Push Your Envelop and Never Stop Learning

Push Your Envelop and Never Stop Learning

By Mike Jones

Cessna Pilots Magazine, originally published: September 2025

Even after flying for more than thirty years, I never start the engine of my Cessna without learning something new. This was particularly true this past August (2025) when I completed a dozen complex flights in ten days. But sitting at the end of the runway in Michigan, on a dreary morning with light rain and the lowest ceiling I have ever seen, I wasn't in the mood to learn something new. I was worried. My hands were shaking. I pondered the poor life-choices which had brought me to this threadbare airport for a zero-dark hundred departure.

If All Goes Well

The week had started with a simple and straightforward out-and-back business trip. But, like Topsy, the mission had expanded as new opportunities arose. The final iteration was a daisy-chain of airports and friendship. If all went well, I'd be leaping around northeastern U.S. like a Mexican jumping bean.

Instantly, you see the problem. With airplanes, nothing always goes well.

The first question was the feasibility of the task. Multiple flights over numerous days, on a tight schedule? With no "slack" to accommodate deviations? Airplane malfunctions, pilot fatigue, adverse weather, inadequate ground transportation, deficient hostelries, or any of a dozen other

circumstances could leave me forlornly awaiting rescue in some distant and no doubt expensive location. This plan could be derailed more easily than a Russian train rolling into Crimea.

But one factoid made this effort compelling: the trip required general aviation. The mission simply could not have been accomplished using the airlines or the interstates. If our friends at MapQuest are to be believed, the trip would have required 48 hours of windshield time covering 3,265 statute miles. That's a lot of dingy bathrooms and greasy food. The sturdy Centurion could make the loop in about sixteen hours. Put me in, Coach!

Sectional Shenanigans

The first leg of the trip was a lazy jaunt from Pinehurst, NC to Akron, OH (KAKR) for the "Pistons and Props" airshow (those details are related elsewhere in this website). As always, I filed IFR but the skies were CAVU. I spent more time peering at the verdant mountains of West Virginia than the gauges in my panel.

There were complex arrival procedures at Akron for the airshow. The southerly arrival required a descent to 2,000 feet prior to tagging the Akron VOR. Arriving traffic was supposed to turn towards the ginormous football stadium downtown. Happily, I never needed that landmark because the temporary control tower, tickled-pink by my arrival, graciously awarded me a

The ramp at the Props and Piston fly-in at Akron in August 2025 was a stellar mixture of antiques, modern G.A., and military hardware. According to the organizers their attendance was the highest ever. If you live in the Midwest, give it a try in 2026.

straight-in approach. Once there, I thrilled the crowds with my patented “multi-bounce” landing.

I tied the Cessna down in the grass and grabbed the shuttle bus to the front gate. Soon I was walking the flight line, enjoying the hardware on display and the ill-informed speculations of the non-flyers in the crowd. “Pistons and Props” is highly entertaining and you’ll be reading more about it in this magazine next month.

But Sunday morning featured gloomy skies and a 50:50 chance of thunderstorms by lunch. Sensitive to the fragility of my schedule, I skipped my planned seminars and interviews and fired up the Centurion. I received my clearance from Cleveland and then asked for a quick visual loop back through the pattern to photograph the fly-in from the air. This was promptly denied. Puzzled, I killed my clearance, departed VFR, flew my loop, got my photos, climbed into radar coverage, and reconnected with the same splenetic lady in Cleveland who had rejected my request a few minutes before.

This rejection puzzled me, because it is quite common to depart under VFR rules and “upon reaching controlled airspace” join the IFR world. I spoke with my friend Hans Krah, an imperturbable senior controller at Cleveland International. Krah suggested I take a closer look at the sectional. I couldn’t see anything odd. Look harder, he coached, sounding like Yoda. Finally it ticked: a dashed *magenta* circle around the Akron airport. What’s up with that?

A dashed blue circle around an airport indicates Class D airspace. “Delta” airports have a tower and own the airspace from the surface to the Class E airspace above. But a dashed magenta ring?

It indicates Fulton/Akron International has controlled airspace down to the surface even though it doesn’t have a tower. So my taciturn controller was correct; I could not climb into controlled airspace because I was already in it.

Slap my forehead! Learning #1 is to pay closer attention to the symbology on our charts. They're there for a reason.

Krah also reminded me there are always options. For example, I could have filed for a practice IFR approach back into Akron, and requested it be an IFR visual approach. Learning #2: A visual IFR approach is a real thing, just not often used in the G.A. world.

As my wheels left the tarmac I was talking to Cleveland Center. Always cautious, I trundled over Lake Erie wearing a life jacket. I peered voyeur-like down into the village of Put-in Bay on South Bass Island. (Long-time readers will recall Put-in Bay was the scene of a memorable weekend in 2024 enroute to Oshkosh. The nice lady at the courthouse says my probation is almost finished.)

