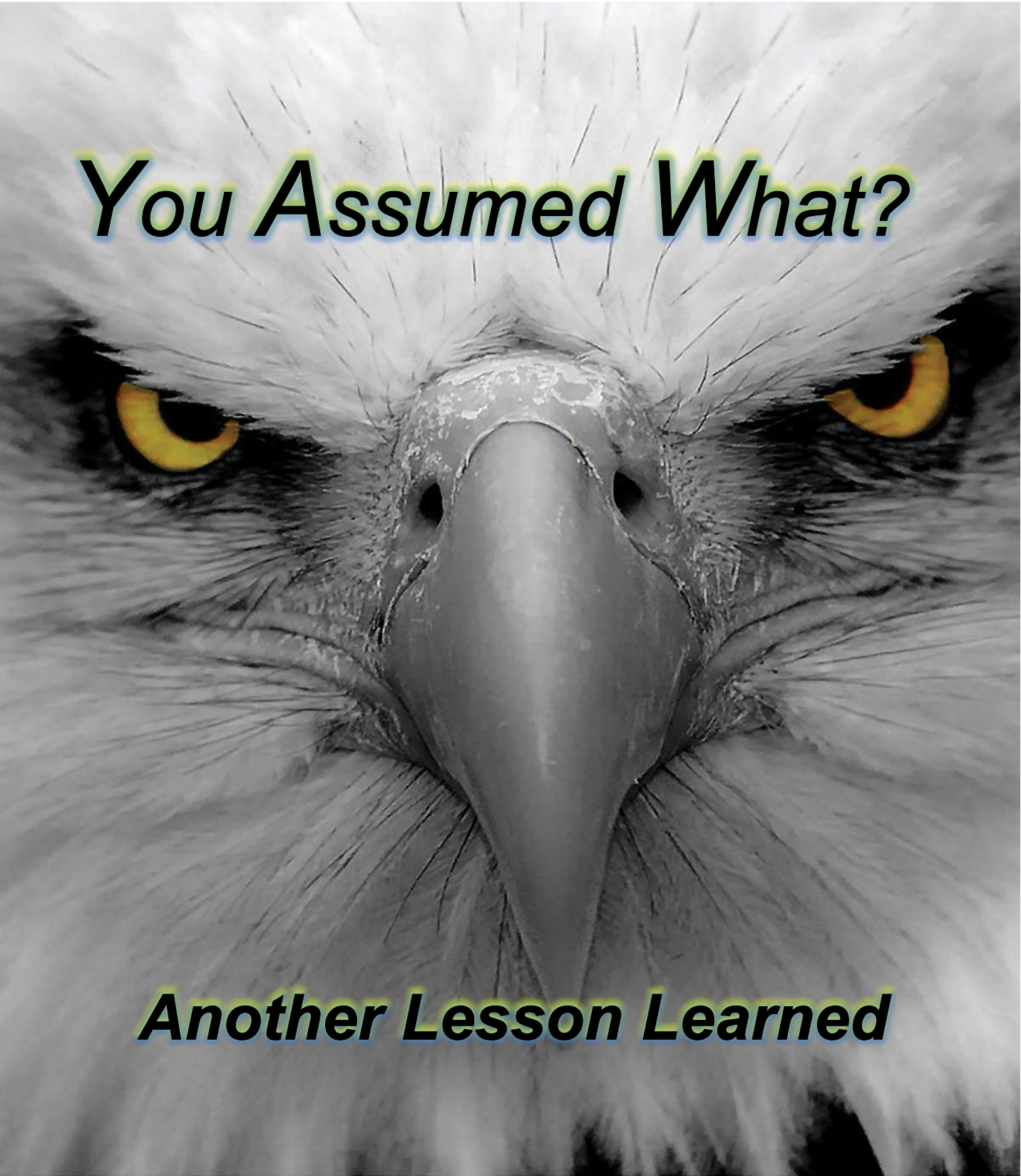




You Assumed What?

Another Lesson Learned

“You Assumed What?” Another Lesson Learned

By Mike Jones

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Many pilots, all of them smarter than this reporter, acknowledge that aviation is one activity in which we always should be learning. There's always some new twist in ATC services or some nuance in the weather forecasts which will make your flying safer, faster, or more affordable. The savvy flyer is always alert for these advantages.

The Mystery of the Missing Oil

A great example of “always learning” came from the new engine in my Cessna T210. Installed in the Spring of 2024, I've been monitoring its performance during the break-in process. Overall, I am thrilled; it is smooth, strong, and cool, just like me.

After a couple of flights — including my memorable trip to Triple Tree Aerodrome documented in these pages two months ago — I noticed things were not right. I was averaging a quart of oil every three hours. Since my old engine had run for nearly two decades using a quart every seven hours, I was concerned.

