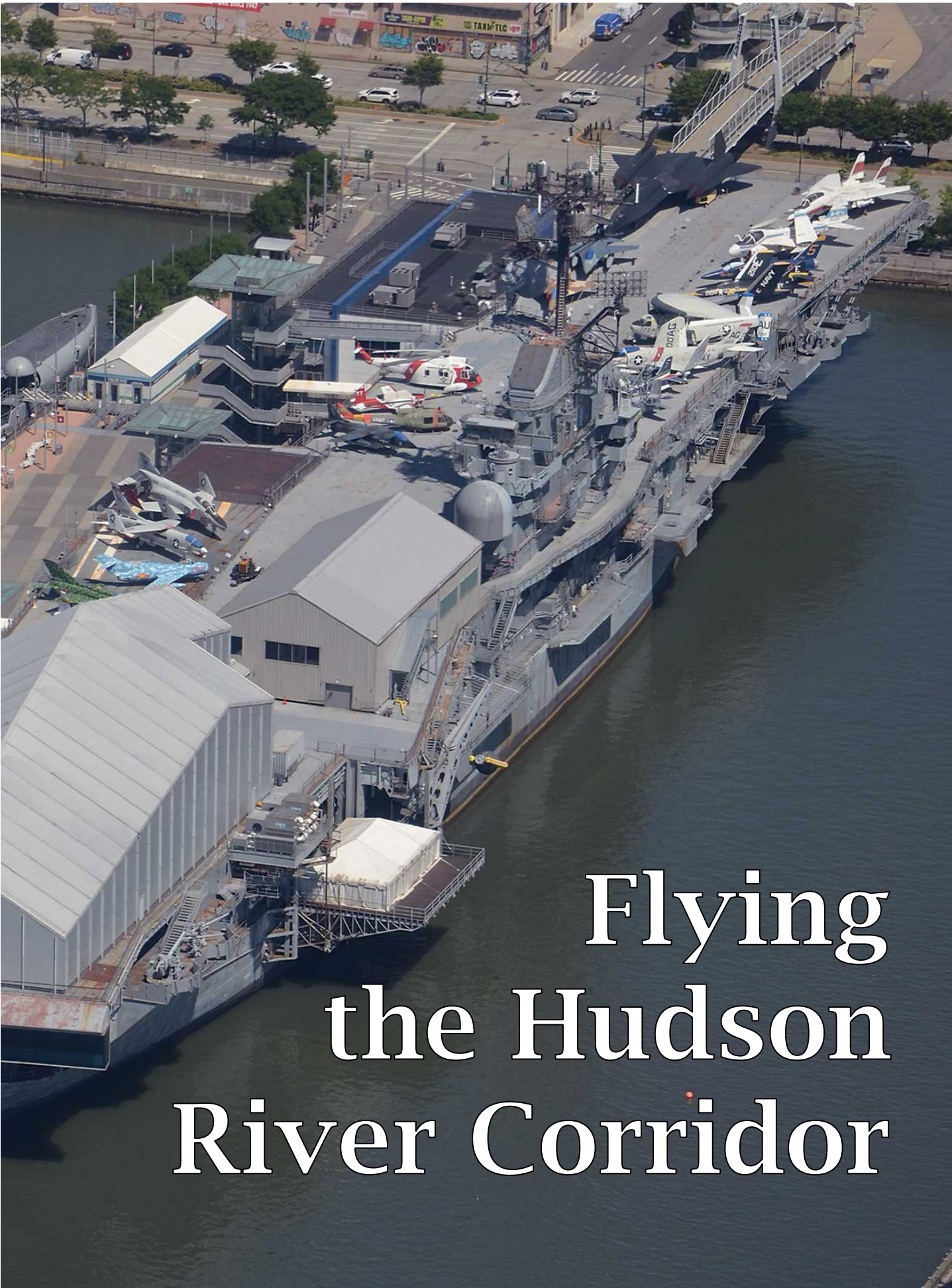


An aerial photograph of the Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum ship docked at a pier. The ship's deck is filled with various aircraft, including several fighter jets, a helicopter, and a large black stealth bomber. The ship is situated on the Hudson River, with a city street and buildings visible in the background. The text "Flying the Hudson River Corridor" is overlaid on the bottom right of the image.

