unfortunately, today was very cloudy with enough visibility to navigate via VFR which we referred to as IFR meaning "I Follow Roads." Over Kentucky with the clouds now down so low were just above the treetops since without our instruments, we dare not get into the clouds where we couldn't see the ground for reference to keep right side up. Suddenly, we roared across an open field and in the surrounding woods were thousands of turkeys feeding in the middle of the field. Flushed, like a rock dropped in a cesspool into the woods on all sides. I hope they didn't injure themselves.

By this time, Steve estimated our fuel should be getting low, without the gauges working, his guess was confirmed when we spotted a small airfield and landed. Using a stick we measured our fuel supply and it was pretty low. No fuel was available here but the map showed a larger airport some distance away and we decided to risk continuing on. When we reached the road where the airport was located, we mistakenly followed it in the wrong direction until we decided it must be the other way. With the "pucker factor" up to

ten, and contemplating engine starvation any moment, we turned back and soon the airport came into view. After topping off the tanks, the remaining daylight didn't leave enough time to continue and we didn't want to be caught in darkness without instruments. The airport personnel agreed to let us bed down in the lobby for the night.

The next day, the weather was more favorable. We flew across Indiana, Illinois, and on into the Midwest, stopping only to refuel. Steve was having trouble controlling the plane on the ground until somewhere in the Midwest he disassembled the tail wheel, and sure enough, the wheel assembly had been incorrectly installed. He corrected it and no more problems on landing after that. As an extra bonus, I unclogged the pitot tube and enjoyed being able to see what our air speed indicator read, which was useful on takeoff and landing. Talk about flying by the seat of your pants, which is what we had been doing.

Somewhere we spent the night in our sleeping bags out on the ground under the wings at some airfield. The following day we flew toward Cheyenne across what looked like desert. Occasionally we saw what looked like had been a homestead before the dust bowl era (that took off the topsoil which vegetation could no longer survive). The big green circles we now saw from the air suggested irrigation. All this intrigued John, our Botany teacher, especially when he saw two lone trees ahead that had survived, wondering aloud what kind of trees they were, Steve said, "We'll see." He did a wing over and dived between the trees. "Well, John, what were they?" Steve asked. John said, "Don't know, I had my eyes shut."

Picking up the westbound railway, which we knew was our route through the Rockies, we followed that till we came to Laramie. The elevation at this point required twice the takeoff distance to get airborne. Our next stop was Rock Springs, where there was an interesting airplane. It was a modified Helio Courier that they had installed a nose wheel and lots of sophisticated equipment. Steve, of course, was intrigued with the modifications of that plane and was asking the mechanic lots of questions about it. The mechanic said the owners frequently flew down to Mexico. Later that day, Steve and John were exploring down in the scrub brush and rocks off the end of the runway. John's specialty is studying the plants and trees. Two men came over and warned them that there was danger in there. "There's badgers in there," one of them said. Steve asked "Are they dangerous?" The man replied, "is the pope a Catholic?"

The next day we were flying above 11,000 feet towards Salt Lake City. Along the Green River the road below forked and our decision was to take the North Fork which would go to Ogden, Utah and fuel up again. This plane sure likes to drink the gas. We took a more northwest route, and after a while, we ran out of map. We didn't have a sectional for this area, but we knew if we kept this heading, we would pick up our next map. Eventually, we picked up recognizable landmarks and had to do that refuel job again. Now that we could follow the interstate again, we knew it would take us through the Cascades at Snoqualmie Pass in Washington. From there on, it would be downhill, as they say, to Seattle. When we approached the mountains, clouds obscured the tops. There was no way to go over the mountains without instruments, so what should we do? Suddenly there appeared an opening in the forest, better yet, there was an inviting grass strip, which we gladly accepted. This was our lucky day. We tied down the plane and noticed everything here looked "GI." Although the place was vacant, it was kept up, even toilet paper in an outhouse. Evidently, we had found an emergency airfield for military planes.

We spent the night, it was cold and rainy. We took a short walk through the woods where John showed us some bear scat; first I'd had ever seen. We came out onto the interstate, where a lodge is located. We went inside and sat next to a big roaring fire. Later, we returned to the airfield and gained access to one of the barracks. It was bare inside, except for cots without mattresses. Using our sleeping bags, we slept comfortable enough until awakened by some animal trying to get in. We guessed, maybe it was a bear. When we got up, our backsides looked like a waffle, after sleeping on those cot springs without a mattress or pad under us.

Sometime in the afternoon, the clouds looked high enough to permit us to fly through the pass. If we had instruments that worked, we would have probably flew through Stampede Pass instead of following the interstate. It was looking good so far, the road below was beckoning us on, when all of a sudden we found ourselves in a box canyon. We saw lots of buildings down there, and the mountains rising up on all sides, pushing up into the clouds. Steve did a crop duster's u-turn and went back out where we came in. We saw our mistake right away. The main road had made an abrupt turn and we had followed the wrong road. We finally got back on course and climbed higher as the terrain rose steeply. Above us, the clouds loomed closer at last reaching the saddle, the point where the road crests; we are barely above the terrain and almost punching into the clouds. We breathed a sigh of relief, throttled back as we descended towards Seattle. The rest of the trip was a piece of cake.

The perspective buyer was waiting anxiously for a trial spin in the Stinson. He was very impressed, mostly because the old reliable plane had safely made the journey from Tennessee to the West Coast. While waiting for Steve to come back down with the buyer, an old man was telling me that the Indians could tell the weather by looking at the mountains in the distance many miles away. He said, the Indians say, if you can see the mountains, it's going to rain, and if you can't see the mountains, it is raining.

The new owner furnished me with an airline ticket back home and also one for John and Steve. I flew back that day, but Steve and John rented a car and stayed a day or two and toured Olympic Park. John thought he had died and gone to heaven. This was his environment. From the rain forest along the west side near the Pacific to the Alpine Meadows and glaciers at the highest elevation. After we all got home safely, we enjoyed telling stories about the trip to everybody at home. I will never forget the Stinson trip to Seattle, and now that both Steve and John Warden are gone, I cherish the memories even more.

(Note: it is illegal for passengers to occupy the plane flying on a ferry permit, but who's looking)