I checked all the obvious suspects. Was there a leak? Was it burning the oil? Was there a gasket problem with the prop? No obvious symptoms were observed.

Diving deep into the Continental manual, and hardly moving my lips while I read it, I noticed a single sentence that seemed out of place. It said, "Continue break-in operations for 50 hours or until oil consumption stabilizes." Hmmm.

I thought break-ins were completed at 25 hours. But Continental politely disagrees. If the engine is working well and there are no other symptoms it means the rings have not yet set.

So I continued feeding over-priced Aeroshell 100W into my 500-pound baby and kept flying. And she flew well, so I was happy. Almost as happy as my almost-sainted wife, who has tired of writing big checks to our mechanic.

Then, at 60 hours, the dipstick surprised me. I had flown five hours and used half a quart. At 65 hours, I barely needed to top it off. At 70 hours, it was rock-steady, down just a pint. The oil consumption finally had stabilized. Exactly as Continental predicted. Those guys down in Mobile must be pretty smart.

But that's not what I came to talk about today.

I came to tell you about that last pint of oil.

And what my sister done to it.

High-Pressure Blues

For about a week now, my Cessna and I had been living the dream. There was a huge "H" in a circle on the television, and the red-haired weather forecaster on TV seemed excited by it. He was joking with the other androids they hire at television stations but you never see in the grocery store. He was saying this Big H was going to deliver spectacular weather for weeks. Blue skies, gentle winds, fluffy clouds.



"It's gonna be like May," he said, "and it's only early March!" And the beautiful people laughed with the red-haired weather guy and everybody looked really happy.

Being a basically lazy airplane, my Cessna loves to fly through those big H's instead of dealing with those soggy L's they sometimes paint on the weather map. I bought some fuel and programmed the GPS and dug out wrinkled checklists and decided to aviate a bit. The only thing missing was a "there." As in, where are we going? We're going there.

My phone rang. It was my sister. The one I like. She is an award-winning nature photographer, such as the photo decorating this article. She was in her car and convivially reporting she had cancelled her bald eagle photography trip on the James River that morning. Instead, she was going to the airport in Williamsburg, VA to have lunch at Charley's Restaurant (KJGG).

Charley’s is a funny airport restaurant, with ten crowded tables and plastic airplanes hanging from the ceiling. It has a kitchen smaller than a broom closet but somehow they stir up wonderful soups and the best pumpernickel bread I’ve ever tossed past my tonsils. I told my sister to hold my chair, it’s just an hour away in the Cessna. I had my *there*.

Which means that everything that happened next is all my sister’s fault.

Into the Skies

Being even lazier than my Cessna, I filed IFR because it’s the easiest flying. Turn on the autopilot, go where they tell you to go, and look out the window. I’m really good at looking out windows. World-class.

Wheels-up, I chatted with the nice folks in Fayetteville Approach. They handed me off to the even nicer folks at Raleigh, who in turn handed me off to the über-friendly folks at Washington Center. It was just a love-fest on the radio. The visibility was a zillion, the ceiling was just this side of the moon. I watched planes flying below me. That new engine? Loping along like a Tennessee Walking Horse, “refined and elegant, yet solidly built.”

I spent a fair amount of time fussing with the iPad, where Foreflight lives. As I passed Raleigh, the iPad overheated, so I shut it down and rebooted. When it came to life the digital keypad was unresponsive. One more reboot and everything was more or less normal. Back to looking out the window.

Just about to cross into Virginia, it was time to check the weather at my destination. Mr. Garmin downloaded it and reported the ceilings were 500 feet.

That can’t be right. We got that Big H over our heads. I saw it on the television. I’m at 9,000 feet and can’t see a cloud. The sky is clear to Nova Scotia.

More than a little concerned, I returned to my buggy Foreflight. It demurely uploaded the latest visibility reports, sky conditions, and ceilings across all the region. All of North Carolina was speckled with big green dots. I felt redeemed. Like Sergeant Schultz in “Hogan’s Heros” I shouted at the Garmin: “I see nossing!”



Charley's Airport Restaurant at Williamsburg Airport (KJGG) is a delight, with a great kitchen, home-baked fresh bread every day, reasonable prices, and great views of their busy runway.

Then I scrolled the display. Oh-oh. Richmond (KRIC) was not green. It was purple. Patrick Henry (KPHF) was purple. Norfolk (KORF) was purple. In fact, the whole eastern half of the state was purple, meaning low IFR conditions with ceilings below 500 feet and visibility less than a mile. Garmin was right and I was wrong.

