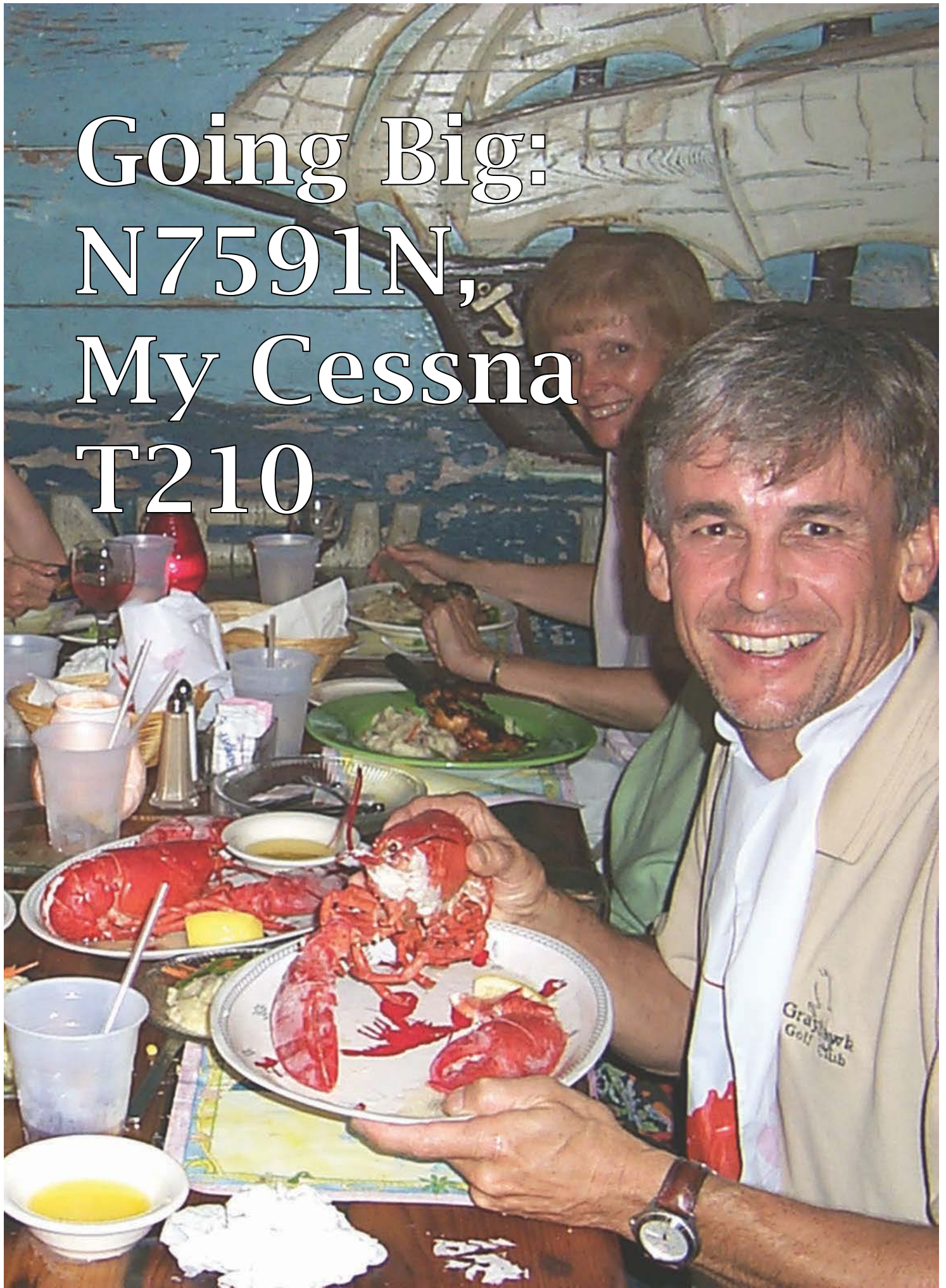


Going Big: N7591N, My Cessna T210



Going Big: N7591N My Cessna T210

By Mike Jones

Originally published: December 2019

39 years ago this Christmas, I married a remarkable woman. Merely one example of her generosity is found in my hangar out at our local airport in the form of a Cessna T210N Centurion, my long-time friend N7591N.

