



October 2008

Commentary

Flying Carpet

Writers' Rendezvous

Bottling the magic of flight

Am I the only aviator compelled to visit every nook and cranny passing on the Earth below? I think not. Like many pilots I obsessively mark my charts with obscure roads and trails to trek on some future land journey. Rarely do I achieve those goals, but trying only makes the fantasies more palpable.

Today an added dimension colors my world aloft. This isn't the typical business trip, where each passing feature out the window, however captivating, serves as a countdown to some appointment. Nor is it a sightseeing flight tinted magical by the purple rays of sunset. Rather, a special destination alters my view. Sure, the familiar landmarks materialize reassuringly in their usual places, but this time they're painted with words rather than a brush.

Like a novel, the free-flowing Verde River meanders beneath me through its namesake canyon, cutting its own channel and changing course unexpectedly from time to time. From the air the Verde is just a great static ribbon, huge swaths of which are comprehensible in a single glance. It's the grand vista of an eagle. But when I imagine myself tracing the river by canoe it assumes another dimension — time. And through time it becomes a story. I fly this waterway in only 30 minutes, but how long would it take to paddle from its headwaters to its confluence with the Salt River? And what would I encounter along the way?

Such contemplations consume me en route to my monthly writers' rendezvous. Writing is surprisingly like flying — soaring with a bird's-eye outlook on the world, sometimes concentrating on the overview, other times on the technical details that get you to where you're going. Given today's mission, I cannot help but concoct what I see into a story.

Those rapids beyond the horseshoe bend — could I anticipate them in my blind approach from upstream? And negotiate them safely if taken by surprise? A dirt road slithers stealthily from my right down the Bradshaw Mountains to the old Sheep's Bridge crossing — the only road access in maybe 50 miles of river. Jean and I once drove it years ago with our young children. This morning that junction is empty, but occasionally from the air I see vehicles parked there. Who would occupy the battered pickup trucks I might encounter in such a place? And how might they greet me? Would this be a tale of friendship? Love? Or horror?

As with flying, we who write must continuously burnish our skills. In some ways this is even harder than improving flight proficiency, as writers can't just drive to the local airport seeking a good instructor. Beyond mastery and encouragement they need inspiration, innovation, and creativity.

That's why for me this writers' gathering has been a do-not-miss event for years. It started casually enough when I teamed up with kindred aerial spirits Heather Baldwin and Brooke Bessesen to share writing tips and review one another's work. Another motivation was advancing those larger creative projects that sink to the background in busy day-to-day life.

Bessesen, a private pilot and children's book author, flies a show-stopping Velocity kitplane she built with her husband, Kevin. Baldwin, a magazine writer and instrument-rated commercial pilot, owned shares of a flying club Cherokee 180 with her husband, John, an airline pilot. Along with their piloting skills, both Bessesen and Baldwin are gifted writers and inspiring thinkers.

A more remote participant is Lake Tahoe-area flight instructor and aviation writer Laurel Lippert, who owns a Cessna 170 taildragger with her husband, Tom. Once when Lippert was visiting northern Arizona, the rest of us loaded our writers' *rendezvous* into the *Flying Carpet* and flew off to visit her. Clearly, a common thread between all of us is flying. Not only does piloting nurture our thirst for adventure, but it also delivers creative dimension to our world as writers. Tempering those aerial perspectives are the nonpilots who have joined our group. Michelle Hoffman is an *Arizona Republic* theater critic, and Mindi Leatham a creative writer and marketing wizard.

Along with swapping workaday assignments for critical review, each of us has creative projects too soul-baring to share with any but the closest of friends. As with cross-country flights, each project has its own topography: Baldwin's World War II aviator novel, Leatham's young adult craft book, Bessesen's latest children's book, and Hoffman's cursing, fast-



talking, hard-knocks business novel. These we dissect, hammer, and forge in the dark recesses of a coffee shop.

My challenge is capturing in mere words the epiphanies we pilots experience from the air. Sometimes flying is like the quilt of farm fields viewed from aloft — structured and organized with any rough edges pieced neatly together. Other flights wind and grind like that serpentine Verde River beneath my wings, rambling toward barely imagined destinations without benefit of a flight plan. Only when such courses are history can we look back to see where we've been. I'm hopeful that today's meeting will help me better bottle the magic of future flying adventures, whatever their character.

For years I drove just five minutes to our writers' rendezvous, but now I reside 150 miles away in Flagstaff. Thankfully my writing compatriots made me promise to keep coming. Although on any given day the trip may seem like a daunting excursion, I now have a delightful purpose to fly monthly for my writing fix. And there's no discounting the creative power of my view out the windshield.

It's hazy this morning as I approach Phoenix, the result of rare recent rainfall. Glancing eastward toward the dawn, I savor a scene both pilots and authors can appreciate: misty layers of the Superstition Mountains torn from shades of monochrome paper. To a pilot it's a photograph. To an artist it's a painting. To a poet it's verse. For me in my *Flying Carpet*, it's a someday story hiding in an amazing view.

Greg Brown was the 2000 National Flight Instructor of the Year. His books include Flying Carpet, The Savvy Flight Instructor, The Turbine Pilot's Flight Manual, Job Hunting for Pilots, and You Can Fly! Visit his Web site, www.paperjet.net.

By Greg Brown

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Mist cloaks Arizona's Superstition Mountains.