

Cornfields for Clouds



The Third Great
Fleet Biplane
Excursion

Phill Bragg

Cornfields for Clouds

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CHAPTER 1

After Wayland and I returned from our excursion to western Kansas, the Fleet was safe and snug in its hangar, as I had promised it. I let my airplane sit for a few days, slowly shedding its oil and gasoline residue one drop at a time; it had earned a quiet rest.

Eventually I began the careful process of removing the metal cowling around the engine, which meant I had to remove the big, wooden propeller as well. Once the faithful Kinner engine was bare to the world under the soft lights hanging from the hangar ceiling, I began to inspect the effects of the past thirty hours of flying.

“Holy Shit!”

Five of the ten threaded steel studs that hold the number one cylinder to the engine case were gone. And then the sixth one broke off in my hand when I touched it. Damn. That meant that, under the best scenario, I had flown from Sky King Ranch to Windsor with one of five cylinders more than capable of departing the aircraft. The noise and vibration that ensue in the aftermath of such a parting of company are something to behold. It’s always expensive too, starting with the emergency landing that immediately follows and, of course, a new pair of underwear.

The more scary scenario though is that after taking off from London, Kentucky, on the last morning of our trip home, Wayland and I were chugging along over Pine Mountain with solid fog below us and cylinder studs that were merrily breaking off the engine, one at a time. That thought gave me the willies. Ignorance of pending doom is truly a blessed state of mind. Lord have mercy.

I had to force myself not to imagine what would have happened if the Kinner had blown a jug above that fog-shrouded terrain. Begrudgingly, I had to attribute good old dumb luck to our making it home that day with no engine trouble. But it bothered me that I somehow overlooked broken or missing studs on my engine during that morning’s preflight inspection. My first walk-around inspection of the day is always thorough and unhurried; subsequent ones throughout the day may be less so, especially if there have been no indications that something is amiss. After leaving London, the Fleet had flown four more hours and had made three more take-offs. Damn.

I like to think the Fleet just wanted to get back home in one piece so I could put things right again in the familiar surroundings of its own hangar. Nevertheless, I would not have thought that four out of ten studs would hold a cylinder to the engine case without at least a little abnormal vibration.

At any rate, I removed the cylinder and was fortunate that all but one of the six broken studs could be easily screwed out of the case. There’s always that one obstinate component which prevents a repair from going smoothly. So, with the ingenuity of my expert metal working friend, Joey, the last broken piece was removed.

Now it was again time to ring up Al Ball, the *au courant* purveyor of all things Kinner. As always before calling him I studiously read my Kinner engine manuals and, as always, I still learned things from him that simply are not in the books. He selflessly donated hours of his valuable time on the telephone to ensure I installed new hold-down studs correctly.

Al is a treasure of knowledge.

My pilot friend, Gary, helped me reinstall the big cylinder and eventually the Kinner was whole again with no questionable parts left over on my workbench, which is always a relief. It cranked up nicely and ran fine. Wayland and I had been lucky indeed over those mountains; I shook my head in wonder at the vagaries of luck and timing.

I resumed my inspection of the Fleet and found it only needing the repair of those few squawks I had been tracking throughout our trip. They were mostly minor fabric patches and a persistent fuel gauge leak, all of which were easily remedied now that we were home.

In a week's time, the Fleet was completely airworthy once more and ready for another long, cross-country flight. But it would be an entire year before we set out on another excursion.

CHAPTER 2

Fall and winter came and went and the spring of 2013 found me in Colombia spraying Round-Up on illegal coca fields for Uncle Sam. But by the middle of May I had come home for good from that work, or so I kept telling myself, and I was contemplating another excursion in my biplane. I decided the Fleet and I would go to the big antique airplane gathering near Blakesburg, Iowa. Unfortunately, Wayland would not accompany me on this trip. I had decided to carry my camping accoutrements with me in the front cockpit, so there would be no room for a passenger. It's always a tough decision whether or not to take someone along on a cross-country trip in the Fleet. On the one hand, it's a shame not to share such an extraordinary experience, but on the other hand, with a person in each cockpit there simply isn't room for additional cargo such as camping requires.

I suppose I should just admit, albeit selfishly, that flying solo across America in my old biplane is an exquisite sense of aloneness and independence that is hard to quantify.

Speaking of aloneness, I made my first solo Atlantic Ocean crossing in June in a brand new cropduster from Texas to Spain via Newfoundland and the Azores. All I can say about that flight is that Charles Lindbergh must have had a pair of giant balls made of high-grade brass. The Atlantic is one big body of water and if you have to ditch, nobody is going to affect a rescue before you die, optimism be damned. And the cumbersome, bright orange Gumby suits we wore for surviving in the cold water will in fact only prolong the agony of a slow death. That's just my opinion of course.

