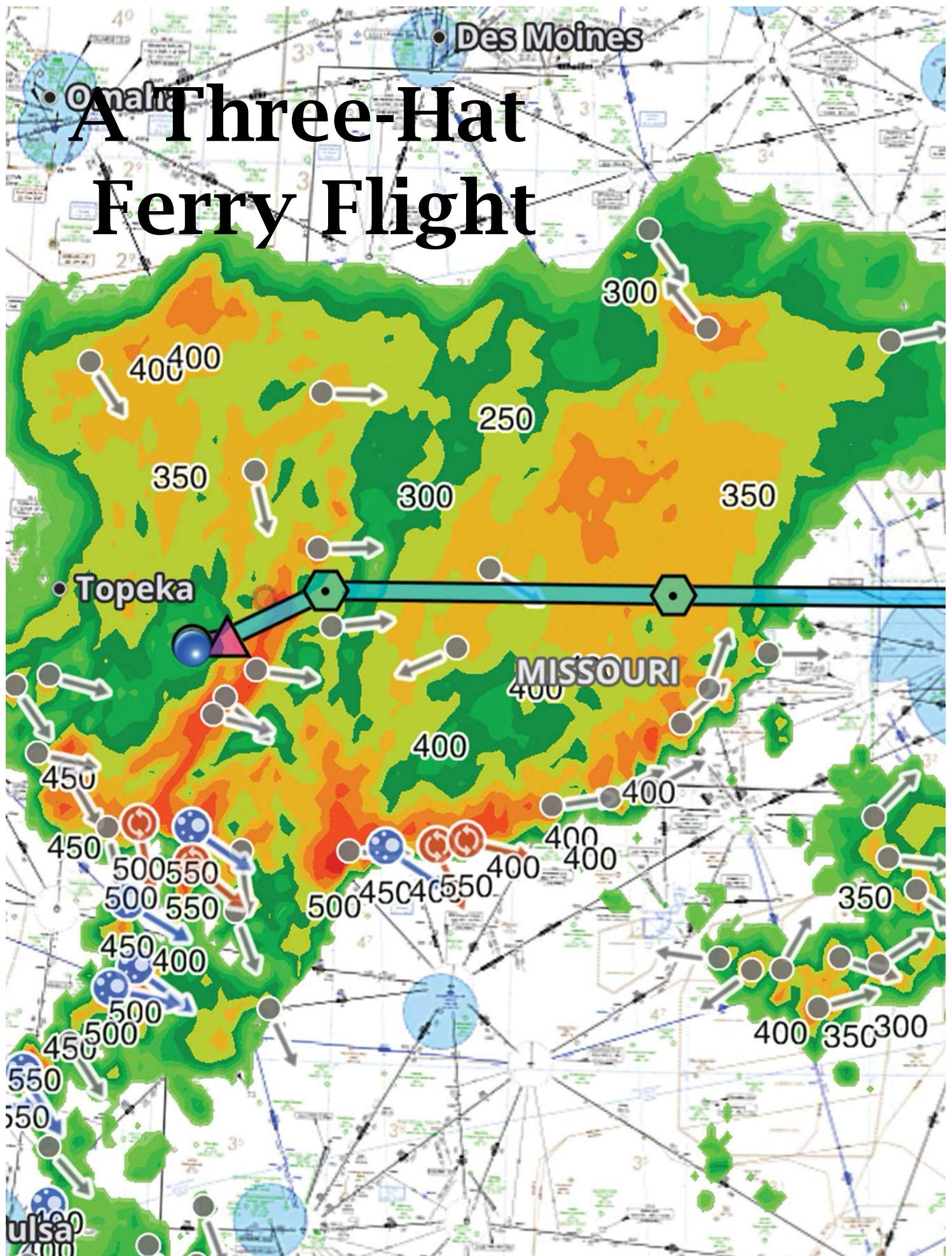


# A Three-Hat Ferry Flight



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## *Bad Weather, Antique Avionics, and Incomplete Paperwork Conspire to Make a Long Flight Even More Complicated*

*By Mike Jones*

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This trip, like many great adventures, started with the unexpected. It was a call from a college roommate of fifty years ago, retired Air Force Lt. Col. Bruce Denner. We had been ROTC cadets in decades past, and while I exited the service after four years Denner made a living as a RC-135 navigator and eventually a desk jockey. He even had soloed a couple of centuries ago but as so often happens, life got in the way. Now an empty-nester in Nashua, NH, a return to flying bubbled to his mind.

