

## Ferry Tale: Uncharted Flight

By David Meier

My flying experiences began during the 1970s boom in new airplane production. In 1977, I had the good fortune to become a ferry pilot, building time by picking up new aircraft at the Cessna factory sites in Kansas for Centaur Aviation, a dealer in the Memphis area. I ferried many Cessna single engine models up through the pressurized Centurion. These many and varied flights eventually provided logged time in twenty-nine different airplane types. They also provided my most adventurous memories, as well as significant learning experiences.

The new Cessnas that had been taken from the factory were then sold to customers or other dealers and moved to other locations. In the last months of 1978, I piloted five planes from the Memphis area to California, providing much valuable experience. It is the particular events of the very first such trip which taught me a significant lesson in the need for flight preparedness.

At midnight on my 27<sup>th</sup> birthday, I awoke to the ringing telephone. It was Philip Fortner, the Centaur representative. I was used to his calls for day trips, usually to Cessna's Kansas plants and back. Fortunately, my job allowed me to take leave on short notice when Philip called. This time he asks, "How would you like to take a 152 to California?" The adventurous young man in me immediately exclaimed, "Yes!", thinking it would happen later in the week. "Then be at Olive Branch airport at four in the morning," Philip added. "You mean, this morning?" I groggily asked. "Yes, three 152s are going together to Santa Paula." "But I don't have the charts for that" I blurted out as I mentally began my preflight planning. Philip explained that we

would all stay close together in radio contact and that he would take care of the planning. So my adventure began.

I arrived at OLV only four hours after Philip's call. The day was dawning to a gray overcast sky with good visibility below the clouds, sufficient to proceed VFR. The three shiny new C-152s were all fueled, preflighted and ready to go. Our navigation planning consisted of the simple concept of flying as a flight-of-three southwest across Arkansas and Texas, through the Guadeloupe mountains and on across the southern tier of western states. We would go as far as possible in one day. On day two, we would continue on through the Banning Pass into the Los Angeles area, staying clear of busy airspace areas, landing in Santa Paula. My understanding wife, also a pilot, would inform my supervisor that I would not be at work for a while because I was on my way to California. He would understand this, having received many previous similar calls for day trips to Kansas and back.

We departed without much delay and arrived at our first stop in Hot Springs, Arkansas for breakfast, then on to refuel in Paris, Texas. Our next stop was for fuel and lunch at the regional airport in Abilene. Our mission continued smoothly, providing a great time flying low across the flat Texas ranchlands, oil fields and desert plains. After refueling again in Wink, we proceeded over the Guadeloupe Range to El Paso for yet another fuel stop. Texas is a big place to fly across in a Cessna 152 and it took us all day to do it. The plan was proceeding so smoothly that I never thought to inquire about obtaining my own set of charts at any of the airports where we stopped.

Leaving El Paso just before sunset, we pressed on for the next long flight leg toward Phoenix, keeping each other in sight. Looking into the setting sun, I managed to lose the two other Cessnas briefly just as a small mountain range appeared in our path. For reasons yet unknown, I opted to veer to the south side of the mountains while looking for the other two planes. After several minutes passed without regaining visual contact, I determined by radio contact that the others had gone north around the range. When I got back on course, I was about fifteen minutes behind the others. Thankful for the radio contact with my fellow travelers, I copied down the navigation and approach frequencies I would need. As I proceeded alone behind the other two planes toward Phoenix, profound darkness engulfed the sky above and ground below. At this point I felt anxious about this situation, but, in retrospect, not as much as I should have. Fuel could have become an issue had I somehow not arrived in the Phoenix airspace as planned. I had few options for landing elsewhere unless I happened to sight an airport beacon. These were things that I should have been considering but only realized afterwards. On this flight, I was committed to somehow rejoin the others as planned in Phoenix.

The two companion Cessnas proceeded ahead of me and landed at Phoenix Sky Harbor airport. Happily, I soon sighted the Phoenix city lights quite clearly in the distance. I contacted Sky Harbor approach control to report my altitude and intentions but did not give an initial position fix due to my awkward lack of available information. I just indicated that I could see the airport in the distance. When asked how far out I was, I guessed maybe 30 miles. They said they had me on radar at 80 miles out! Obviously, extremely good visibility was not a thing to which I was accustomed. Approach then suggested that I climb a couple of thousand feet because, "There are rocks out there." Seeing the area in the daylight the next morning, I realized

that those rocks were what I think of as small mountains. I arrived at Sky Harbor safely, though a bit rattled, with minimal fuel reserve. Despite overcoming what could have been a bad result for me, our little band of ferry pilots was quite pleased to have flown our little Cessnas all the way from Memphis to Phoenix in one very long flying day.

The second day's two flight legs were uneventful, taking us across Death Valley to Palm Springs for a refueling stop. Palm Springs would not let us land as a flight-of-three, so we separated ourselves like an angry cloud of bees to land individually, which was sort of fun. After refueling, we proceeded through the Banning Pass, into the Los Angeles basin, over the Hollywood sign and on to Santa Paula. Visibility in the basin was quite good, which I now know from experience is not the usual case. Santa Paula is in a valley, up against a mountain ridge. Our landing traffic pattern was over the nearby mountain side rather than the valley, which made the conclusion of our long mission interesting. Once on the ground, it was immediately apparent that this little airport was a hotbed of grass roots aviation activity, as it now remains. The little Cessnas we delivered were later crated and forwarded Australia by the appropriately named Southern Cross Aviation. Our return trip included a ferry jump over the mountain in a Cessna 210 to Van Nuys airport, a commuter Twin Otter to LAX , concluding with an airline flight.

Rinker Buck's *Flight of Passage* details a transcontinental flight made by the author and his older teenage brother in a Piper Cub, made over much the same western route just a dozen years prior to the flight I have described. The two boys navigated successfully through their adventures without radio, using their charts and simple pilotage. Flying a similar mission in the smallest of Cessnas proved to me the importance of having proper information even more so

than a radio. I vowed then to maintain proper charts in case I was ever invited to repeat the long ferry mission. As it happened, I did just that two more times in C-152s, plus two in C-172s, without incident.