

Changing Plans: The Prudent Pilot's Plan B



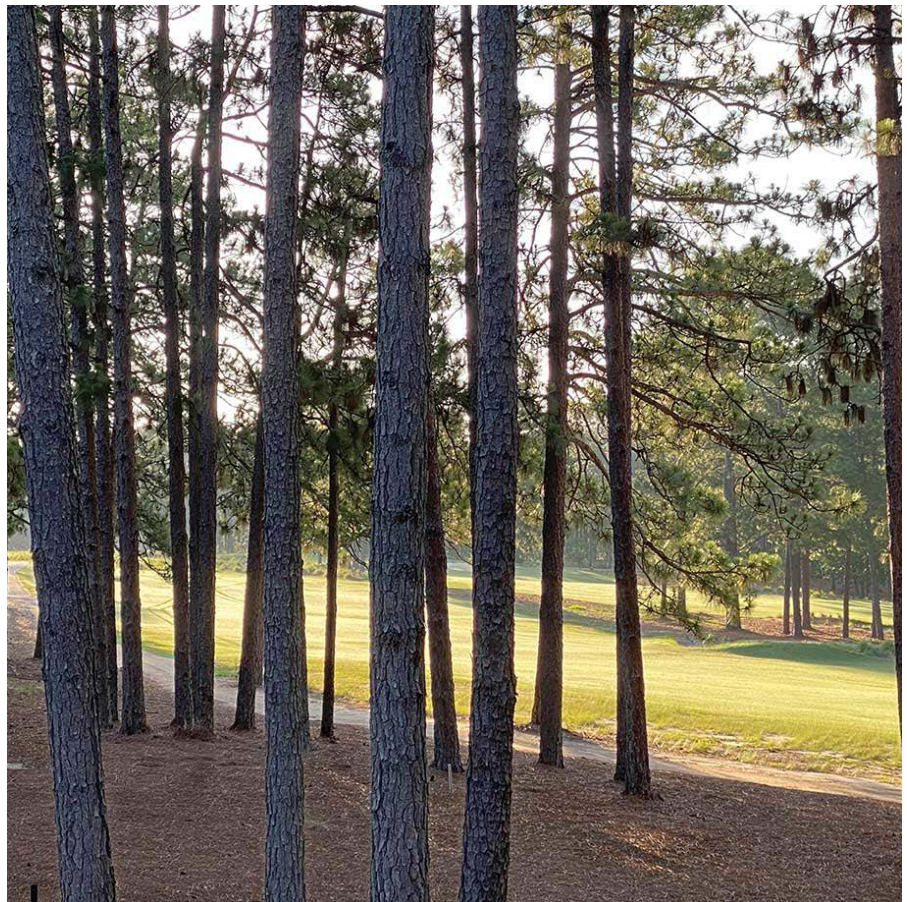
Changing Plans: The Prudent Pilot's Plan B

By Mike Jones

Originally published: July 2021

A sleepy, sultry Sunday summer morning. No chores, no gym, no Zooms, no obligations. In terms of indolence, it doesn't get any better.

I was up early, baking a coffee cake while my mostly-sainted wife snuggled under the duvet for those last delicious minutes before your eyes open wide and the day really begins. Cake in the oven and coffee in hand, I stepped onto the back deck to inspect the early morning sky. A little bit of fog, as expected for this time of year; it would burn off by mid-morning, leaving that shockingly blue Carolina sky punctuated by popcorn cumulus. The sun itself was still just a hazy orange orb peeking between the pines. Mockingbirds, cardinals and thrushes were competing with their songs. I glimpsed our neighborhood's red-



tailed hawk swirling overhead, looking for a careless squirrel to join him for breakfast.

“Ping!” goes my cell phone. Dan Benedix wants to fly.