The year was 2002. We lived in Connecticut but had just bought a vacation home in the Sandhills of North Carolina. I had this concept of buying a small plane to transport us back and forth with some degree of speed, comfort and safety but the search wasn't going well.

I looked at Cessnas of all sizes; the trade-off between cash and capabilities was so pronounced. C172s were very affordable, but limited. I had lots of hours in the 182-family but my heart went into palpitations over the C210. Other birds also caught my heart: I was tormented by one particular lovely and speedy Mooney. I recall a couple of Pipers made the list. There was a plethora of choices and lots of worry about making the wrong decision.

Finally, my Annie cut through the noise. "Go big, Michael," she directed. "Go big or don't go at all!" At which point she flounced away, message delivered.

Two months later, I'm in Torrance, CA. Robert Santiago and I are pulling his Cessna T210 out of his hangar in preparation for an exhilarating two-day flight all the way back to Hartford, CT. I had never seen N7591N in person before, and I was thrilled.

A Big Girl

She was big — as Annie had directed — standing tall on her mantis-like retractable gear. The panel was loaded with knobs and levers and all sorts of exotica. The engine was strong, starting enthusiastically on the first couple of blades, and idled smoothly as Robert talked me through the checklist. It really was love at first sight.



N7591N shows off her handsome profile and elegant new livery. Photo: Courtesy Barbara Houston.

In retrospect, '91N was a well-equipped but fairly ordinary plane with great logbooks and no damage history. The panel was chock-a-block with old Cessna avionics, including a VOR receiver with RNAV capability, and a Loran which never did work. Pretty ho-hum stuff, as I think about it today.

But we blasted off into the early morning mist. We refueled in Grand Junction, CO and climbed to 27,000 feet to clear both the Rockies and some weather. The next day I flew left seat and we literally taped together a string of sectional charts — this was long before GPS became widely available — all the way to Plainville, CT by mid-afternoon. As the afternoon light glowed, I proudly showed my new acquisition to all my airport buddies.

I asked Robert what he would like for dinner, and he mentioned he had never had a New England lobster. Brilliant! We bundled ourselves back into the plane and jumped over to Block Island, about 30 miles off the coast. There we enjoyed an amazing dinner straight out of the ocean. We flew back as the summer twilight faded and the stars popped out. It was a great introduction to the enormous capabilities of the Centurion and I have never looked back.



Lobster dinners after a two-day, cross-country flight to deliver N7591N to her new home in Hartford Connecticut. Mike Jones is second, on left; Robert Santiago is front right.

In 2004 three friends and I took '91N to my first Oshkosh experience. As a cautious new owner, I was fanatical about the weight-and-balance. I personally weighed every single bag, box and tool that went into the plane. Imagine this result: fully-fueled, with four adult men, and all the camping gear we could use for a week in the North Forty, and we were still two hundred pounds below max gross weight. Since then I've been going every other year or three, and the load-carrying capability of '91N still impresses me.



My first trip to Oshkosh, camping with my friends. The volume and weight-carrying capacity of a Centurion is the envy of my friends with Mooneys and Bonanzas.

Eventually the old panel simply had to go. After fussing with fading avionics for about five years, the LORAN and RNAV were ripped out. Over a decade I upgraded to a PS Engineering audio panel, a WAAS-enabled Garmin 530 GPS, Sirius satellite download of NEXRAD weather, eventually a new Garmin 330 transponder with Mode S traffic, a new JPI digital engine monitor and a JPI Fuel flow meter linked to the GPS. More recently, I added a Garmin G5 HSI and

the new Garmin G500 autopilot, which was documented in this journal a few months ago. The photos illustrate the dozens of upgrades that made 7591N the modern machine she is today.



Less important aeronautically but hugely impressive cosmetically, in 2018 the interior was completely replaced and the exterior painted. The old Cessna baby-blue plastic, faded and cracked from four decades of heat on the ramp, was completely replaced with handsome neutral beige. Flint tip tanks added 32 gallons more fuel to the already capacious tanks. On the ramp today the plane looks factory-new and, in my opinion, is substantially more capable and safer than when it came off the assembly line forty years ago.