Eventually I said hello to the cordial controllers in Detroit. Staring down through the clouds, I deciphered another new symbol on the sectional chart I had not noticed before. Pay attention, class: An irregular shape inscribed with hash marks denotes a wind farm. Hundreds of enormous towers are flapping their blades over central Michigan, eager to trip a low-flying Cessna. Learning #3: wind farms and scud-runners are not the best of friends.

But Detroit wasn't my destination, nor was Lansing, Mount Pleasant, nor even Traverse City, which is so far north polar bears vacation there. I was heading to Escanaba, on the Upper Peninsula (the "Yooper," in the vernacular of the locals).

This required a 75-mile dash over icy Lake Michigan. At 7,000 feet, I would be out of gliding distance from either shore for twelve minutes, which made me a little twitchy. I minimized my time over the frigid waters with a high-speed VFR descent as the shoreline approached. With an empty pattern and clear skies, I hit the final approach fix to Runway 1 at nearly 170 knots. Turning

inbound I pulled the power back, dropped the gear, and enthusiastically flopped onto the tarmac.

My time in Escanaba was well-spent. I met members of the Airport Advisory Board, the new airport manager, and some of the County Commissioners. I offered them some guidance on boosting the airport's economic impact by attracting new customers with bigger planes. How that turns out is hard to predict, but their professionalism was encouraging and their hospitality delightful.

Which brings me to my take-off on Tuesday morning, shaky hands and all.

Playing the Odds

At Escanaba, the morning greeted me with light rain, easterly winds, visibility ten miles, and a solid ceiling at two hundred feet. The forecast was for rain storms along my route, but no ice or convective activity. I had a luncheon meeting with the mayor of Lock Haven, in central Pennsylvania, on the schedule. Time was tight. Riddle me this, Batman: Was it safe to depart? Would you?

The question requires managing the "chain of causation." Accident investigators often describe a crash as a series of decisions which make the accident inevitable. If the pilot flips the switch on any one of those decisions, the accident simply doesn't occur.

Let's look at the "chain" for this flight. Hard IFR is familiar territory and I average at least a dozen instrument approaches every year. The airport was equipped with an ILS approach. The runway was long (although it was pointing directly into the lake). The airplane had just completed its annual inspection, was running flawlessly, had a modern autopilot, was fully fueled, and thoroughly pre-flighted. I was well-rested and it had been a dozen hours since my post-prandial schnaps. (Remember the "IMSAFE" checklist, self-assessing

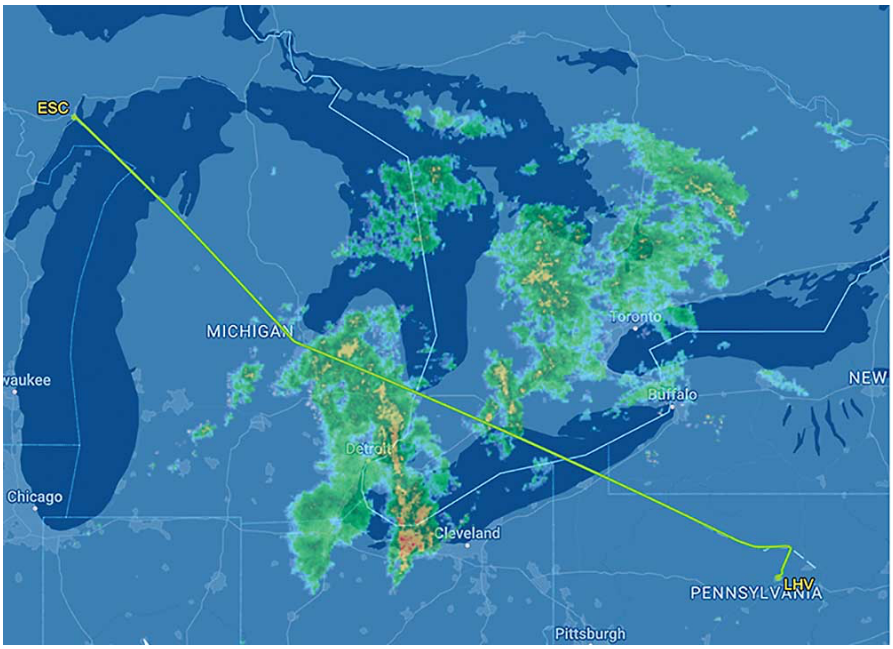
Illness, Medication, Stress, Alcohol, Fatigue, and Emotion?) I was wearing my life jacket. I had filed an IFR flight plan. I had completed a detailed weather briefing. What were the odds?

The only condition I could not control would be a low altitude IFR crisis over Lake Michigan.