The Plan

You have read about Benedix on these pages previously. He helped organize a spontaneous airlift relief effort after Hurricane Florence in 2018, using hundreds of small planes to fly 250,000 pounds of donated supplies to flooded communities. He and I, along with CFI extraordinaire Josh Foster, enjoyed the astounding views of New York City last summer when we flew my Centurion over the Statue of Liberty and up the Hudson River. During one Christmas holiday he arranged “Operation Santa Drop” to deliver thousands of toys to the underprivileged at his local aerodrome. A big bear of a man, he always greets the world with a smile, full of ideas and boundless optimism. Plus, he’s a fine airman.

On this particular morning, Benedix needed to reposition his dark green Piper from Burlington, NC (KBUY) to Sanford, NC (KTTA) so it could be available to Foster for flight training on Monday. It’s a short hop but a awkward drive; perhaps 50 miles as the Cessna flies but 90 minutes on twisty country roads. His time-saving idea was for me to meet him at the destination airport and, using my little two-seat LSA taildragger “Puffin” chauffeur him back to Burlington.

Bright skies? Gentle winds? Obliging wife? “Absolutely,” I answered enthusiastically.

We continued to chat about flying, as pilots like to do. Benedix mentioned he had spent the better part of the previous day (Saturday) at a marvelous fly-in at Lake Ridge Airport (8NC8), just north of Raleigh. That airport has just been purchased by two energetic brothers, Paul and Daniel Rovegno, and they are

eager to see their 3,200-foot grass runway become an important part of the aviation community. Benedix reported their fly-in was a great success: they had a couple hundred planes come and go; people camped along the runway and a line of food trucks kept everybody hydrated and happy.

“The fly-in is still going on,” Benedix hinted, a smile in his voice. Like a large mouth bass spotting a juicy tadpole, I bit at the lure.

“Why don’t we drop in and visit?” I suggested.

Quickly we developed and refined our plan. I would grab Puffin and head north to Lake Ridge, transiting the west side of the Raleigh Class C airspace and button-hooking eastward to Lake Ridge. Meanwhile, Benedix would drive to Burlington and then wait on the ground until he saw me pop up on Foreflight because he was both closer and faster. Then he would launch for Lake Ridge and we should arrive at 8NC8 at approximately the same time.

Once we were done socializing with the remaining flyers we’d depart to the east, orbiting Raleigh’s busy heavy-metal airspace, and dive south to Sanford. We’d tie down Benedix’s Piper, he’d clamber into Puffin’s rarely-used right seat, and I’d deliver him back to Burlington. A great plan, I’m sure you will agree: all sorts of flying, grass runways, a gaggle of other pilots and planes, maybe a food truck burger, plus a “real” mission accomplished. Perfect.

In the Air

With the temperatures in the low 90s, it didn’t take long for Puffin’s ROTAX engine to warm and I was in the air right on schedule, five hours of fuel in the tanks. The sky was dotted with scattered clouds at 4,500 feet, winds from the south at eight knots, a touch of light chop from time to time, and only the slightest chance of widely-scattered thunderstorms. Passing Carthage and then Siler City, Puffin and I floated over pine forests and dying tobacco farms

— solar panels are a more reliable crop than cigarettes these days — and admired the view.

From time to time, Benedix would text me and I would wobble out a one-handed reply, keeping the other hand on the stick and my eyes out the window. There are three enormous TV antennae looming 2,000 feet into the sky just west of Chapel Hill; I didn't want to perch Puffin on their wires. Peering through the windscreen, I noticed the clouds had thickened and the turbulence had kicked up a notch as well. Nothing Puffin couldn't handle, just a little more work and a little less comfort.

My phone pings again. "Still on the ground," Benedix texted cryptically, exasperation in his digital voice. "Thunderstorm at runway. Will wait it out."



Dan Benedix grabbed this image of his Piper and the thunderstorm that grounded him at Burlington, NC this Sunday afternoon. The strong prevailing winds and the configuration of the runway at KBUY would have put his nose right into that storm. Good decision to sit this dance out.

That's prudent but annoying — what are the odds that one of those "widely scattered" storms would pop up in our way? But flying is all about Plan B, and a short delay was certainly not the end of the world. I trundled on, the little ROTAX chugging smoothly. I dialed in the Raleigh AWOS to see what was happening, weather-wise, at nearby Lake Ridge. Things were happening.