Nobody's Perfect

Of course, no relationship is perfect. Old '91N and I had have our moments. I've declared an emergency three times. Two of them were non-events with faulty landing gear indications. But once, with six souls on board, '91N decided it was time to eat an exhaust valve. The temperatures on Cylinder #4 went stone-cold, the engine ran so rough I worried the wings would flop off, and power dropped precipitously because the errant valve naturally added insult to injury by nose-diving into the turbocharger. My co-pilot, Eileen Malan, recalled later the first thing I said was, "Well, that's not good!"

The flight was a charity fund-raising mission. I was returning from Beaufort, NC to Southern Pines on a beautiful clear spring day. I had repeatedly radioed Fayetteville Approach for flight following but the controller preferred chatting with handsome airline captains and most assiduously ignored my check-in calls.

Once the problem started, I mashed the transmit button. "Well Fayetteville," I said, "now you're going to have to talk to me because '91N is declaring an emergency!" That finally got me the help I was hoping for. The jet traffic scurried out of my way as I made a high approach (in case the engine failed I wanted more glide distance) to an uneventful landing. Once we were on the ground my passengers burbled with excitement, taking snapshots of the

firemen. One told me, "This was the best trip ever!" and asked if they could do it again.



Annie snapped this photo of Mike Jones and co-pilot Eileen Malan chatting with one of the rescue firefighters on the ramp in Fayetteville, NC after his one serious in-flight emergency.

That said, '91N has more than returned my respect, providing almost 2,000 hours of aerial adventures. Several times I have slept in the plane (on the tarmac, of course!) when thunderbumpers blocked the path; most recently I had an awful, soggy night on the ramp at Elizabeth City, NC.

In our almost-two decades together flying has changed; GPS, NEXRAD, Foreflight and ADSB have made flying much safer. Annie and I eventually moved to North Carolina and I commute to my office in Connecticut in three hours. We have visited friends in Florida, relatives in Calgary, dropped into a college reunion near Pittsburgh, and managed dozens of AngelFlight missions

up and down the east coast in all sorts of weather. During the recovery from Hurricane Florence, I flew nineteen Operation AirDrop missions, delivering 10,000 pounds of supplies to the flooded areas of North Carolina. '91N even has about 700 Young Eagle rides in her logbook.

Special Memories

The Centurion is an incredible IFR platform. One day I climbed high, caught the lower edge of the jet stream and flew from Omaha to Boston in under four hours, booking a crisp 258 knots over the ground. Challenging weather won't phase her — confident there was no convection in the area, I have flown through bright red NEXRAD returns and '91N never missed a beat. Several times I've picked up ice and was the plane chugged along while I negotiated with ATC. I've landed in a 19-knot direct crosswind which was sporty but safe. Grassy fields and short fields are just another day in the park for this versatile bird; I often take '91N into a local airport designated BQ1 ("Barbeque 1") for



After Hurricane Katrina, old '91N made a long trip to New Orleans to rescue animals abandoned and homeless from the storm.

lunch and use less than half of the 2,500 foot runway. It's hard to image any plane performing better or being more versatile.

The capability of '91N creates moments of intense delight. One evening I left Brainard Field in Hartford, CT and headed south. The weather had been challenging for days but most of the front

had blown eastward. As night settled in and the big Continental loped along at 2,300 rpm, I found myself over the Maryland shores under the stars in crystal clear skies. To the east and to the west, two parallel lines of thunderstorms

matched my path, flickering with lightening and towering high overhead in the night sky, illuminated by the rising moon. I flew through this cloud-canyon, perhaps fifty miles wide, for nearly an hour. Pilots see things of which ordinary people never even dream.

Years ago I read a tale, probably apocryphal, about two pilots comparing logbooks. The younger pilot boasted he had almost 1,000 hours. Where have you flown and what have you done, the old codger asked provocatively. The answer was mostly local flights, working the pattern, the proverbial \$100 hamburger run. “You don’t have a thousand hours,” the old-timer corrected. “You have one hour, repeated a thousand times!”

I vowed I would never make that mistake, and with ‘91N’s loyal help we have had some great adventures together. Look for me and old ‘91N at fly-ins and airshows for the next twenty years — we’re going everywhere.

About the Author



Dr. Mike Jones has been flying his 1979 Centurion for nearly 20 years. You always can reach him at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.