



MARK HARRIS with his 1947 Beechcraft 35 Bonanza.

SAGE ADVICE

FLYING FRIEND SAVES THE DAY

For the second year running, I looked forward to retrieving my young pilot friend Tyler Allen from Window Rock for summer music camp in Flagstaff. The night before, I heard from another young pilot, Zack Morris, who had earned his private certificate just a week earlier. Zack hoped to hitch a ride to Show Low to work at a camp for children with disabilities.

“Sure wish I could fly there myself tomorrow,” he said, “but obviously I can’t park a rental plane there for two months.” Without my help, his parents would have to drive seven hours to drop him off.

I explained to Zack that I’d gladly take him if I wasn’t already committed to picking up Tyler. Show Low, Window Rock, and Flagstaff are all about 100 miles apart. Given Tyler’s be-there-by-noon-or-else check-in time, there was hardly time to make both stops. Besides, with all three airports between 6,400 and 7,000 feet elevation, I preferred to complete the trip in the cool early morning to minimize density-altitude effects. But it pained me, telling another pilot to drive.

Then I had an idea: I asked my buddy Mark Harris to consider flying Zack to Show Low while I picked up Tyler from

Window Rock. Mark happily consented.

Driving to Flagstaff Airport on Sunday morning, I was delayed when the airport security gate wouldn’t close behind me. Fortunately I reached someone in airport operations to secure it, but now I was running a little behind schedule.

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Briskly, I preflighted the *Flying Carpet*. At the runway I leaned the engine for density altitude, and then started engine checks. The right magneto yielded a minor drop. But the left mag coughed and backfired. I straightened in my seat. *Leaning the mixture for a few moments under*

power should cure the problem...but it didn’t. Following a second failed attempt, I recognized this was one of those times when safe piloting means not taking off.

Now I had a problem. Tyler expected me at Window Rock an hour from now, with camp check-in looming. Fortunately, I intercepted Mark and Zack just before they launched for Show Low. Explaining the situation, I asked Mark to collect Tyler at Window Rock after dropping Zack.

“Sure!” he said. “You’ll come along, right?” This posed a dilemma. Mark flies a recently purchased older V-tail Bonanza with a modest engine. I knew my buddy was eager for me to fly along, but I have little experience in Bonanzas. I told Mark that by the time we reached Window Rock from Show Low, the density altitude there could exceed 10,000 feet. I asked if we should be concerned about his airplane’s takeoff performance.

“With three of us and baggage we’ll still be just under gross weight,” he replied. Mark is super-competent, and I totally trust his judgment. Still, I’d planned my early morning flight based partly on density altitude concerns. I phoned Jean.

“Mark’s offered to save the day and pick

up Tyler, and he’s invited me along...”

Before I could continue she said, “Greg, you were concerned about departing with Tyler and two weeks of luggage even in early morning. Is Mark’s plane capable of lifting an additional person at midday? Please don’t take any chances.” That did it.

“I’d love to join you,” I told Mark. “But I *know* you won’t have takeoff performance issues with just you and Tyler aboard, while with me along we’d *probably* get off the ground OK. I’m sure you’ll agree that ‘probably’ doesn’t fit a pilot’s vocabulary.”

“I respect your concerns,” said Mark. “I’ll pick up Tyler myself.” Relieved, I checked my watch. Time was tight, but if all went well we still might make summer-camp check-in. I’d hardly returned home when Mark reported from Show Low. Seemingly minutes later, he phoned again.

“You’re already at Window Rock?” I asked, envying his speedy Bonanza.

“Unfortunately, no,” said Mark. “I’m having hot-start problems and letting the engine cool before running the battery down.” This was Mark’s first fuel-injected aircraft, so I offered some hot-start tips. Clearly Tyler was going to be late, so we’d just have to deal with it when the time came. Now I was far more worried about stranding friends at distant airports on a Sunday morning.

“Got it started!” texted Mark. That was good news, but hopefully he wouldn’t experience the same problem at unattended Window Rock Airport. After another nail-biting hour, Mark texted that he and Tyler were taking off for Flagstaff.

I was waiting at Mark’s tiedown when they landed. Hurriedly I transferred Tyler and his luggage to my car, and enthusiastically thanked Mark for saving the day.

“It was my pleasure, Greg—and a good object lesson on density altitude!” There wasn’t time to ask what he meant, but Tyler reported the climb out of Window Rock as “pretty feeble.” Mark later told of needing to S-turn to clear the ridge west of town, and admitted relief at not carrying my additional weight.

I, of course, had learned my own lesson. “Always check your mags before shutdown,” instructor Fred Gibbs once counseled me. “It’ll save you getting stuck somewhere at takeoff time.” Never again will I forget that sage advice. 🧐

Greg Brown is an aviation author, photographer, and former National Flight Instructor of the Year. Visit his website (www.gregbrownflyingcarpet.com).