The Raleigh AWOS reported a broken sky at 2,500 feet with winds from

the southwest at 10 knots, gusting to 16. Hmmm, I thought. That would be a direct ten-knot crosswind because the turf runway at Lake Ridge is aligned southeast-northwest. Ten knots is just about the limit for a plane with light wing-loading such as Puffin; unlike my Centurion it just doesn't have the mass to knife through the gusts. It's a worry.

As I cleared the northern edges of Raleigh's airspace, I planned my turn to the east. The air seemed hazy and the horizon somewhat diminished; the sharp towers of Raleigh were no longer visible. Scanning the skies, I found the culprit: a downpour had formed amidst the broken clouds. As I watched it intensified; I saw the faint draperies of silver rain thicken and solidify into a grey wall, pounding the roads and towns below.

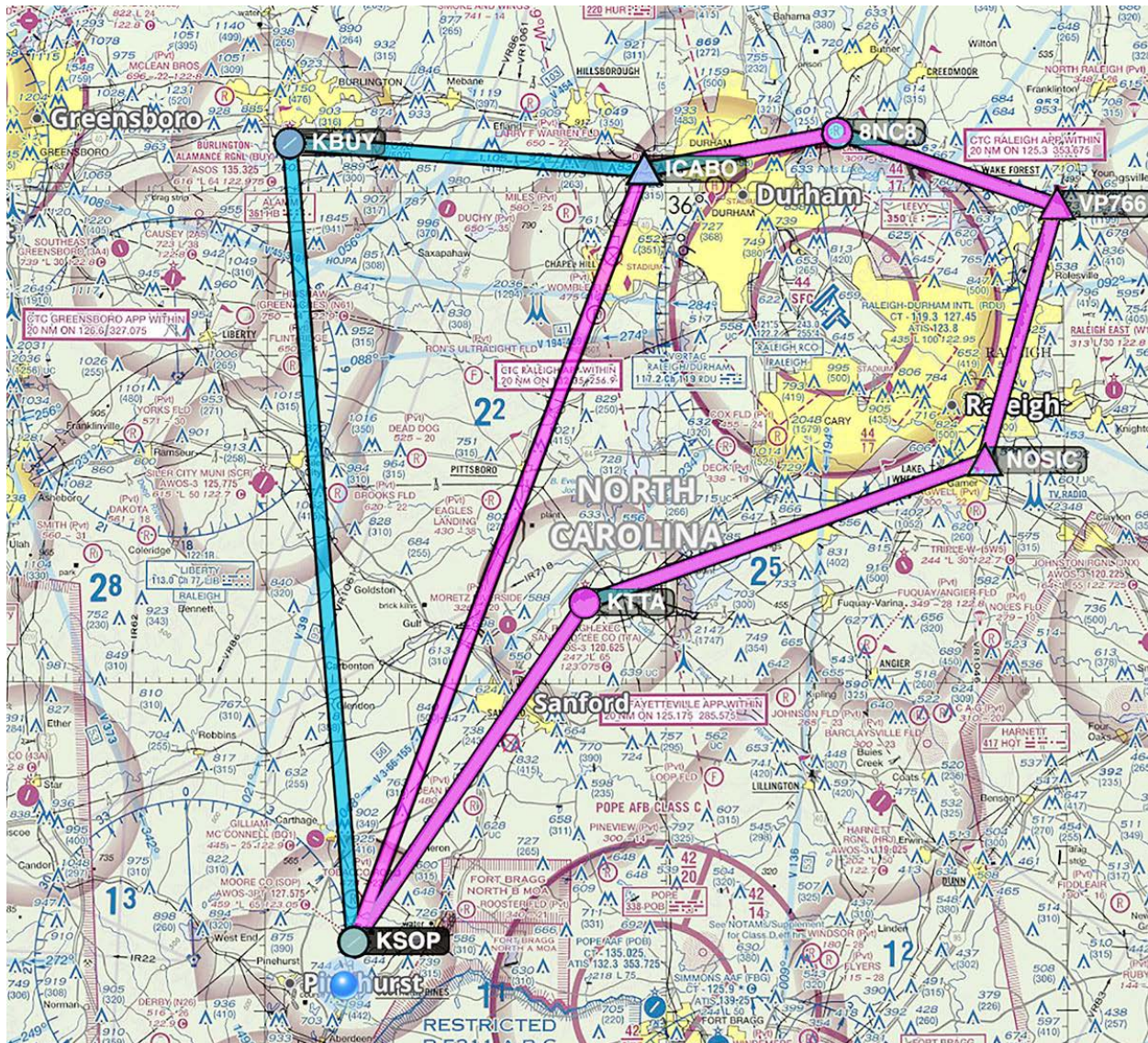
Revise the plan, I said to myself. I'll simply go north around the cloud burst. Checking the radar on Foreflight, I quickly began to doubt that plan. The cloudburst I was circumnavigating was a long, skinny banana of yellow and red radar reflections, stretching nearly up to the Virginia border. Every time the screen refreshed, the storm grew more ominous.

