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AVIATION FRIENDS

“We’re stranded!” lamented my son, Austin. He was flying his wife Desi and family from southern New Mexico to Flagstaff, Arizona, to join us for Thanksgiving.

The Diamond DA40 carried adequate fuel for what’s normally a three-hour flight, but to allow for headwinds and antsy little kids, Austin had planned a pit stop at St. Johns, Arizona. Two days before, he’d phoned St. Johns Industrial Airpark (SJN) regarding fuel availability. “We’re closed Thanksgiving Day,” explained airport manager Gary Liston, so Austin rescheduled to travel the day before. A career jet pilot, Austin had only recently returned to lightplane travel. On two previous journeys the family had battled headwinds, turbulence, and been stranded overnight.

Wednesday, however, dawned calm and clear—finally after those rough rides, Austin had perfect weather “to show Desi how enjoyable and efficient flying can be.” They launched after lunch, and midafternoon we received the expected call from St. Johns.

“The flight was fine,” reported Austin, “but after a perfect landing the airplane pulled progressively harder to the right as we slowed until even full left rudder and brake wouldn’t straighten it. It turns out we have a flat tire and there’s no mechanic here nor any way to pull the airplane off the runway. I’m monitoring unicom frequency with a handheld radio to alert any inbound aircraft. Oh, and this is not helping Desi’s air-travel confidence.” Tires sometimes deflate because of sticking filler valves, so I hoped this one might hold air when reinflated. But the tire pressurized only long enough for Austin to taxi off the runway.

Still 150 road miles from Flagstaff, Austin learned that the nearest rental cars were 45 miles away in Show Low, and it was getting late this holiday weekend to rent one. So while Gary phoned around seeking a mechanic and tire, I solicited pilot friends for a second airplane to help me retrieve the family. But none was available.

“Too bad,” said my CFI buddy, Freddie. “They’ll never find anyone to fix it at such a remote location, much less have the proper tire.” But then Austin called back. Mechanic Ray Webber of Ray’s Aircraft Services miraculously stocked the proper tire and tube, and offered to drive 50 miles from Taylor Airport to install them.

“I have a project to finish but will be there in two hours,” Ray told Gary. When Austin expressed frustration at the day’s poor luck, I countered with his wisdom in planning travel to an attended airport, and his good fortune in getting the tire changed. While waiting, Desi and Austin plied their hungry children with vending-machine snacks, and Gary provided a toy airplane for entertainment.

Ray arrived and set to work in cold darkness with a headlamp supplemented by auto headlights. But his jack would not fit under the Diamond’s wing. Gary crafted a wheel ramp of scavenged wood to elevate the wing and place the jack. Then, unexpected metric fasteners forced a search for additional tools. Despite the setbacks, Ray successfully replaced the tire.

Austin was wary of continuing in darkness over unfamiliar terrain. But snow and gusty winds threatened on Thanksgiving Day, potentially stranding the family if they waited until morning.

“From St. Johns to Flagstaff is flatter than a board,” Gary advised Austin. “It’s just 45 miles to Holbrook and from there you can follow I-40 to Flagstaff.” A full moon would illuminate the one-hour flight, with alternate airports along the way. We heard no more until Desi texted for a ride from Flagstaff Pulliam Airport at 9 p.m.

“You were right about our luck,” said Austin before the family tumbled into bed. “Gary and Ray should have been home with their families preparing for the holiday, but instead spent their evening changing our tire so we wouldn’t be stuck.” The next day over turkey we celebrated two new aviation friends among our blessings. **FT**