Suppose I departed into those clouds and developed vertigo. It's happened, rarely but instantly. Could I keep the wings level if my inner-ear is sending me sideways? Suppose my Continental snorted as I kicked into the clouds. Despite the ILS, those low ceilings would make a return to Escanaba challenging. It's all about playing the odds. I had to ask myself, like Clint Eastwood in *Dirty Harry*, how lucky do you feel, punk?

Sitting in the run-up area, pondering this chain of causation, I heard Minneapolis Center clear a Cessna to land. A cheery landing light poked optimistically out of the overcast. A minute later a sturdy FedEx Caravan floated gracefully onto the runway.

It was an omen. If that Cessna could do it, this Cessna could, too. I rolled confidently down the runway. I had the plane reconfigured before entering the murk, and at five hundred feet began a cruise climb with the autopilot engaged.



This screengrab, courtesy of FlightAware, shows the mission from Escanaba to Lock Haven along with the weather at the mid-point of the flight. The radar does not show the low ceilings during my departure, nor the fair-weather cumulus that almost stymied my arrival in Pennsylvania. The radar track highlights the sharp button-hook at the end of the flight, which is when I spotted the hole in the clouds that allowed me to descend VFR.

Learning #4: Preparation and practice will bend the odds in your favor. As golfer Gary Player said, “The more I practice, the luckier I get.”

The City that Piper Built

A little over three hours later, I was still in the murk. I had successfully re-crossed Lake Michigan and dashed southward over the “mitten” of southern Michigan. Friendly Toronto Center escorted me over their farmlands and Lake Erie. I was in and out of IMC and was happy to receive the final hand-off to New York Center as I descended into Lock Haven. The problem? The weather and the rocks weren’t cooperating.

Central Pennsylvania is stunningly beautiful. The terrain is characterized by the “Pennsylvania Salient” of volcanic rocks which were folded over eons into a series of parallel ridges, spooning together like a bunch of bananas on a forest-green tablecloth. These mountains were once as tall as the modern Himalayas before millions of years of weathering subdued them into today’s more gentle topography.

But subdued does not mean insignificant. Lock Haven is snuggled between a pair of those ridges, each 2,000 feet above sea level. The RNAV approach into Lock Haven has a decision height of 2,440 feet — 1,900 feet above the runway! — which renders it more aspirational than aeronautically useful. With no safe and legal way into Lock Haven, a broken layer of cumulus could hamstring my meeting with the mayor.

Of course, there are many ways to skin the IFR cat. Before departing I had filed my route not to Lock Haven but to Williamsport, PA (KIPT), a substantial burg twenty miles upstream. That aerodrome has an instrument approach that ends merely 200 feet above the runway. Savvy pilots fly the ILS into Williamsport and at a reasonable altitude proceed southwest to Lock Haven under visual flight rules.

But as I motored towards Williamsport at 4,000 feet — feet in the clouds but my shoulders in sunlight — I spotted a better opportunity. There was a substantial break in the cloud cover to the south, through which I could clearly see the hills and valleys. I judged the ceiling to be around 2,500 feet with unlimited visibility below. I quickly negotiated with Center, pivoted on my wing, and slipped through that hole faster than a squirrel being chased by a hawk. A right-hand pattern had me thumping into Lock Haven with time to spare.

Learning #5: Plan your flight and fly your plan, but knowing the rules gives you flexibility.

Simple and Shiny

The following Saturday found me in Nashua, NH (KASH) brunching at the Nashua airport restaurant with my college roommate of fifty years ago, Bruce Denner, and Mark Robidoux, of PilotWorkshop.com fame. Robidoux shared recent tales of floatplane flying in Maine, and was very impressed when he inspected both my Cessna and Denner's. Looking at my bug-splattered flying machine, he shared a surprising fact. In a pilot survey they had recently conducted, the single most popular airplane cleaner was Lemon Pledge, the furniture polish. Learning #6: I tried it. It works amazingly. Who knew?

When we weren't flying, Denner and I were pursuing our second love, golf. Denner's granddaughter, Morgan, joined us for a round and beat us both like rented mules.

You first met the amiable Bruce Denner in this newspaper last summer when he bought N4691K, a nifty Cessna 182 with a strong engine but tired avionics. Over the winter, Denner had invested heavily in new digital toys and flight lessons. When I arrived he had successfully soloed and had two different instructors working complicated schedules to get his ticket punched before the snow flies.

A great example of the unexpected finds in a G.A. hangar. An AirCam on floats is a marvelous backcountry machine, but to see one in a Nashua, NH hangar honoring the distant University of Florida was a treat. As a Gator alumni, the selfie was mandatory.

Denner was proud of his new-found skills but dubious they would withstand the challenges of real-world flying. To sharpen his razor, we planned a four-airport round-robin that would challenge his navigation, his pattern-entry skills, his crosswind tactics, his radio finesse, and his command of the new electronics. Technically, I was pilot-in-command but mostly I was ballast.

