In **GREG BROWN'S** early piloting days, flight service provided thunderstorm information from hand-drawn radar summary charts up to two hours old. **www.GregBrownFlyingCarpet.com**

PAINTED INTO A CORNER

"Oh, and the St. Johns VOR is out of service," said the flight service briefer before we departed Santa Fe for Scottsdale. In those pre-GPS days, St. Johns was the only enroute radio navigation aid on Victor-190, the 274-nautical-mile instrument airway between Albuquerque and Phoenix. No matter; I anticipated good weather throughout the two-and-a-half-hour flight.

Launching late afternoon in a rented Cessna 172RG Cutlass, we cruised clear skies southwestward. Entering Arizona, however, I spotted unexpected clouds ahead. It turned out that an unforecast stratus layer had developed almost to Phoenix. Fortunately, visual flight conditions prevailed underneath, the only concerning weather being a line of heavy thunderstorms paralleling our route 30 miles to the north.

Soon we cruised under clouds at 8,500 feet, eying intense, distant lightning off our right wing. I'd anticipated reaching lower country by nightfall, but we'd been slowed by headwinds, and darkness falls early under clouds. I calculated ceilings to be 1,000 feet above the highest ridges ahead. That's risky for night flight over mountains.

Since headwinds and poor aircraft performance would further slow us at Victor-190's then-minimum 12,000-foot instrument altitude, I decided to proceed visually beneath the overcast until dusk. Then in gathering twilight, I radioed Albuquerque Center for a "pop-up" instrument clearance.

Since nearby St. Johns VOR was out of service, the controller asked if I was receiving Phoenix or Albuquerque VORs, each some 135 miles away. We were too low to get either.

"Well, you're below my radar coverage, and I need you on radar or VOR navigation to issue a clearance. Can you climb in visual conditions? I should pick you up at 10- to 11,000 feet." However the ceiling was too low for that. Here we were, sandwiched between soon-to-be-invisible clouds and mountains at nightfall.

"If you're receiving the Winslow VOR," offered the controller, "I can clear you direct with a climb to 12,000 feet. Expect vectors to Phoenix once I get you on radar." We were indeed receiving Winslow, directly beyond those evil thunderheads. My stomach churned.

The 172RG is a notoriously poor climb performer, especially at altitude carrying four people and bags. I calculated we'd require 10 minutes and 15 miles to reach 12,000 feet, uncomfortably close to those thunderstorms. But there was no choice.

I accepted the Winslow clearance but told Jean, "If Center doesn't get us on radar by 10,000 feet, we'll steer toward Phoenix anyway. That's plenty high enough to clear terrain, and we dare not approach those thunderstorms." Turning 90 degrees right, we climbed into turbulent black clouds straight toward those thunderstorms.

Back then, ADF receivers served as rudimentary lightning detectors. I tuned ours off-station and cranked up the volume. Each discharge swung the needle toward its source, tagging intense lightning spanning 30 degrees on either side of our nose. As we inched in blackness toward 10,000 feet, our cloud-shrouded cockpit strobed with blinding light. Both kids shrieked from the backseat.

"Whoa!" said Jean. "Did I hear thunder over the engine?"

"Probably not," I said, hoping she was wrong. Several more terrifying flashes followed, and then...

"Radar contact," said the controller. "Turn left heading 200 degrees, vectors to Phoenix." The lightning faded when we turned tail to the weather, and 20 minutes later we landed under starry skies at Scottsdale Airport. But my mind echoed with terror. Probably we'd been far from the sources of those blinding flashes, but who could know for sure?

None of this would have happened had I requested an instrument clearance before reaching the cloud deck. We'd simply have climbed visually to instrument altitude and proceeded on course. But I'd painted us into a corner. As always, the piloting errors we survive teach valuable lessons. In the future, I vowed to launch earlier in the day, and file IFR at the first hint I might need it, not at the last moment. **FT**