“Jonesy, I think I’ve found the right plane for me,” he said, rushing to the punchline.

“That’s great,” I replied confusedly, “but you don’t have a license yet.”

“I haven’t, which is why this is the perfect plane!”

Not only did he not have a license, he didn’t have an instructor, a hangar, or even an airport. But he was determined to start his aviation journey with the plane of his dreams. I like his style.

## On-Line Shopping

Denner is an excellent researcher, and we talked for hours, dissecting his needs. After each call he'd spiral away like a bloodhound, nose down, picking up aeronautical scents. A week later he'd be back, with more questions and possibilities, and we'd fine-tune his expectations. Over time, four specific issues shaped his criteria:

- ◆ After Denner's first flying lesson in forty years, we realized that G.A. airplanes can be very cramped for a less-than-nimble senior citizen.
- ◆ He has two daughters, two sons-in-law, and a passle of grandkids. That suggests at least a four-seater, maybe six.
- ◆ He lives in New Hampshire but holidays in Hilton Head, so our list veered toward planes with longer legs and a useful autopilot.
- ◆ Denner spoke to a couple of insurance brokers who cautioned against taildraggers and retractables.

His "most wanted" list ebbed and flowed like the tide.

It took months, but eventually we focused on the venerable Cessna Skylane. More than 24,000 Skylanes have rolled out of Wichita since 1956. At any given time, 300 or more are for sale. But the stupefying variety makes shopping challenging: so many versions, prices, engines, avionic packages, conditions, and histories.

Denner also is very methodical. Several times a handsome plane was stolen away by someone moving faster, with a bigger wallet, or a greater tolerance for risk. For all of us, it's a learning journey.

In the end, he found the bird for him. N4691K is a 1975 Cessna 182P, with a fresh engine, good logbooks, adequate avionics, a shabby interior, but handsome paint.



*Ron Fernuik (left) was the broker who helped Lt. Col. Bruce Denner make the leap into airplane ownership. Gentle-spoken Fernuik also is a CFI and a super-experienced charter pilot.*

“This lady had a tortured past,” Denner confided to me. While her first three decades had seen family service, more recently she had been owned by a flight school. A nose-wheel landing that resulted in a prop strike ended her flight school days but explained the new engine. (Prop strikes

are not unusual on Skylanes, a notoriously nose-heavy aircraft, so much so that newer Skylanes have substantially more robust firewall configurations.)

“The sellers were very up-front and transparent about the plane and its history,” Denner said. “Sure, I had some trepidations, but they gave me confidence that I had an even chance of getting a decent airplane.”

“That’s also why I spent extra on the prebuy,” he explained. “I wanted them specifically to look for any damage to the firewall and to ensure the repairs were done properly.” The pre-buy was performed by a company which had never worked on the plane before.

The only hitch was that the plane was in Texas, a good 1,800 miles from Nashua.

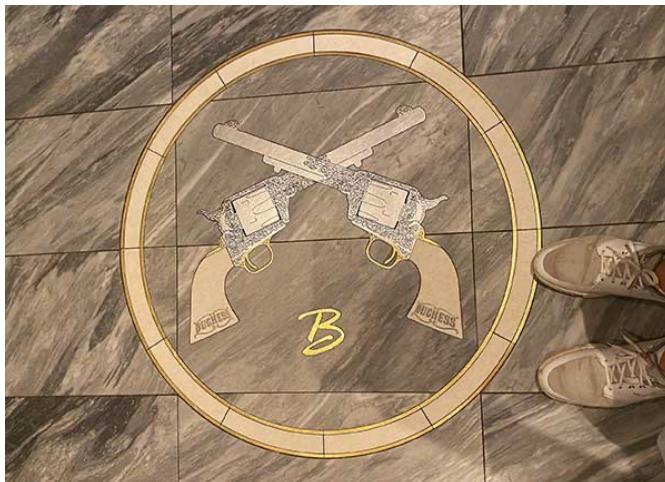
As friends will do, I volunteered to ferry it home. Bruce could fly right seat. What could go wrong?

## A Day in the Museum

On the appointed Sunday, I chose first class on American to Amarillo, changing in Dallas. Denner flew through Denver on Jammed Knees Airways. Amazingly, both flights arrived on-schedule. We met at the airport, rented a car, and drove to the Texas Air and Space Museum to see Denner's new acquisition.