To confirm my suspicion that ferrying single-engine cropdusters over endless bodies of water and cloud-obscured mountain ranges is more hazardous than getting shot at by narco-guerillas in Colombia, I delivered another one in July. This time to China from Albany, Georgia, via Alaska and the Bering Sea, and then across southeastern Russia. Yep, I was right all along: It's way more hazardous than spraying coca fields. The trip to China was my second and final aircraft delivery. I never would have guessed it wasn't my cup of tea, but indeed it wasn't.

Finally August approached and it was time to start preparations for Blakesburg. I had been flying the Fleet locally all summer and it was not in need of any major maintenance, only routine tender loving care.

My plan was to carry enough camping equipment to reside comfortably beside my airplane while at Antique Airfield for the soiree, but to stay in motels en route in order to expedite my flying time to Blakesburg. I spent an afternoon in my hangar inspecting my backpacking paraphernalia, which had not been used in the decade since I'd negotiated the Chilkoot Trail in Alaska with my friend, Kevin.

For the most part, it was all serviceable and it strapped nicely into the front cockpit. I had a tent, an air mattress, a sleeping bag, camp stool, a lantern, odds and ends of rope, tent stakes, batteries, and a ceramic coffee cup. I do hate drinking good coffee from a Styrofoam cup.

After a few hours of arranging and rearranging, I was satisfied with the security of the load in the open cockpit, with the added bonus that the small baggage compartment behind

the pilot's seat was still relatively empty. Into that space went my tools, engine oil and grease, extra spark plugs and a few other essential items.

This would be my third excursion in my biplane and I might as well go ahead and confess something which I find shameful from a certain perspective. This year, for the first time in all my far-flung travels in the Fleet, I would be using an air navigation app on my mini-iPad in order to find my way. There. I've said it and now I can move on.

Actually, I can't move on just yet. Let me explain the path my logic has taken in this decision to not navigate primarily with my venerable alcohol compass and my wrist watch. I place most of the blame, if there is any, squarely on Bill Gates. His is the entrepreneurial genius that has forced us all to decide whether we will embrace new technologies, and therefore be enslaved by them, or whether we will be hard-headed sticks-in-the-mud. Obviously I have chosen the former.

I have resisted navigating by GPS in my antique biplane for ten years now. Haven't I paid the requisite homage to the old ways of needle, ball, and alcohol? Oh, what's the use? I feel like I'm insulting my airplane. Like I'm slapping it right in the face. I keep telling the Fleet that now I won't get us lost as often. And that will give us more time to explore new places. And we'll have fewer opportunities to exhaust our fuel supply while trying to locate ourselves on the aeronautical chart. And that means no off-airport landings. Yeah, that's it.

I sense that the Fleet can see through my weak rationalization. It knows the truth; it knows that I'm just getting lazy. Ever since I saw my friend George's iPad with the air navigation app that encompasses the entire United States and Canada on a moving map display, I have been wanting one. No more trying to fold and read charts in a windy open cockpit or confusing identical landmarks that are in fact ten miles apart. Purists will just have to find it in their hearts to forgive me. I just hope the Fleet will forgive me too.

CHAPTER 3

My plan was to depart Todd's Cross around ten in the morning, but it was almost noon before the Fleet and I could leave due to a leaking fuel strainer gasket I discovered during my preflight inspection. I had gasket material on hand and quickly fabricated a new one which fixed the problem. The Fleet and I were soon airborne into clear blue skies and we headed northwest toward Iowa.

Not far along our course we passed directly over Tri-County Airport but received no reply on the Unicom frequency when I called to say hello to Henry Joyner, my first flight instructor. I wanted to tell him I was headed to Blakesburg. Henry had taught me to fly many, many years before and, fortunately for me, I had retained more than a few good flying habits thanks to his tutelage.

So on we went, passing overhead the towns of Garysburg and Weldon. I could see the rapids of the Roanoke River as it flowed beneath the railroad bridges near downtown. There was an old Airstream trailer parked by one of the huge stone trestles beneath the Civil War-era bridge; it looked as if it was no longer inhabited. What a great spot though and I wondered who had lived there.