Flying the Hudson River Corridor

Fly Away Those COVID Blues — Flying the Hudson River Corridor

By Mike Jones

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Last week I was Grumpy Mike. I was sick of social distancizing. Endless ZOOM meetings with people with nothing to say — no thanks. No pub? No gym? No church? I was scrappier than an alley cat; picking fights with anybody over anything.

This week I am Happy Mike, all smiles and cheery, walking on tippy toes through fields of daisies.

I went flying.

Back in the Saddle

I hadn't been in the sky for months because the annual inspection on old N7591N did not go well this year. It took almost twelve weeks to get my baby home from the shop. Part of the delay was COVID-related, but the icing on the cake was one tiny bracket about the size of a butter knife. With a powerful flashlight and a limber spine, my sharp-eyed A&P noticed a white line in a mounting bracket on the turbocharger. It was the shiny metal of newly-minted crack. Unrepaired and unrestrained, the turbo would wobble more than either

Cessna or Continental would approve. No problem: ten bucks from Spruce, delivered in three days, a piece of cake.

But while installing the new bracket we discovered the threads in the bolt hole on the turbocharger which gripped that bracket were abraded smooth. The whole thing was holding itself together with rust and loyalty, which probably is why the bracket shook itself to pieces in the first place. We concluded, somewhat wistfully, my turbo had bought the farm. More delays; more money; get over it. That said, it was still a long twelve weeks.

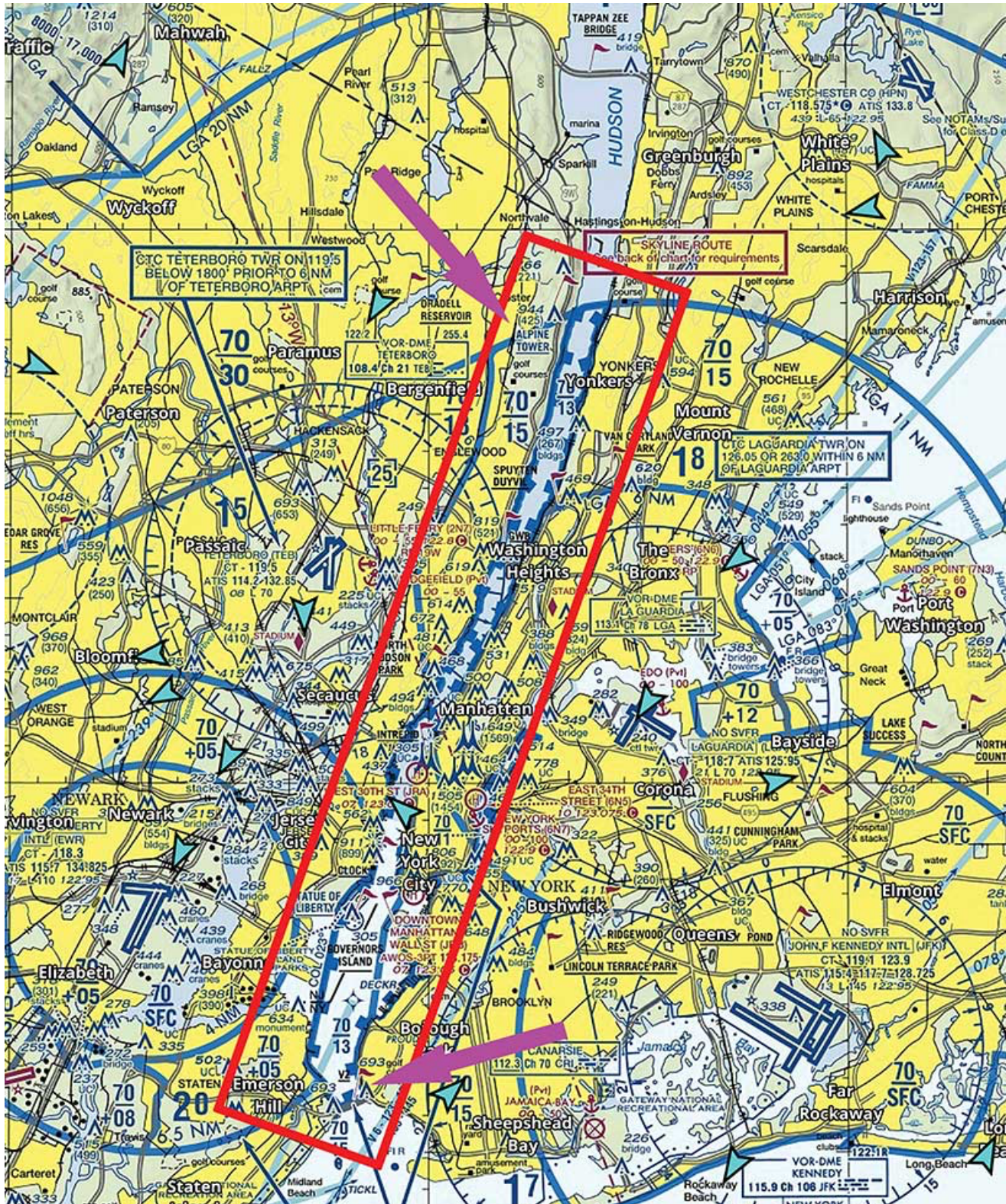
Pop quiz, dear reader: what's the first thing you should do after a long lay-off from aviating?