Revise the revision! I messaged back to Benedix I was cancelling Lake Ridge. Instead, I would fly to the west, away from the cloudburst, and visit him in Burlington. He sent me a terse reply: "122.9."

Return to Base

I dialed up the frequency and found Benedix yakking away. Our signals were scratchy and weak because I was low, he was on the ground, and his communication antennae are under the plane pointing down into the concrete (as they are on most airplanes).

"Not good here," he said, the radios crackling with static. "Shutting down. Moving plane to hangar." He also recommended I simply return to my home base because of the increasingly unpredictable winds and the increasingly



This was the initial plan Benedix and Jonesy had developed, starting at KSOP and flying to ICABO and then looping over the top of the Raleigh airspace to the turf runway at Lake Ridge Airport. After their visit to Lake Ridge they were going to circle to the east and drop off Benedix's Piper at Raleigh Executive Airport (KTAA). After ICABO, the blue line shows the approximate route Jonesy actually flew.

numerous pop-up storms. He advised me the winds at Pinehurst were right down the runway; 230° at ten knots, which would make that landing a piece of cake. Sitting on the ground with a strong internet connection, he had a better big-picture view than did I.

“Just because you can [get to Burlington],” he said as a farewell, “doesn’t mean you should. Go home, be safe!”

Reluctantly I agreed and wished him well, gently pleased with his concern for my safety. I turned south. It was noteworthy at this point I was almost an hour in the sky and not one aspect of our exciting mission had been accomplished. Such is the life of a general aviation pilot.

Additionally, the gentle tailwind I enjoyed heading to Lake Ridge was now a headwind, and the light chop had turned into constant moderate turbulence. But Puffin is a rugged monster, designed for tough flying in the African bush, so this was not a concern.

My navigational strategy was simple: rather than fussily attempting to hold a precise altitude and heading, I would momentarily get myself pointed in the right direction, pick a distant water tower or some other highly visible object as



This screenshot, taken shortly after landing, shows the thunderstorms building near the Pinehurst airport. “Widely scattered” they may have been, but they were all scattered along the routes Benedix and I wanted to fly that day. What are the odds?

my next way-point, and then let Puffin surf up and down in the splashing summer air. Who needs a compass or an altimeter? It's just a number. Go with the flow. It was bumpy but fun.

Double Trouble

Approaching the Pinehurst airport, I could see on the Foreflight radar and then through the windscreen another problem. In fact, two problems; sometimes it just sucks to be me. Two more "widely scattered" storms had just materialized out of the murk like Klingon warships deactivating their cloaking devices. They were south of my airport and blowing north. I needed to get on the ground before they rolled overhead.