Peering through the windscreen, I dimly noticed a narrow layer of stratus perched atop the entire Tidewater region. A very skinny layer, barely worth a notice. The tops were maybe at 2,000 feet. Nothing significant, really.

But that layer clung to the hillsides of southeastern Virginia like silk clinging to a Versace super-model. High above, it was smooth sailing. But if I was going to descend for my homemade soup with pumpernickel bread, I needed an IFR approach right to the minimums.

Peering at the approach plate, my stomach roiled. The missed approach point into my sister’s airport was about 1,000 feet. Which would be in the clouds. I considered Patrick Henry, the only other airport to which my sister could drive in a reasonable time. Ceilings 300 feet. Served by an ILS, it technically was do-able.

My iPad blinked twice and went dark. Karma is a bitch, as they say.

When You Assume...

Years ago, when the Cessna and I were just becoming friends, I flew with paper sectionals, approach plates, and the famous green Airport Facility Directory (AFD) for the entire East Coast. I was the cause of deforestation for half of the Amazon jungle. When I finally upgraded to modern avionics, I weighed all the paper charts in the plane; 47 pounds of cellulose was recycled every 58 days.

But you never have to re-boot a paper chart.

Technically I was fine; I was in VMC on an IFR flight plan and the Garmin was my primary navigator; all legal and kosher.

But did I really want to fly to minimums without an approach plate? Or divert to an alternate? Oh, right — I assumed the weather in Williamsburg was the same as it was in North Carolina. I was so smug I didn’t get a weather

briefing. I didn’t file an alternate. Nor had I mentioned to my sister about driving 45 minutes in the wrong direction.

I pondered the scenario for a few moments. I could fly to the Initial Approach Fix and waddle down the RNAV into Williamsburg. Odds-on, I was going to go missed. In short order, I would then fly the missed approach, get the weather at Newport News, coordinate with Approach, select a procedure, re-set all the radios, reprogram the nav gear, all why flying the second approach to minimums. Can you spell “task saturated”?

“Washington, Cessna 91N,” I said to my friend sitting in his radar room someplace, “Request.”

“Go ahead, 91N,” he promptly replied.

“Change of plans, sir. 91N is going to divert to Halifax County (KIXA),” which was an airport about ten miles behind me in clear VFR conditions.

“91N, roger you’re diverting. Is everything alright?” he asked calmly but with a concerned tone.

“Everything is fine, I just need to get on the ground and recheck the weather at my destination.” Which must have sounded as lame to him as it sounded to me as I said it. I cancelled IFR and set the radios for my new destination.

I flipped the plane around and headed towards Halifax. I needed to lose 8,000 feet of altitude in ten miles. What’s a pilot to do?

Slip-Sliding Away

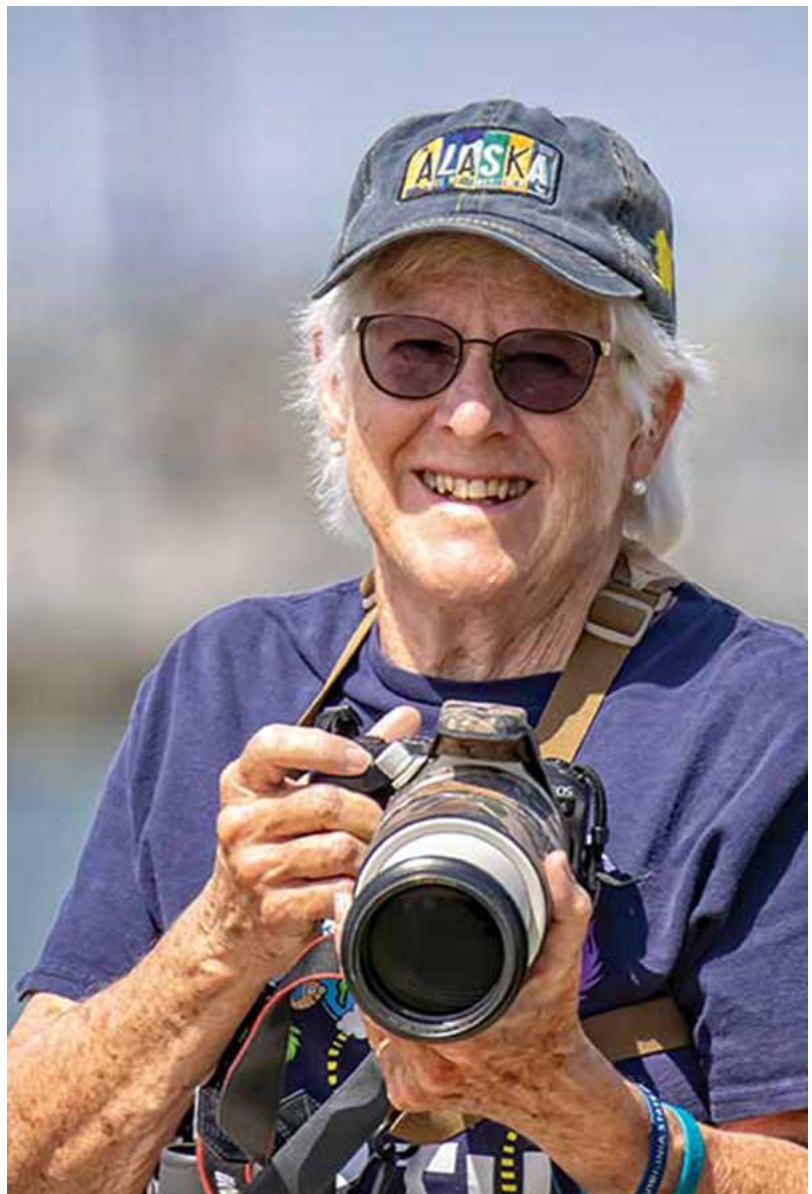
The forward slip is my favorite maneuver; one that is unknown to some and unused by most, but this was one of those times. Rather than point the nose down and dive at V_{NE} towards the airport, I raised the nose and pulled the