You start small, start cautiously, and you certainly start in VMC.

Never trust a plane just out of annual; even the best mechanics overlook things. I pulled my baby out of her hangar and preflighted rigorously. My POH wasn't in the right place, the wrong headset was on my seat; the radio settings were all awry and the transponder had been turned off. Double-check everything before you start the engine.

Once I was ready, that first flight was a dream. My A&P had put Humpty back together perfectly. She jumped off the runway and flew straight, true and fast. The new turbo roared like Puff the Magic Dragon. For two hours I threw myself into all the normal maneuvers. Slow flight, holds, steep turns, stalls, everything I could think off. I even made a landing, sort of. Ignoring the line guys rolling on the ramp in hysterics, I taxied more-or-less proudly back to my hangar. I was a pilot again.

Next step was some IFR refresher. A phone call to Slim, my favorite instructor, set up a session in the air. Slim is a lanky military pilot with more than 10,000 hours in fifty different models of airplanes. For three hours he hammered me like a blacksmith forging a horseshoe. We did unusual attitudes.



This chart shows the Hudson River Special Flight Rules area. This is a tight fit — it's squeezed between Newark International and Teeterboro Airport on the New Jersey side, Kennedy International and LaGuardia Airport to the east, Westchester Airport to the north and numerous heliports along the rivers. The purple arrows highlight the southern entrance over the Verrazzano Bridge and the northern terminus at the Alpine Tower. Traffic always is a problem in this narrow, congested space. I flew this once a few years ago as a B-17 flew the opposite direction, co-altitude. The light blue triangles on the map are ADSB-reported traffic.

Shot some approaches. We did six — yes, count 'em six! — engine-out landings. I was exhausted, but it was a good start. I was making the plane go where and how I wanted.

Which brings up a great question: in the era of COVID-19, where to go? That's a tough one. The beaches are vacant, the hotels are empty, the national parks are closed, and all the normal tourist destinations deserted as I write this (although they're talking about re-opening). Many airport restaurants are closed. How frustrating: the plane was ready, I was ready, the skies were blue... and I couldn't find any place to go.