To our right was the southern shore of Lake Gaston and I could see a number of boaters; some were fishing and others were water skiing. And beyond the left wing was the old Roanoke Rapids Airport. Sadly, it is closed now and the grass runway which intersects the asphalt one is badly overgrown with weeds and broomstraw. Soon it will not be recognizable as an airstrip, not even an overgrown one. The south end of the paved runway was cluttered with heavy equipment and appeared to be a storage depot for construction materials. I doubt I could land there in an emergency, even in the Fleet.

My dad had learned to fly there after he returned home from the Korean War and I had gone there with him as a kid. When I finally earned my private pilot's license years later, I landed there one day and took my granddaddy for a plane ride. He had been one of my first passengers. So, it was heartbreaking to see the old airport abandoned. I felt the way I do when I see those tired, pitiful elephants giving small children rides at the state fair. It's just undignified.

What was once a thriving municipal airport is now a parking lot. And the shiny, new county airport a few miles away, while quite nice and modern, will never have the same character. Progress.

Lake Gaston turned into the larger body of water called Kerr Reservoir, which holds some record for having a gazillion miles of shoreline. There were houses and cottages of all shapes and sizes along its irregular banks and of course more boaters and water skiers enjoying the hot summer day. We crossed the invisible state line into Virginia about midway over the huge lake. The small town of Clarksville was out in front of the Fleet's nose, sitting on the southeastern shore with Highway 58 running through it to the west. We'd been flying almost an hour and a half and it would soon be time to land and check my gas and oil consumption. I like to get an accurate baseline for such things at the beginning of any long cross-country journey.

I chose the William Tuck Airport just east of South Boston for our first stop. There were no other airplanes in the traffic pattern as we approached and I could see what appeared to be a self-service fuel pump on the ramp. There was also a business jet parked there. Even better, there was a well-kept grass runway crossing the asphalt one, always a pleasant surprise.

We floated down to the grass and taxied over to the fuel pump and shut down. The FBO was actually a small, single-wide trailer, which seemed to be unattended as I went about servicing my airplane. My post-flight, oil-wiping, walk-around inspection revealed nothing out of the ordinary. I topped off the Kinner engine with oil and the gas tank with aviation fuel and went inside the small trailer.

There was no airport manager to be found, only the two-man crew of the business jet. They were sitting on the couch watching television in the relative air-conditioned comfort. So, the first thought I had was: How can these guys be pilots and yet not be interested enough in who just landed at a rural municipal airport in an antique biplane to go outside and take a closer look? How can you be a lover of the blue and not at least go take a look? At least look out the window. I will never understand that mindset in some pilots.

Not that the Fleet is a beautiful showpiece, indeed it isn't, but it isn't exactly a common sight at an airport either. In all fairness though, the two jet pilots were probably wondering why I didn't want a tour of their wizbang modern jet with all its bells and whistles. Why wouldn't the pilot of an old open-cockpit biplane want to see how aircraft cockpits have evolved since the days of needle and ball and alcohol compasses? Why indeed.

I bought a cold can of Dr. Pepper and a pack of peanut butter crackers from the vending machine outside and said goodbye to the two corporate pilots. It occurred to me to ask one of them to hold the tail of the Fleet while I propped it, but I figured that might be a little outside their comfort zone.

What?! No, electrical system!

Why, you're a mad man!

CHAPTER 4

The Fleet and I departed William Tuck Airport on the paved runway just as a Super Cub entered the pattern for touch-and-gos on the grass runway. I watched it settle onto the grass as we climbed out slowly to the northwest.

We were flying toward Roanoke, Virginia, to find a low pass through the Blue Ridge Mountains into West Virginia. The weather was gorgeous for flying down low with no clouds anywhere and great visibility in all directions. I was thoroughly enjoying navigating with my mini-iPad, although it still required the use of my reading glasses.

The lovely Dan River was off to our left as we flew above the rolling hills west of South Boston. Farms and pastures were postcard perfect from a thousand feet in the air. As we crossed the small Banister River I could see the city of Danville to the south.

Over the Fleet's nose in the distance the terrain was becoming steeper as we approached the Blue Ridge. The long, craggy Smith Mountain Reservoir was off the right wing and directly beneath us was the fast-moving traffic traveling between Roanoke and Martinsville on the four-lane highway. We climbed to three thousand feet above sea level to pass safely, and legally, over the more populated countryside between the towns of Blacksburg and Christianburg. Just south of the Blacksburg Airport, a slight turn to the northwest allowed us to follow the winding New River through a wide pass in the mountains. Then we were in West Virginia.

The panoramic view crossing the pass was breathtaking. The ridges making up the mountain range became steep cliffs where the river had carved itself deeply into the earth since the beginning of time. Light brown-colored rocks stood out against all the bright green foliage of summer.