They say you only get one chance to make a great first impression, and '91K did very well. Squeezed into a busy hangar, she stood shiny and proud amidst a gaggle of turboprops and the Museum's dusty DC-3. Denner reviewed the pre-buy with the A&P from Haven Aviation. Together they confirmed her tires were round, her windows clear, and the paint as handsome as had been promised. For Denner, it was love at first sight. Me? I bought a museum hat.

Ron Fernuik is the broker who had found the plane for Denner. Fernuik has thousands of hours in almost everything with wings. Slightly hunched by years, soft-spoken and extraordinarily polite, he was patient and informative as we poked and prodded the beast. He also advised us he had to catch a commercial



*Life-long New Englanders, Denner and I both felt like Dorothy in "The Wizard of Oz" as we wandered around Amarillo, TX. We were the only people who actually walked anywhere, men wore their cowboy hats indoors; the hotel room lacked a desk; and this pair of six-guns was embedded into the elevator floors.*

flight at 5pm, so our introductory flight would be an abbreviated expedition.

I climbed into the left seat and felt instantly at home. Accustomed to the more leisurely acceleration of my Centurion, this Skylane zipped spritely off the runway almost instantly. The radios were clear and strong. The Garmin 430 tracked our position patiently. I motored

downwind, dropped some flaps, and flew a professional pattern. Nose high, we settled on to the runway with a graceful chirp. *That was fun.* This plane just wants to fly.

We all shook hands while typing emails signaling the acceptance of the deal. Monies moved to escrow; paperwork checked; insurance forms filed. Time to celebrate.

Denner is a dedicated Marriot guy, which I don't hold against him, and he had found a fancy one in Amarillo. One big room, two twin beds. We had been roommates before, so the arrangement was perfectly acceptable.

The hotel itself was interesting: a century-old office building renovated into a modern hotel. There were a few oddities which puzzled us — no desk in the room, a space-age shower with asthmatically weak water pressure, and a pair of six-guns embedded into the elevator floors — but all in all a very pleasant experience.

We had a lovely dinner at a local Italian restaurant as we worked on our flight plan. Eventually, we called it a night. Big discovery: unlike the young Denner of fifty years ago, the 2024-model Denner snores. I dragged the duvet off the bed and slept on the bathroom floor. I've been worse places.

## Paris of the Plains

Day One featured modest ambitions: Amarillo to Kansas City in VMC. We didn't want to press the aircraft too hard while we acquainted ourselves with the engine, the avionics, the fuel-burn, and flying performance.

We stopped at Harbor Freight for a utility knife, tie downs, bottled water, flashlights, and other essentials. As we preflighted, a couple of hitches materialized. A needed STC for the prop had not arrived and the insurance coverage had not been activated. The insurance question was easy, but resolving the STC involved tense, last minute negotiations. The sellers wanted

this airplane off their back, while Denner demanded they deliver what they had promised because without the STC the airplane technically was not airworthy. A few more phone calls got those last-minute burbles resolved but the morning had evaporated. Our wheels lifted off the tarmac just after lunch, into the heat of the day.

Departing Amarillo, we turned northeast and climbed to 7,000 feet to pick up a twenty-knot tailwind. Texas and Oklahoma are amazing; lonely and desolate; miles of scrublands; nothing in sight but hundreds of oil wells.

We both had positive impressions of the Cessna. The engine was strong and smooth. The GPS and radios were old but worked fine. The familiar steam gauges were steaming away. A diminutive engine monitor was excellent if hard to read. In fact, the only significant problem was my own: my antique noise-cancelling headset was dying. I missed a number of radio calls but Denner did not, so we were not too burdensome on ATC.

Denner flew from the right seat. The visibility was good out to twenty miles before everything faded into a translucent haze, as if a giant dome of Tupperware was surrounding the plane. Denner had trouble interpreting the HSI heading indicator but once he grokked it he followed the yellow bar nicely. We'd alternated pilot-flying every 20-30 minutes or so.

One of Denner's requirements was a capable autopilot, and we gave it a try. Unhappily, the instructions he had downloaded onto his tablet were inadequate. After fussing unsuccessfully with it we gave up and hand-flew, which was better training anyway.

The transponder started acting up. ATC repeatedly asked us to re-set it, usually without success. They finally gave up and told us to squawk stand-by while they followed us on primary radar.