Flying Buddies

Which is where the witty invention called a “screensaver” enters this tale.

I'm sitting at home growling at my email — remember Nasty Mike? — and on my computer screen pops a happy flying photo: a flight down the Hudson River, looking up at the Twin Towers, a few months before 9-11. That was a great day of flying, I mused to myself.

Hold on! I have a plane. It has a big engine and long legs. Why not fly the Hudson River Corridor again? My brain sparked back



Here's our happy bunch as we flew from North Carolina on our way to fly the Hudson River Corridor. Your humble correspondent is on the left. Josh Foster had the pilot's seat and Dan Benedix was relegated to the back of the airplane, from which he grumbled for hours. Notice everybody is wearing dark shirts, for better photography.

to life. Need a plan. Need a copilot. Need a sunny day. Need a camera with a big memory card. Need food and water. Everything in place? Let's fly!

Of course, miracles don't happen in real life. On the chosen morning my flying buddies Dan and Josh were fogged-in at Burlington, NC (KBUY) while I was at Southern Pines, NC (KSOP). It's a 19-minute flight, VFR. We sat a while, texting each other exuberantly. Eventually the clouds made it up to my personal minimums (Remember my rust? Why push it?) and I departed IFR, zig-zagging up Victor airways. I hand-flew the ILS-6 — thank you, Slim! — and touched down smoothly if a little late.



The skyscrapers of Wall Street, the absolute heart of the world's financial system, are at the tip of Manhattan Island. This photo was taken as the plane approached the Verrazano Bridge. The Hudson River is on the left while the East River and the Brooklyn Bridge is on the right. The green island is Governor's Island and was a Coast Guard station for decades. This picture also shows the brilliant clear skies created by the COVID economic shut-down; I've never seen New York so clearly.

Dan and Josh were ready. Dan Benedix is a retired entrepreneur determined to bring more people into aviation. Josh Foster is a new-ish pilot working on his CFI certificate. We loaded the plane with cameras and food and blasted back into the murk,

Josh taking the left seat. Around 5,000 feet we popped into bright sunshine. ATC was very helpful and kept giving us "direct to" shortcuts. As the visibility improved we overflowed the Patuxent River Naval Air Station where F-35s litter the ramp like glass beads at Mardi Gras. At Dover AFB an entire wing of elephantine C-5 cargo lifters dozed on the ramp. We got a close-up look at Lakehurst, NJ where the Hindenburg crashed.

After a little over two hours in the air Josh flopped us down on the runway at Monmouth, NJ. It's a threadbare little airport with a dreary FBO but it's the

northernmost airport close to New York City. Josh swears it was a perfect landing except for the hump in the touchdown zone. Dan and I were unconvinced.

We on-loaded some gas, off-loaded some coffee, and blasted north to New York City, distantly shimmering on the horizon. Our next waypoint: the towers of the Verrazzano Narrows Bridge.

Miracle Above the Hudson

The Hudson River is about a mile wide as it flows past Manhattan Island; Manhattan is on the east side and New Jersey is on the west. The Hudson River Special Flight Rules area defines the Hudson River Corridor. The fact this corridor exists at all is a testament to the extraordinary efforts the FAA makes to support GA flying. It really is a bit of an administrative miracle and nothing quite like it exists in any other city in the world.



The one photo everybody wants to take, one of the most inspiring scenes in all of aviation. Practice your “turns around a point” before attempting this maneuver: your altitude can only be from 1,000 feet to 1,300 feet and if you “pop up” you’ll be talking to unhappy controllers at JFK and LGA. As this is the year of COVID-19, the Statue was shut down to visitors making this the only time I have not seen thousands of tourists clustered along the railings.

The corridor is about 27 nm long on a roughly north-south line. It runs over the Hudson River from the Verrazano Bridge in the south to the Alpine Tower in the north. It’s VFR-only and requires a bit of patience, a tiny bit of special training, updated charts and sharp eyes.