power back until the “gear down” alarm screeched in my ears. The plane slowed as if I had dropped anchor.

Once the airspeed was right, I stomped on the right rudder and dropped the left wing. Cross-controlling generates truckloads of drag, and with the Continental as powerless as a gelded stallion the altimeter unwound like a time-traveling wristwatch. For four minutes I pegged that gauge at 2,000 feet per minute. The only challenge with a long forward slip is your leg muscles get tired.

Approaching the pattern, I released the controls and returned to normal flight. Old ‘91N and I flounced onto the empty runway at Halifax and rolled towards the terminal with style. If you didn’t know I had seriously screwed up, you might have thought I was competent.

Switching to “Casual Cool” mode, I sauntered into the surprisingly modern FBO and asked for the bathroom. Then I hid in the pilot briefing room and performed the preflight planning I should have done hours before. Sure enough, southeastern Virginia was socked-in and was going to remain that way for the next



Judy Jones, award winning nature photographer. The cover photo for this article of the bald eagle glaring at the camera is an example of her skills.

few days. Let's face it, dear reader: your scribe is a knucklehead, honest and true.

Decision-Time

What to do now? Option #1: Re-file and fly to Newport News, with their long, wide runways and snappy ILS. Not a bad choice and certainly fly-able. But my aging iPad had failed mid-flight twice; what if it failed again, and I had to fly a missed approach? Plus, KPHF is inconvenient; my sister would have a long drive to get me, and another long drive to drop me off after lunch.

Option #2 was less challenging. I could simply return home. That would give me a couple hours to ponder my inadequacies. Remember the "Always Learning" mantra? Yeah, really.

The prudent choice was Option 2, so I called my sister and man-splained to her the situation. She was happy I was safe but disappointed I wasn't going to be there for lunch. Then she made me slap my forehead.

"Well, I told you I had cancelled my photography day," she said.

"Yes, you did, which is why I thought lunch would be fun," I replied.

"But you know I go eagle-watching in all sorts of weather, even in rain, or freezing, or high winds," she sighed, glad that our parents hadn't shared my stupid gene with her. *"I only cancel because of low clouds or fog."*

"Oh. Photography. Light. Clouds. Fog. Right."

Of course, she had assumed I knew about the clouds. When we had spoken a couple hours before, she knew I always get a weather briefing. Plus, in my defense, she actually didn't say the clouds were touching the treetops. She wasn't specific that the sky was darker than the Lincoln Tunnel. She didn't say, if the eagles aren't flying maybe I shouldn't as well? See what I mean? She

wasn't *explicit*. So it's really all her fault that I flew two hours and used that last pint of engine oil. Some sister she turned out to be.

Resigned to my fate, I fired up old '91N and returned home, low, slow, and VFR, hiding my embarrassment in the ground clutter. Completely uneventful. I had failed to "respect the flight" as my friend Mark says, so I failed in my pre-flight planning, and this time it bit me. As I say after every flight, I'll do better next time. When the bar is as low as it was on this flight, that's a safe bet.

But I did get to meet a really nice airport cat at Halifax, so the day wasn't totally wasted.



The airport cat at Halifax, NC. Lovely wee soul.

About the Author



Dr. Mike Jones is an avid pilot, desperate golfer, and passionate gardner. His “day job” is consulting with small airports and helping them find ways to boost their total economic impact so they become more relevant to their local community. You always can reach him at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.