Late in the bright afternoon we arrived over New Century airport (KIXD, in Olathe) south of Kansas City. We considered our options: fly on for another couple of hours, to an unknown airport and possibly into IMC. We both were fatigued. The plane had performed well but had some quirks that were best managed in day VMC. We decided not to press on and secured the plane against overnight storms.

## Double-Paying

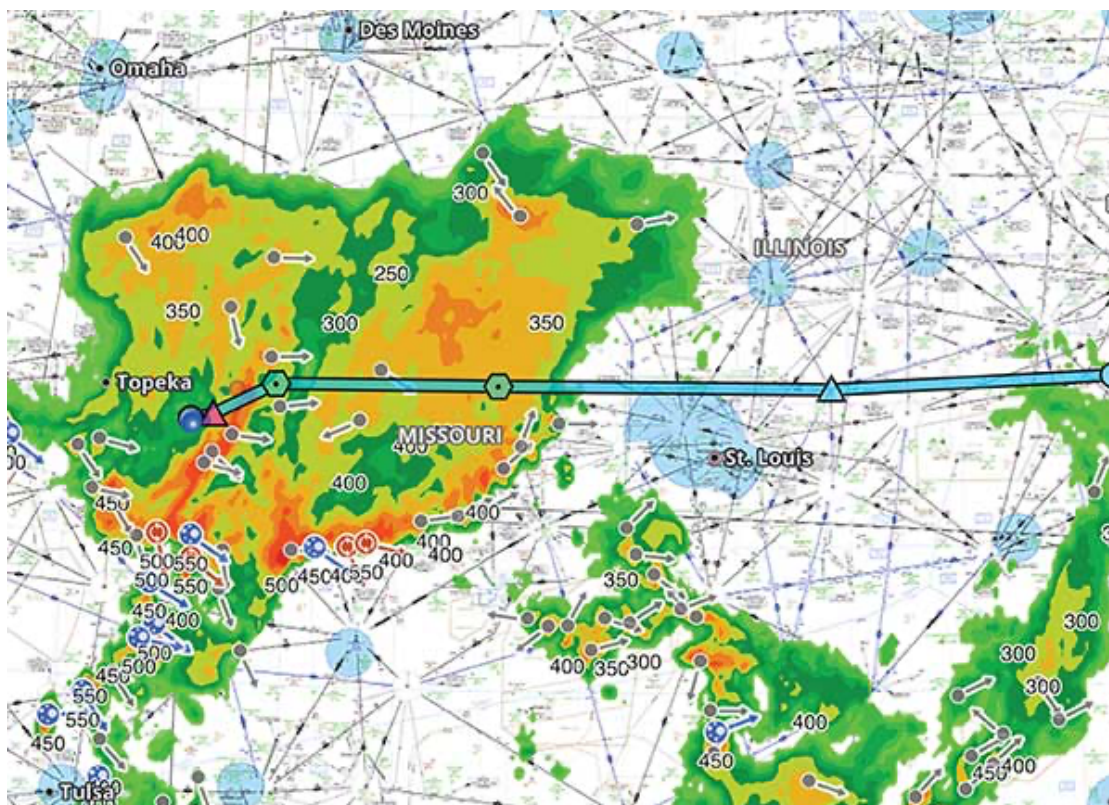
There are three FBOs at New Century, and we picked the wrong one. Advanced Aviation is very basic and threadbare. There is a tiny waiting room with frat-house furniture, a broken vending machine, weak WIFI, and no pilot lounge. Even the bottled water in the fridge was lukewarm. The comatose staff was unable to recommend a hotel or a restaurant. Denner went on-line, booked some rooms, and ordered an Uber. We couldn't wait to get out of there.

In his haste, Denner had mistakenly booked us into the hotel in July, not June. When we arrived at the hotel they would neither change nor refund his erroneous reservation. Lacking easy mobility, we bit our tongues and paid twice for our rooms. Ouch!

Unlike the FBO, the hotel people were able to recommend a “world famous” local hotspot for dinner: Joe’s Kansas City Bar-b-que. We discovered it to be a family restaurant, with screaming kids and dinners served cafeteria-style. The food was plentiful and the flavors adequate, but after our hard day in the sky we would have preferred a quieter place with a wine list and cloth napkins.