I pushed the throttle to maximum power, which is 5,400 rpm on this ROTAX engine, and started a slow descent from about fifteen miles out. Puffin responded enthusiastically. Bouncing along at the top of the yellow arc, I covered those miles as quickly as Puffin had ever done anything. We punched a midfield crosswind over the runway exactly at pattern altitude while the storms leered in our direction, just inches to the southeast.

One last issue with which to deal: the winds had shifted, their natural flow distorted by the nearby storms. The winds were now 160° at 8-10 knots, just about a direct crosswind for Runway 23 and matching my initial concerns about landing at Lake Ridge so long ago. But now I was committed. Like Yoda in Star Wars, "there is no 'try' — there is only 'do,'" I said to myself.

I flew an abbreviated downwind and stood Puffin on her left wing in the turn to base. On short final I felt the plane's groundspeed slow precipitously as the headwinds bit into my airspeed. Half-flaps seemed prudent as I aimed for the numbers, keeping my airspeed slightly higher than my normal 55-60 mph in case a gust quit on me unexpectedly.

Four centuries ago, Samuel Johnson wrote “when a man knows he is to be hanged, it concentrates his mind wonderfully.” A tricky crosswind landing in a lightly loaded taildragger has much the same effect. It was sixty seconds of Zen-like intensity; not thinking, just doing. I shut my brain off and stayed out of the conversation while my eyes and my butt talked to my hands and feet.

Focused and calm, it felt like the plane was fixed and unmoving in the sky. The tarmac rose up to greet me. I flared, kept the tail down and nose high. With my feet whapping out a tango on the rudder, Puffin delivered a snappy wheel landing right on the center line. A Skylane on the taxiway noted my performance and radioed “Well done!”

Even the Russian judge gave me a “ten.”



Jonesy literally ran from his hangar to the ramp to grab this vista of the storms as they blew by the Pinehurst airport.. Notice the Skyhawk departing despite the storm (the black dot over the tail of the Piper): Cessnas rule!

In Memoriam

My good friend Dan William Benedix succumbed to esophageal cancer on February 14, 2025. Dan was 50 years old and valiantly fought for 19 months against the cancer. In classic “Dan” fashion, he defied all the odds and lived far past his diagnosed expectancy.



A 1992 graduate of Millbury (MA) High School, Dan was a talented basketball player, playing on the Millbury Varsity Team and then at Quinsigamond Community College until a severe back injury ended his basketball career.

Dan pursued a career in the IT sector, eventually becoming the founder of Tego. After selling his company, Dan pursued his many other interests: becoming a pilot, building his own airfield in Cedar Grove NC, and continuing as a serial entrepreneur. Dan was always “all-in” and accomplished every task with unsurpassed dedication and passion.

Dan probably was best known for his humanitarian work. He actively supported cancer research through both Race Across America and Kaitlynn's Ride. He spearheaded efforts with Operation AirDrop to deliver life-saving meals, medicine, and water to communities flooded by Hurricane Florence in 2018. Even as he was approaching the end of his life, Dan assembled a flotilla of aircraft, pilots, and volunteers to deliver supplies into Asheville and the surrounding areas that were direly impacted after Hurricane Helene. He also often volunteered for Pilots and Paws, as well as Military Angel Flights,

providing much needed transportation of veterans to receive medical treatment.

One of Dan's greatest joys was his family. He is survived by his wife, Jocelyn (Guschl) Benedix, their shared children Sebastian (20), Rue (17), and Stella (16) and their six rescue dogs (some of whom were flown home to NC for their rescue). Dan absolutely loved being a dad and never missed a first or last day, a single practice, performance or competition. Supporting and loving his family unconditionally and with his whole heart is what defined Dan, not just as a dad and husband, but as the amazing human he was.

Dan's final message to us all was always to love and care for one another, period.

About the Author



Dr. Mike Jones is a 3,000+ hour general aviation pilot who, after 30 years in the left seat, knows he still has lots to learn. He's headed to Oshkosh this year and will fly with 130 other Cessna airplanes in the Cessnas-2-Oshkosh mass arrival. He is eagerly looking forward to making new friends there. Watch for his report in these pages next month. You always can reach him at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.