The Special Flight Rules consists of three simple instructions. First, fixed-wing aircraft must fly over the river and never over land. Secondly, everybody stays to *their* right and flies between 1,000 feet and 1,300 feet AGL. Lastly, everybody self-reports in the blind at specific reporting points on 123.05. It's not hard but it does require some precision and a little pre-planning.

This corridor was created after a mid-air collision between a low-wing aircraft flying southward and a helicopter departing a Manhattan heliport. In earlier days, everybody flew where they wanted, at whatever altitude they chose. In the old days, I frequently flew the river as low as 500 feet, skimming between the towers of the huge bridges, and local sight-seeing helicopters were definitely a factor. The special flight rules have been in effect for the past decade or so without any further incidents so it seems to be a nice safety

improvement from the FAA.

We departed from Monmouth and climbed to 2,500 feet. Josh was right-seat with his Nikon and would focus on Manhattan and the skyscrapers while Dan was in back-left with



Flying southbound along the New Jersey side of the river (right) we enjoyed a spectacular view of the entire New York skyline. Along the shore is the famous 79th Street Boat Basin, featured in "You've Got Mail" with Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks. Behind it are the 800 manicured acres of Central Park. The tall tower under construction in the center of the photo is Central Park Tower on West 57th Street. The penthouse on the 115th floor can be yours for merely \$63,750,000. Above, see almost the same scene, but taken in 1999. The pollution in the air is far worse than it is today, and since that time skyscrapers around the Empire State Building have sprouted like mushrooms after a Spring rain. Hard to believe it's the same city.



a GoPro peering towards New Jersey. I found a convenient waypoint — TICKL was easy to spell — and plugged it into the GPS to keep the Garmin 500 autopilot busy. About half-way across the outer (southern) harbor the veil of the New York Class B airspace thuds down to 1,500 feet AGL so we crossed beneath that line in a gentle descent. I dropped the gear and 10° of flaps to keep our speed a comfortable 90 knots.



The new World Trade Center is a stunning building, 1,776 feet tall and looming far above our plane. The density of the development in southern Manhattan is beyond belief.

In terms of situational awareness, you can't find better landmarks than the Hudson River corridor. The route starts at the Verrazzano Narrows Bridge and ends at the Alpine Tower. The bridge is unmistakable; the second-largest suspension bridge in the world is just shy of 700 feet tall. The Alpine Tower is a bright orange radio tower perched on top of the cliffs of the Palisades. If you can't find these two landmarks you really shouldn't be in a plane.

We nailed the center of the Narrows bridge and continued north over the inner harbor. While it was bumpy and hot, the air was sparkling clear because there were no commuters polluting the air, due to the COVID restrictions. Visibility might have been 50 miles or more.

There was a fleet of sleepy-looking freighters and tankers awaiting berths. An almost-empty State Island ferry splashed by, orange paint faded dingy by the salt and sun. Cameras clicking, we flew turns-about-a-point over the Statue of Liberty and peeked at Ellis Island. Then I carefully positioned us on the proper (right) side of the river as we approached Wall Street at the very southern tip of Manhattan Island. This is the point where things get interesting.

The scene is amazing. The new World Trade Center is a marvel; angular and elegant as it looms hundreds of feet above our wings. That surreal tower is surrounded by a Star-Wars style fleet of smaller skyscrapers, all shiny and



Josh snapped this awesome photograph as the Empire State Building seeming to touch my wingtip. To the bottom left are the railroad tracks going into Penn Station. The low, circular building at the center of the photo is Madison Square Garden.



The U.S.S. Intrepid is an Essex-class aircraft carrier built during World War II. She was torpedoed once and hit by four kamikaze aircraft but kept on fighting. She also served in the Korean War, Vietnam and was the recovery ship for two early space flight missions. Decommissioned in 1974, she's now the Sea, Air & Space Museum. If you ever get to New York this is one museum you must not miss.

