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## Commentary

### Flying Carpet

By: Greg Brown

#### The longest day

Destination: Santa Fe

Do you think we'll get all the way to Arizona tonight?" asks Jean. We've just taken off from visiting our son and daughter-in-law in Sumter, South Carolina.

"Possibly," I reply. "Although getting home should take 12 or 13 hours and I've never managed that much flying in one day. I'm thinking we'll refuel at Little Rock, and hang out with our buddy Bruce tonight in Santa Fe. That should take about 10 hours. If we feel like continuing instead, well, it's only another two and a half hours to Flagstaff."

"What a vacation this has been!" says Jean. "Visiting friends and family in Illinois, Indiana, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, South Carolina—all in just two weeks. I loved lounging with Desi and Austin yesterday at Pawley's Island beach. And now for the finale, fine dining with an old friend in Santa Fe!"

It's our first journey across the Southern states in years, so between broken clouds we ogle Atlanta's lake-studded northern suburbs; the Tennessee River at Huntsville, Alabama; and the Mississippi River south of Memphis. Between sightseeing attractions, we talk.

"I learned something interesting departing Flagstaff for Chicago two weeks ago," I said to Jean. "When I asked the flight service briefer about potential fuel stops, she said, 'Airport managers are supposed to inform us immediately if there is no fuel. Since there are no such notations, they should have it. But remember, you can always radio Flight Service en route and have them telephone a given airport to confirm fuel availability.' I never knew you could do that."

Descending through scattered cumulus, we thread our way between adjacent airfields to North Little Rock Airport. Jean's been photographing our destination runways throughout the trip, but it's so hot and bumpy here that she doesn't even retrieve the camera. Sweat drenches our faces as we refuel in sweltering heat.

"We need to get out of here now!" says Jean just minutes after landing. As eager as we were to escape the cockpit after five hours of flying, now we just want to flee this miserable humidity. I file instruments to Santa Fe in hopes of climbing to cooler, drier air. After takeoff, however, we cannot top the clouds and bounce uncomfortably through them for hours on end.

"Check out our groundspeed," says Jean as we enter Oklahoma. From 130 knots it slows to 120, then 110. "Hopefully it won't stay that slow, or we might not make Santa Fe without refueling again."

But over the next hour our speed sags further to 100, and then 95. I troubleshoot to confirm that nothing's wrong. But the engine's developing rated power, the flaps are up, and the cowl flaps are closed. Our problem is 50 knots of headwind.

Now our groundspeed slumps to 87, so under clearing skies I cancel instruments and

descend from 8,000 feet to 6,500. But we're still doing under 90 knots.

Frustrated, I assess our remaining fuel. There's not enough to make Santa Fe at this speed, so I change destinations to Las Vegas, New Mexico, 50 miles closer. An hour later I concede that Las Vegas won't work, either, so I re-file to Dalhart, Texas, 175 miles short of Santa Fe. Soon even that seems questionable.

"We might need to land at Amarillo," I say to Jean, discouraged. By now, any hopes of proceeding to Santa Fe after refueling—much less Flagstaff—have evaporated.

"Ugh!" says my wife. "When we took off this morning I expected a romantic evening in Santa Fe. Now we're talking sleeping in some cow pasture!" Finally our groundspeed stabilizes at a maddening 85 knots—we can make Dalhart, but not until after 6 p.m.

Will fuel be available that late? I wonder. And lodging? And if so, could we get into town? Suddenly I remember the flight service tip from the outset of our trip. I radio McAlester Flight Service, and sure enough the briefer consents to telephone Dalhart. Shortly afterward we glean fragments of a staticky transmission. "This is McAlester Radio. I have that info you requested. McAlester Radio, over." I answer and answer but apparently the briefer can no longer hear me.

"Fort Worth Center," I radio, "is there any way to get some destination information we requested from McAlester Flight Service?" The controller calls back 15 minutes later. "Dalhart has fuel, lodging, and a loaner car. Someone will be there at least until 7:30." He even shares a phone number in case we land after closing.

"Is that thing broken?" says Jean, pointing to our GPS time-to-destination display. "Seems like it's been stuck on an hour and thirteen minutes forever!" She's only half-joking. With each new airport that appears she asks, "Isn't that Dalhart?" At long last our destination slowly emerges amid a pancake-flat gaggle of irrigation circles.

We battle howling winds to a landing, and Chuck from Ingram Flying Service motions us to the pumps and tops the airplane. Then we tie down next to the one other aircraft on the ramp. With nary a tree in sight to impede the gale, it's all we can do to install our cockpit cover.

"I'll bet that's the airport car," says Jean of a faded and chromy Crown Victoria in the parking lot. But instead Chuck tosses keys to a late-model crew-cab pickup, one of the nicer airport cars we've experienced. "No need to add gas," he says congenially, "unless you don't have enough to make it back to the airport."

"This is no Santa Fe, but I'm glad to be anywhere," says Jean as we tumble exhausted into bed after savoring small-town hospitality at the Bar-H Steak House. "Today was the longest flying day I ever remember."

"The hard part's over," I reply. "Just an easy four-hour flight tomorrow over the sunny Southwest, and we'll be home at last."

*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.](#)*