*Our first stop was in Olathe, Kansas and we dined at a local hot-spot called “Joe’s Kansas City Bar-B-Que.” The food was fine and the portions huge, but the rowdy, kid-filled atmosphere was exhausting after a hard day in the sky.*



*The Kansas City forecast called for thunderstorms, so we secured the airplane tightly before heading to our hotel. Right after midnight the atmosphere was ripped apart with this storm which lasted for hours. The thunder woke me up, so I grabbed this screenshot of our proposed route. Fortunately, by sunrise it had moved southeast, leaving merely a low overcast layer and some residual bumps.*

In the morning, Mr. Uber returned us to the FBO. We were relieved to find the plane in one piece, shiny and unscathed by vicious overnight storms. Denner preflighted methodically. We were especially careful to check for water in the fuel, but the sumps flowed clean.

My big worry: the airport was marginal IMC, with a ceiling at 900 feet but blue skies above. Taking an untested airplane into hard IMC could be perilous, but I decided she had proven herself sufficiently reliable yesterday that a brief interlude in the murk (with a couple of escape options if things went wrong) seemed reasonably safe.

We plowed into the overcast. The big Continental chugged along unconcernedly. All the avionics worked as advertised. I began to relax and

enjoy the adventure. We turned on-course and popped into the sunshine at 3,000 feet. Somewhat mysteriously, ATC vectored us north-northeast instead of our filed flight-plan route, but after half an hour they cleared us on course. We climbed to 7,000 feet and alternated flying duties for the next three hours.

Unlike yesterday, we both were working hard. We were in busy airspace without ADSB-In, no traffic data, and no weather radar. It was old-fashioned hand-flying, in-and-out of IMC. Heavy storms brewed and stewed to our left. Our groundspeed settled in at 125 knots as we peered through breaks in the clouds to spot the Mississippi.

I noticed Denner seemed reluctant to make decisive course corrections. I coached him that small airplanes are more nimble than his RC-135 of forty years ago. He quickly adapted to more aggressive corrections and did a better job keeping the HSI centered and the altitude locked.

Two hours into the mission, we started to brief the approach and found an egregious mistake. We had chosen our destination for cheap fuel. But as we briefed the landing we discovered it lacked an instrument approach. My bad! We diverted to Kankakee airport (KIKK), south of Chicago, and flew the RNAV 34 in-and-out of the murk to an uneventful landing. No harm, no foul. The FBO was modern, speedy, and offered cold drinks, so we felt like rock stars in comparison to the FBO at New Century.

Planning the next leg was tricky. The radar showed a line of storms blocking our route, with a second parallel line of storms a hundred miles behind it. That had us



*I find the Midwest amazing. From the sky, Kansas, Illinois, Indiana and Ohio are unlike the rest of the world: arrow-straight roads, tidy farms, huge wind farms, and cute towns snuggled randomly across the prairie. These farms are near Rock Creek, IL.*

scratching our heads. Our best choice was to drive to the southeast, far off course but well ahead of both fronts. We filed IFR and picked up our clearance in the air from the amiable folks at Chicago Approach.

## Sporty's Bound

This was the best flying of the trip. It was solid IMC almost all the way and Denner manipulated the controls with growing confidence. Chicago Approach was very helpful and provided excellent weather guidance. They routed us away from the strongest storms and handed us off to Griffith tower, who passed us to Indianapolis Center, who sent us to Cincinnati. This was Denner's first taste of prolonged IMC and he was working hard through the burbles and bumps. He was very impressed with the helpfulness of ATC, despite the weather-exacerbated workload and our intermittent transponder.

Overnight in the hotel Denner had found a demonstration video of the balky autopilot. He carefully stepped through the boot-up process. To our surprise, the system powered up. That was exciting, but we could not get it to activate. Hand-flying continued to be our fate.

We motored south for an hour and stayed out of the darkest clouds. Finally turning easterly, we looped beneath the Cincinnati Class Bravo. Destination in sight, we dropped into Clermont County Airport, which the savvy readers of this journal will recognize as the home of Sporty's Pilot Shop.

Sporty's is even better than you hope, with a handsome runway, lots of hangars, a friendly staff, Titan fuel and, of course, a cool store. Importantly for my sanity, I bought a new Bose noise-cancelling headset, along with a baseball hat. Denner dropped over \$2,000 in the shop. We also had a leisurely chat with John Zimmerman, president of Sporty's. He recommended our next stop to be Allegheny County Airport (KAGC) just outside of Pittsburgh. We filed IFR again and wandered to the plane, only to discover the storm we had out-run over Indiana had caught up with us as we dawdled in the shop.

