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A RIDGE-TOP "sucker hole" materializes near Kayenta, Arizona.

U-TURN

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

For pilots, knowledge is power. Today's broad aviation weather access contributes immeasurably to flight safety by allowing us to anticipate and plan for what lies ahead. Without it, we return to the dark ages of flying.

Recently Jean proposed picking up her mother, Marge, in Phoenix, and from there visiting her brother in Montrose, Colorado. Phoenix to Montrose is a long flight for the uninitiated—three and a half hours through often-turbulent desert skies. What's more, Marge is in her 80s and limited in mobility. Almost any precautionary landing site along this remote route would lack people, water, or shade, with help potentially hours away. Oh, and another brother was flying in from Chicago, making the schedule immutable.

So as much as I love piloting, I suggested dropping Jean in Phoenix, where she and Marge could hop a one-hour commercial flight instead.

"Mom says she'd rather go by *Flying Carpet* than airlines," Jean answered with finality, but she did compromise. After retrieving Marge in Phoenix she suggested we overnight in Flagstaff before proceeding, thereby shortening our Montrose flight by an hour. Although helpful, that didn't relieve my concerns. But at least Jean and Marge had made an informed decision.

Pilots outside the intermountain West may not easily picture a 275-nautical-mile route with virtually no attended airports, minimal weather reporting, limited ATC radar and voice communications, marginal to nonexistent weather radar coverage, and 14,000-foot peaks surrounding the destination. Fortunately, June is normally bone-dry in Arizona, so other than turbulence, I didn't expect weather to multiply the challenges.

The day we picked up Marge, however, Arizona was hammered by its first June rains in a long time (13 years for Phoenix). I filed a rare instrument flight plan to Phoenix to get her, and returning shot one of my few actual-instruments approaches to Flagstaff in nearly a decade living there.

We launched early the next day for Montrose to beat forecast scattered afternoon thunderstorms. (I'd packed an overnight bag in case I couldn't return.)

WHAT IF DOWNDRAFTS PLAGUE THAT NARROW GAP? *I WONDERED, BATTLING TEMPTATION.*

Before takeoff I delivered my standard "be prepared to turn around if we don't like what we see" passenger briefing.

"That's fine with me," replied Marge. "Don't take any chances." When we leveled in blue skies at 9,500 feet, I anticipated delivering my passengers uneventfully. Both Flagstaff and Montrose were clear, and datalink weather depicted just one tiny precipitation echo en route.

An hour in, I noted darkness shading the horizon and checked the few nearby weather stations. Blanding, Utah, reported a healthy 8,000 feet scattered, but Window Rock, Arizona, was 2,200 broken, suggesting obscured peaks. Gallup and other points south reported multiple layers. Although unable to raise Albuquerque Center, I successfully radioed flight service to corroborate the "almost nothing" shown on our datalink weather display.

"I see only two tiny cells ahead, which it appears you can bypass to the north," said the briefer. "But keep in mind there's minimal weather radar coverage in that area." We pilots tend to assume that an empty datalink screen means no weather ahead, but nearing Kayenta we encountered a very dark southeast-to-northwest convective line blocking our route.

Modern preflight, cockpit, and radio weather resources normally warn us in advance of such hazards so we can assess how to bypass them, identify safe gaps, or decide not to take off. But this storm line never appeared in the aviation

weather system—so, as in the old days, we were reduced to eyeballing the line for openings.

Now halfway to our destination and urged along by a tailwind, I was emotionally invested. Tracing the line northwestward, we found no gap. The thunderstorms ended to the southeast, but beyond there multiple cloud layers extended from ground to the flight levels. Scud running over such rugged terrain would be deadly. And although layered clouds often make for easy instrument flying, the nearest IFR routing would require a drastic detour over Gallup and extended flight at 12,000 to 13,000 feet, for which we barely carried enough oxygen. More unforeseen weather was possible along that high-mountain route. In any case, we couldn't reach ATC from here to request IFR; even if we could, Gallup ATC radar was out of service, so they might not be able to issue us a clearance anyway.

Jean and I were ruling out such options when a luminous ridge-top sliver magically revealed a sunlit valley beyond. *What if downdrafts plague that narrow gap?* I wondered, battling temptation. *Might we get boxed in by weather or high terrain beyond?* Then as if to punctuate the risks, lightning bracketed the "sucker hole" ahead of us. I reversed course for home, relaying our intentions to Albuquerque Center via an airliner overhead. We landed back at Flagstaff at the time we'd expected to reach our destination.

I was upset at not completing our mission, but Jean observed that although we often abort flights because of weather, this was our first U-turn in years. Then she embarked with Marge on the barren eight-hour drive to Montrose. Only later could I take pride, if not pleasure, in my decision. Frankly, I've gotten skilled enough at completing challenging flights that I occasionally wonder, *Will I really turn around if I need to?* Today proved I could still reverse course when justified. That was both comforting and rewarding.

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