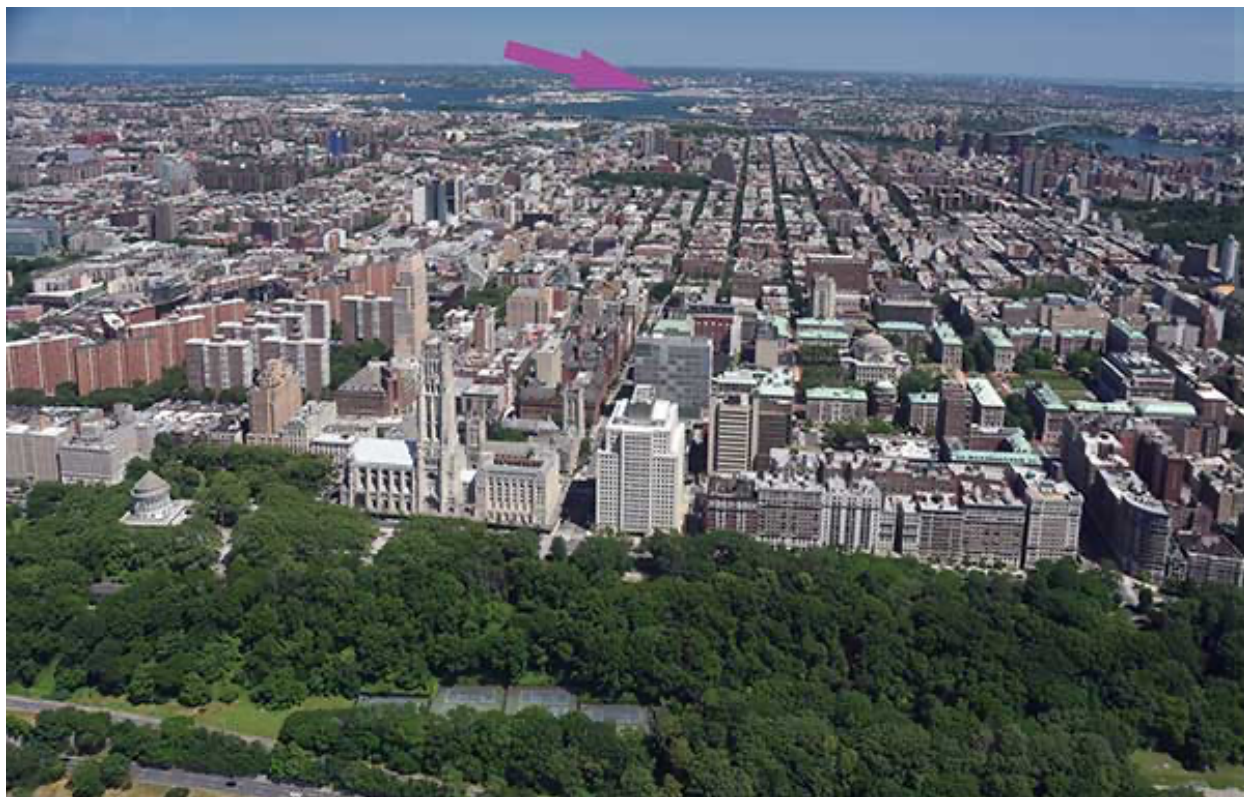
glass. Any one of those buildings would be a world-class giant in another city, but in Manhattan they are just a ho-hum neighbor.

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From an airplane, the geology underneath Manhattan becomes quite evident. The south end of the island, Wall Street, is solid rock which supports massive towers. There is another outcrop of granite in midtown, running up to Central Park, which supports a second wave of elegant towers. But between those zones the soil is swampy and the bedrock goes deep so the buildings of

SOHO, Greenwich Village, Little Italy and Chinatown are shorter and less ostentatious. I had lived in The City for almost two decades, so like a chatty taxi driver I highlighted landmarks to Dan and Josh as we floated by.

