



Commentary

Flying Carpet

Goodbye, Don

Long journey north

Don was at the island that Saturday, his bit of paradise on the Canadian side of Lake of the Woods, when the pain began. Fortunately, my brother-in-law Dave was there with his wife, Barb. They rushed Don by boat and car to Kenora, Ontario, where he was airlifted to Winnipeg.

I hardly knew Don, my mother-in-law's longtime companion. When Don and Marge wintered in Arizona, Jean and I would occasionally meet them for dinner. A retired butcher and grocer, Don enjoyed socializing and playing the sax. He treasured fishing from his island cabin and, most importantly, he loved Marge. Although Don and I had little in common, he brightened our gatherings with cordial north-country humor.



Despite his doctors' best efforts, the sad news came on Monday that Don had died. The funeral was scheduled for the following Saturday in Don's hometown of Baudette, Minnesota, raising travel challenges because it fell on a holiday weekend. Jammed and costly airline flights dictated that Jean travel there alone, depart three days early, and return a day late. Rental cars and hotel rooms also were in short supply.

"This is a nightmare," said Jean. "How long would it take to fly there ourselves?" Obviously she hadn't looked at a chart. "From Arizona to northern Minnesota? That's a very long flight," I replied. "Over 10 hours each way."

"Going by airline means five depressing days alone, Greg. I'd rather team up in the *Flying Carpet* and enjoy some adventures together along the way." Tentatively, I investigated Baudette International Airport. Alongside its paved strip was a water runway in the adjacent Rainy River. "Floatplanes can taxi across the river to Canadian customs," said my directory. Intrigued, I phoned Tom, the airport manager. "C'mon up," he said. "We have no rental vehicles, but you can use the airport courtesy car. Just keep in mind that it's nothing fancy."

"It's not a courtesy car unless the windshield is cracked," I joked. "Then you won't be disappointed," Tom said. But then I checked the weather — thunderstorms were forecast along the entire 1,300-mile route. Discouraged, I informed my wife, "To be certain of making the funeral, you need to go by airline."

"But we'd likely make it by *Flying Carpet*, right? We have three whole days to get there."

"Yeah, probably, if you can accept the possibility of getting stranded somewhere and missing the memorial service. Buying an airline ticket after today would be impossible."

"Fair enough," said Jean. "We'll go by *Flying Carpet* and make the most of a sad mission."

I didn't expect to get past Santa Fe when we took flight Wednesday morning, but the weather beyond there proved better than forecast. When thunderstorms did pop up, Albuquerque Center advised landing at Trinidad, Colorado. The subsequent Denver Center controller, however, directed us easily around the activity. The thunderstorms were organized in clusters, so thanks to flight watch and some 50-mile detours we bypassed all the weather.

To our delight, we made it all the way to Fargo, North Dakota, that evening, only 150 miles short of our destination. Just how far north we'd flown didn't sink in until we dined *al fresco* at 9:30 p.m.; it was still light some two hours beyond sunset at home.

Having made such good progress, we toured the University of North Dakota Aerospace program in Grand Forks the next morning, then steered northeast into Minnesota. When farmlands gave way to swamps, we noted with surprise what seemed to be ultralights beneath us — only to realize they were actually huge herons and pelicans circling thousands of feet below. Then 50-by-80-mile Lake of the Woods came into view; to parched Arizonans, it seemed a great ocean.

Water pilots landing in nearby lakes dominated the radio advisory frequency when we turned downwind over the Rainy River, and seaplanes filled Baudette's parking ramp when we landed. "This is nothing like Arizona," said Jean as we tied down next to a derelict Noorduyn Norseman on floats.

Equally novel was Baudette's courtesy car. Not only was the windshield indeed cracked, but duct tape supported the side mirror, errant wires draped the accelerator pedal, and the "check engine" light remained eternally on. Adding character were discarded "biker girl" posters in the back seat. Best of all, the car's previous life had never entirely been erased — emblazoned

on its doors and trunk were the words, "Lake of the Woods Sheriff."

Soon we gathered with Marge's family on Don's treasured outdoor deck. His son Russ arrived, and daughters-in-law Sue and Bonita. As we told stories and swatted mosquitoes and scanned Canada across the Rainy River, Don's memory fished just a few feet away on the old washed-out pier.

The next morning, Jean and I strolled Lake of the Woods beaches. "If only Don were here to show us around," Jean said sadly as we wandered this paradise he called home. Upon seeking shelter from gathering thunderstorms, we discovered another foible of the sheriff's car — inoperative windshield wipers. Navigating rainy roads without them made instrument flying seem easy.

When time came for the funeral, Jean and I drove far back in the procession so as not to threaten the dignity of the occasion. "Actually, Don would have appreciated this sheriff's car in his procession," noted Jean of the man's quirky sense of humor. We didn't anticipate, however, finding the car's battery dead when mosquitoes urged everyone from the cemetery. To a symphony of swatting and slapping, Russ jump-started our cruiser for its return trip to the airport.

We made it to Colorado Springs that evening, but not without one final incident. Out of McCook, Nebraska, our *Flying Carpet* pitched slowly downward while its airspeed tickled the yellow arc. "Mountain wave!" Quickly I disconnected the autopilot and chopped power before brutal bumps rearranged our stomachs, baggage, and backseat coolers. "We will never forget Don's funeral," said Jean, cowering in her seat as we lurched along at maneuvering speed. Between the blue Rainy River, an old sheriff's car, and this long journey north, I knew she was right.

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](http://www.GregBrownFlyingCarpet.com), www.GregBrownFlyingCarpet.com.

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