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TED HECKMAN'S 1941 Meyers OTW biplane at Padgham Field in Allegan, Michigan (left). Tyler Allen and Jean Brown at Kalamazoo College in Michigan (below).

SIGHTSEEING MICHIGAN

VISITING FRIENDS FAR FROM HOME

For some great sightseeing, cruise low along the Lake Michigan shoreline on your way from Chicago,” my friend Jason Blair had advised before takeoff. Unfortunately, lake-effect showers streamed southward over northern Indiana, dulling the view. For the moment we navigated haze under gray 2,200-foot ceilings.

“We’re a mile below Flagstaff’s airport elevation,” Jean said, noting the altimeter. That seemed queasily unnatural compared to our normal 8,000- to 11,000-foot flight altitudes back home in Northern Arizona’s mountains.

Gradually, we found ourselves descending under lowering clouds and virga. I checked weather. While our destination of Allegan, Michigan, 60 miles away remained clear, nearby lakeshore stations had suddenly fallen below 1,500 feet overcast, with Michigan City reporting 900 feet broken. We deviated eastward toward better weather away from the lake.

Why are we doing this? I thought, eyeing cobalt skies through broken clouds overhead. There were other airplanes down here, and tall radio towers. Rather than steer farther off course to escape the muck, I requested a “pop-up” instrument clearance, which South Bend Approach promptly granted. In no time we surfed blue skies over snowy clouds at 5,000 feet.

Between them could be glimpsed vivid farm fields and sparkling Lake Michigan beaches. Funny how visibility can sometimes be restricted near the ground, and yet appear crystal clear from above.

Jean and I now shared excitement about visiting our friend Tyler Allen, a sophomore at Kalamazoo College. You may remember Tyler from previous columns—he began flight training as a high school student on the Navajo Nation, and we shared many Arizona flying adventures together. Here, finally, was our opportunity to visit him at college.

The clouds dissipated as we proceeded north, so we canceled our instrument flight plan and descended visually into peaceful Padgham Field Airport. Jason and his girlfriend, Aimee Heckman, helped secure the *Flying Carpet*, and off we drove to Kalamazoo.

We were Tyler’s first campus visitors from faraway Arizona, and he greeted us beaming at his dorm. An official campus

tour guide, our friend reveled in showing us beautiful “K” College, its dignified buildings framed by blossoming trees. We sat in on choir practice in Stetson Chapel, scoped out the school’s impressive tennis courts for Jean’s benefit, and sampled student life lunching at Hicks Center.

A particular highlight was Dalton Auditorium, where Grammy nominee Radmilla Cody had screened her award-winning documentary on a recent tour. Cody is among the top Native American entertainers, so, as a fellow Navajo, Tyler was honored when asked to present her at the event.

He told of introducing the college’s honored guest and himself in the Navajo language, using traditional family-clan introductions. As one of few Native Americans on campus, that made him a bit of a celebrity. Better yet, when Tyler subsequently encountered Cody at the Navajo Nation Fair, he had the pleasure of introducing her to his mother, grandmother, and aunts, all of whom own her albums.

Tyler’s family hasn’t yet been able to visit, so I delighted in texting them snapshots of him around campus. They’re so excited about attending Tyler’s commencement two years from now that his mother, Val, is already crafting traditional



Navajo clothing for him to wear under his graduation gown.

After our tour, Jason and Aimee treated us all to dinner at a local Iraqi restaurant. Tyler misses his grandmother's home-cooked Navajo food, but Middle Eastern cuisine offers similarities with its lamb dishes. Tyler showed photos of icy Lake Michigan from a recent flight with Jason.

Along with being a pilot examiner and flight instructor, Jason is a boating and diving enthusiast. He and Aimee enjoy cruising Lake Michigan and exploring Great Lakes shipwrecks. Last winter he took Tyler snowshoeing for the first time, and plans to take him fishing. Best of all, Jason looks forward to helping our young friend finish his pilot certificate—Tyler has taken a hiatus from flying during college, and he is eager to get back to it.

“Do you think Tyler enjoyed our visit?” Jean asked as we drove back to Allegan. There's always sadness in leaving our buddy behind. Before I could answer, my phone jingled with a text from Tyler: “I miss you guys already!”

The next morning, Aimee drove us to Padgham Field, where her father, Ted, showed off his spectacular 1941 Meyers OTW biplane. Then we took off back to Chicago's Aurora Airport.

This time, clear skies delivered those spectacular views Jason had promised. We ogled harbors, boats, and the Michigan and Indiana dunes from aloft, along with Chicago's famed skyline across the lake.

To think that we had embarked on this aerial journey crossing two-thirds of the country just a week earlier. Thankfully, bad-weather forecasts proved unfounded after our first travel day, and we'd landed to visit friends and family in Missouri, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Michigan. All that now remained before heading home was the reunion that prompted this trip.

“Who'd have guessed we'd achieve all our desired stops on such an ambitious schedule?” Jean said. “Only one mission left, and we're gonna make it!” 🧐

Greg Brown is an aviation author, photographer, and former National Flight Instructor of the Year



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