



In decades of piloting, **GREG BROWN** remembers the vast majority of his flights as “routine”...whatever that is.
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‘ROUTINE’ FLIGHT

“For once,” said Jean, “a routine flight.” We cruised homeward through cool, calm skies thanks to a high overcast filtering New Mexico’s high-desert summertime sun.

Driving from Flagstaff to Alamogordo takes eight hours each way. Going commercially requires two airline legs plus 90 minutes’ drive from El Paso. So general aviation truly offers the fastest way to get there, circumstances permitting, and this weekend was proving to be such an occasion.

But what is a routine flight, anyway? Piloting light airplanes turns out to be more about anomaly than routine. However often we travel a given route, every flight is different. Most aviators learn to appreciate that variety as adventure, but anyone

expecting uneventful aerial “auto trips” is doomed to disappointment.

We often face impediments flying this three-hour journey to visit family—thunderstorms, turbulence, headwinds, or potential icing. Restricted airspace aggravates such problems by limiting routes and our ability to deviate. One Thanksgiving we returned



Thunderstorms threaten Alamogordo White Sands Regional Airport (ALM) from the Sacramento Mountains.

home early to avoid a week of unflyable weather.

But this weekend had been different. Yes, we’d worried about forecast widespread thunderstorms before takeoff in each direction. Outbound Friday morning there’d been consternation entering New Mexico when cumulus clouds billowed ahead like hatching thunderstorms, but just as abruptly they’d ended.

Perhaps, Jean and I concluded, “routine” is partly our own doing. We’ve learned to take off early on summertime travels. Departing bleary-eyed is a small price to avoid bouncing, hot and cramped, through storm-laden afternoon skies.

Then there’s route familiarity. Our first time flying to Alamogordo, storm clouds seemingly threatened our passage through the general aviation corridor north of town. Since then, however, we’ve learned that although thunderheads blossom dramatically over the nearby Sacramento Mountains most summer mornings, they generally perch peacefully there until afternoon before drifting over town to threaten the airport. So inbound on Friday morning we’d greeted them as old friends rather than grave threats. Still, within moments of touchdown, monstrous boiling thunderclouds lunged toward Alamogordo from their mountain lair. Our flight would have been far from routine an hour later.

We’d again departed early this morning, munching boiled eggs aloft in lieu of the hot breakfast offered by our hosts. Despite forecast widespread thunderstorms, the only blob on our cockpit weather screen topped Phoenix, far south of our route.

“It’s hard to believe those predicted thunderstorms will actually develop,” observed Jean as we cruised peacefully to country music on satellite radio. Only upon approaching Flagstaff for landing did we notice a pair of isolated rainshowers, one 10 miles north and another 10 miles south.

As we drove home from the airport, however, huge raindrops suddenly pelted our windshield. Storms dumped some five inches of rain that day, flooding parts of town in a 100-year rainfall event. Arriving just 20 minutes later would have forced us to divert.

Avoided threats, however, are soon forgotten. Rather, we’ll remember this trip as calmly cruising beautiful New Mexico skies to a soundtrack of fiddle and steel guitar, and savoring *for once, a routine flight!* **FT**