New England weather rarely plays fair. By lunchtime on Saturday the winds were “sporty” — from the southwest at twelve, gusting higher. To complete this mission, Denner needed to join the varsity team.

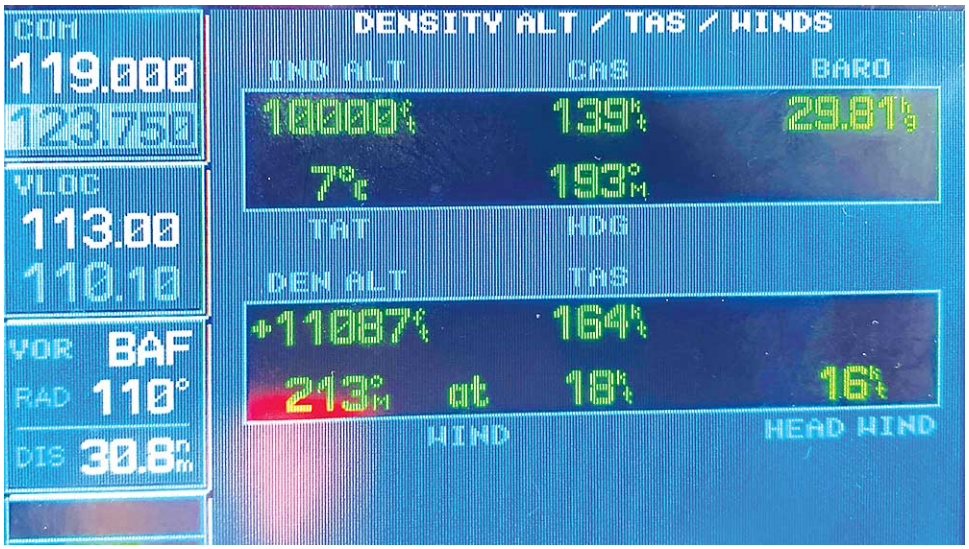
With just one runway at Nashua, hefty crosswinds were his first test. He briskly switched to Manchester Approach and negotiated his way through their Class Charlie. We turned northeast to Laconia (KLCI) on the windy shores of Lake Winnipesaukee. The wind blasted right down the runway, which

abbreviated Denner's downwind and made his turn to base a little shaggy. But he recovered competently and we exited at mid-field.

Our next leg was to Lewiston, ME (KLEW) with more crosswinds. That was followed by an expedited hop to Brunswick Executive (KBXM). There, the hefty tailwinds pushed us into the pattern almost before we could grab the AWOS. Our entry was garbled but the landing was excellent.

Turning southward, we flew over the rocky coastline of Maine, further testing Denner's abilities with the air traffic controllers at Portland Approach. We were anticipating the superb lunch at Sanford Regional (KSFM) but Denner was reaching his limit, so we skipped the crab cakes and headed home.

Despite the fact we were perfectly positioned for a right base, Nashua Tower shunted us onto a time-wasting digression to the northwest. Halfway there, Tower changed their mind and re-pointed us back to a base entry. They directed Denner to "cross the Merrimack River and report a two-mile base." Weary from three hours of banging around in his aluminum can, Denner stopped thinking and started piloting. He responded accurately, automatically, and professionally. His crosswind correction and landing was the best of the day. In these wearying repetitions, he



My 1979 Cessna T210 has been a loyal partner in my aviation journey for twenty five years. The new Continental has about 100 hours on it and is running tight and strong, only using a quart of oil every ten hours. It's reassuring when Mr. Garmin determines we're making 164 knots true, which is exactly the number expected in the POH.

had found the sharper skills he had been seeking. Learning #7: If your palms aren't sweaty, you're not learning. Get out of your comfort zone.

Almost Home

Which brings us back to Pinehurst. After dallying for a few days in Nashua I dashed over New York City at 14,000 feet to visit my sister in Williamsburg, VA (KJGG). From there it was a one-hour cakewalk back to Pinehurst (KSOP). The totals in my logbook are satisfying: seven flights, totaling 17.8 hours in my Centurion, plus four supplemental flights and three additional hours in Denner's C-182. I earned a big hug from my mostly-sainted wife, and enjoyed a long relaxing hike with my dogs.

Learning #8: the best part of any journey is coming home.

About the Author

Dr. Mike Jones is an entrepreneur who uses his business expertise to help G.A. airports across the country improve their governance and operations, speeding them on their way to more revenues, grants, and community support. He also helps protect them from avaricious developers and reverse the damage caused by ineffectual politicians. He's been writing for this magazine for nearly a decade, flown 800 Young Eagle missions, and put 4,000 hours in his logbook. He's always accessible at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.