This storm was nasty, angry at us since we had foiled its efforts to trap us in Chicago. Its dark and angry shelf-cloud snarled with thunder and distant lightening. The razor-sharp leading edge warned of the intensity of the turmoil in those clouds. Every second counted. We loaded the plane and literally raced down the runway as the storm began to batter the airport. We checked-in with Cincinnati Approach and watched the skies roil and boil behind us.

We dashed due south, full-throttle. After twenty minutes we had sufficient distance between us and the storm, and ATC turned us to an easterly heading to parallel the front. We popped in and out of clouds, with some chop, but all the convective activity was comfortably off the left wing. Denner was becoming quite proficient hand-flying the plane. My new headset was a dream and I could hear the controllers clearly. We kept the Continental at full power as the storm slowly swallowed the hills behind us. It was going to be a close-run race to see who got to AGC first.



*For our second overnight, we stopped in Denner's hometown, Pittsburgh. After another night of wicked storms, it was thrilling to find a B-17 and a B-25 on the ramp next to the Cessna. "Sentimental Journey" is owned by the Commemorative Air Force and was touring the eastern half of the country, giving rides and raising funds.*

Happily, we did, plunking down on Runway 27 in just two hours. Lightning flashed but we were safe and dry. Weird discoveries: Allegheny County Airport doesn't have any tie downs, but it does have a cemetery. We installed the gust lock, triple-checked the plane, and hoped for the best.



*Numerous studies have shown that the general public believes flying is dangerous. The folks in Pittsburgh are not helping our cause by hosting a cemetery at the side of the runway.*

## Commemorative Colleagues

Pittsburgh endured a ferocious storm overnight. The television reported numerous trees down and several tornadoes. We grimaced as we watched the morning news but happily found the plane untouched. We also discovered new neighbors: a Commemorative Air Force B-25

and a B-17 had arrived, seeking refuge from the same storm. A modest donation to their cause won me another hat.

We departed in beautiful but turbulent VMC. From our lurching perch, we inspected the verdant valleys and steep mountains which litter western Pennsylvania. Amusingly, floating above the valleys the air was smooth but crossing the ridgelines loosened our molars. We bounced into New York state and tip-toed across the Hudson River, bumping and bouncing in the clean, cool, dry air. A hundred miles to the north, we could see the skyscrapers of Albany. It was spectacular.

Denner continued to fuss with the autopilot. He recited a mantra he had discovered on YouTube: Power OFF, power to TEST, wait for the self-test, activate ON, activate ALT. All to no avail. But as Denner was manhandling the buttons, the plane took a big bump. His index finger poked the center knob on the autopilot controller. It came alive! It flew perfectly! If only somebody had labeled that center button, "Push to Activate."

Thrilled with this surprise, we used the autopilot for an hour, zooming over the Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield and the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. A jumbo-sized C-17 flew below us into Westover AFB and a curious



*One of the most beautiful scenes in North America is the 300-miles of the Hudson River, flowing from Lake “Tear of the Clouds” in the Adirondacks down to New York City. This was a vital waterway in the early years of America, and a key link in the Erie Canal. Today the valley is home to endless miles of orchards, but in earlier times you might have met the Headless Horseman, Rip Van Winkle, and Johnny Appleseed.*

C-130 dawdled in vague formation before deciding we were unworthy of their companionship. Amazing to see such enormous machines up close and personal.

We descended into the hilly airport in Nashua, NH. Denner flew a nice pattern and I finished the landing, plunking it down firmly. We tied her down, exhausted, relieved, and proud.

Overall, it was three excellent days of planning, flying, and adapting. Denner enjoyed the introduction to his new bird and we were able to thoroughly test the plane under a wide variety of conditions. Overall, the flight was 1,800 miles, 15 hours, and about 180 gallons of 100LL. Plus three new hats. Flying doesn't get much better than that.

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## *About the Author*

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Dr. Mike Jones is a commercial pilot, a writer, and an entrepreneur with 4,000 hours and 800 Young Eagle missions in his logbook. His “day job” is consulting with general aviation airports, using his expertise in aviation, business, and academic research to help airports improve their governance and operations. He’s always accessible at [PilotMike2012@gmail.com](mailto:PilotMike2012@gmail.com).