Leaving the skyscrapers of Manhattan behind, we continued up the Hudson



Leaving the skyscrapers of Manhattan behind, we continued up the Hudson and peered into Central Park, Harlem, Riverside Park and eventually Morningside Heights. In this photo (left to right) is Grant's Tomb, Riverside Cathedral and the green roofs of Columbia University. The purple arrow is the main runway of LaGuardia Airport, about two miles away. Watch for traffic!

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In midtown, one of the most interesting sights is the aircraft carrier *Intrepid*. It's been docked in the Hudson River for about thirty years. This museum features tours of the ship, explanations of its design and operation, and exciting videos of its history. On static display is an exciting array of airplanes including an SR-71 and a Concorde, neither of which ever even

thought about landing on a carrier. There's also a submarine and other surprises. From the air the museum is enticing.

Our flight continued north, my two tourists chatting exuberantly as we passed Central Park, Riverside Cathedral, Who's-Buried-in-Grant's Tomb, and eventually the historic George Washington Bridge. LaGuardia Airport was just a few miles off our right wing. Jets winked in the afternoon glare as they arrived and departed.



*Finished in 1931, the George Washington Bridge is the world's busiest bridge with d 100 million crossings annually. It connects Fort Washington Park in Manhattan to northern New Jersey. Even more interestingly, this photo includes the famous "Little Red Lighthouse" under the bridge, on a point of land called Jeffrey's Hook. The Coast Guard proposed demolishing the lighthouse but an outcry from fans of the 1942 children's book, *The Little Red Lighthouse and the Great Gray Bridge*, by Hildegard Swift, convinced the Coast Guard to just give it to the city.*

Course Reversal

The more savvy of you probably are thinking, how does a non-aerobatic aircraft turn in this congested airspace? For that purpose, Mother Nature thoughtfully provided the Tappan Zee, a spreading of the river near Tarrytown

a few miles north of the Alpine Tower. The river fans out about three miles. The shallow water also makes it a prime spot for the new and stunningly beautiful Tappan Zee twin-bridge which carries the New York Thruway across the river. It's the perfect landmark for a gentle turn and more radio calls.

Now Josh inspected the New Jersey side of the river up close and personal while Dan focused on Manhattan. The rocky cliffs of the Palisades are impressive from any angle. We passed the frail-looking latticework of the Alpine Tower and began our return through the corridor. Photographically speaking, the south-bound trip offers better views of Manhattan because you're slightly more distant, capturing the skyline more dramatically.

Eventually we worked our way back down the river, said good-bye to Lady Liberty and dashed back to the Narrows Bridge. We'd spent the better part of an hour in turbulent air, low and slow on a hot summer day. The cockpit was a sweaty sauna. As soon as we cleared the Class B we began a long, steady climb to cooler altitudes. Again, ATC was amazingly helpful and was able to give us a pick-up IFR clearance without any fuss. We cruised at 10,000 feet for the long ride home.

Two hours later we plopped down at Burlington, tired but thrilled with our day. With 50 gallons still in my tanks I thanked my flight crew and dashed home VFR, arriving just as a thunderstorm threatened the field. I was able to slide into home plate before the winds and rain arrived, putting a happy and safe ending on a marvelous day in the air.

Which brings me back to the Happy Mike. The world's a pretty stressful place right now. There is the COVID virus, unemployment, bankruptcies, Washington is a mess and there are riots in cities. There's even a plague of locusts in Africa. All in all, not a good picture.

Do what you can for your own mental health. Go fly. You were born to do it. The airports will appreciate the business. Your plane will appreciate the exercise. As for the rest of the world, we'll start fixing that tomorrow.

About the Author

Dr. Mike Jones learned to fly at Robertson Field in Connecticut, about sixty miles northeast of New York City. He often flew friends down the Hudson River corridor in his Cessna 182. He was scheduled to fly a tour down the river with friends on the morning of September 11, 2001 but at the last minute decided to go to a meeting in his office instead. He's always accessible at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.