Once we were over the Clinch Mountains the terrain below gradually became less steep and began to resemble foothills again, although there still were no flatlands as far as I could see to the west. The hidden valleys harbored picturesque farms and pastures with neat, well-kept farmhouses dotting the green hillsides.

We flew directly across a low saddle on a ridge where a homesite sat, consisting of several dilapidated single-wide trailers. The surrounding yard was littered with cast off farm equipment and ample garbage. Those people had a stunning million dollar view across the mountain range and yet they chose to live like vagabonds. I wondered if they even appreciated the beauty of their natural surroundings. Was their seeming poverty due to sloth or was it due to hard economic times?

The long, spiny Blue Ridge was soon behind us but the land was still broken into continuous hills and valleys running in all directions. There were not many large, flat areas on which to land should the engine quit, a scenario that is always at the front of my mind when flying above rough terrain.

But the Fleet chugged along smoothly without missing a beat and I enjoyed the lack of turbulence above the hills as I looked down on West Virginia. We'd been in the air almost two hours as the single paved runway of Kee Field came into view. It is the municipal airport for nearby Pineville and it is situated in the bottom of a narrow valley between

parallel ridges, all thickly covered in pine trees. Thus the name of the nearby town, no doubt.

The runway markings were recently painted and especially conspicuous was the airport name, as well as the name of nearby Pineville. The huge white letters were easy to read from a thousand feet in the air and I thought they were nostalgic; not all airports do that anymore.

Several elderly gentlemen came from the small airport office to inquire after the Fleet while I was fueling. They were curious as to where we'd come from and where we were headed. I had to patiently watch a video on one of their cellphones of a newly restored Stearman which had landed at Pineville Airport while on its way east a few days earlier. It was being delivered to its new owner.

Once I was prepared for another leg of my journey, I said goodbye to the old guys and swung my prop to start the Kinner. It came to life eagerly and I climbed into the rear cockpit, forgetting to take a picture of the quaint little airport. I wanted to fly another two-hour leg before stopping for the first night of our trip.

It was hot outside and the Fleet did not have a huge surplus of climbing capability as I watched the ridges beneath us recede a little too slowly for comfort. But the climb rate would be adequate as long as my motor maintained its enthusiasm, which it did.

CHAPTER 5

We were soon smack dab in the middle of the fabled coal mining country of West Virginia and the landscape was dotted with strip mines and quarries as far as I could see. It was not a hospitable place to land an airplane.

The first recognizable landmarks were the small towns of Mallory and Man, which had a small, picturesque river as well as a railroad running beside them. We soon crossed four-lane Highway 119 which pointed southwest toward Kentucky and then we were over nothing but bare, stark coal country.

Then a most unsettling thought occurred to me as my iPad messaged that I only had eleven percent battery power remaining. This situation would not have caused me much concern if I had purchased paper aeronautical charts of the area, but I hadn't. The airport at Pineville had not had any available for sale. As simple as it seems, without a chart, one is quite simply lost. The Colombians have a saying: *Mas perdido que el hijo de Lindbergh*. It means you are more lost than Lindbergh's child, in reference to that child's kidnapping and murder in the 1930's. And I was about to be just that lost.

If the battery in my iPad dies, I will know where I am the moment the screen goes blank, but unless I have committed a fair portion of the chart displayed on the screen to memory, I would not know the compass heading or the distance to the next airport. Of course, a local pilot would have no problem, as he or she could navigate with ease about their familiar surroundings.

So, I detoured immediately to the southwest toward the nearest regional airport on my still functioning screen. We were just passing into Kentucky and Big Sandy Regional Airport should be only twenty miles away. And, even better, it was situated beside a four-lane highway which snaked along the gas well- and strip mine-covered hill country. So, if I held my new compass heading, even if I lost all power to my iPad, I should easily be able to navigate to Big Sandy Regional. No doubt the purists reading this who scoff at these popular devices are laughing at me right now.

I had only been in the air forty-five minutes after leaving Pineville when I'd realized my oversight regarding the iPad's battery life, so the Fleet had plenty of fuel, always a good thing when you're about to be lost. I could have kicked myself for not buying a spare power source for the device, but I simply never thought of it.

After another five minutes of flying, I easily spotted the four-lane and ten more minutes across the strip-mined hills put me within sight of the airport. It was a welcome sight in light of how I'd almost royally screwed up my ability to navigate.

The Big Sandy Airport sat on top of one of the ubiquitous hills in this unspectacular coal country, its one hard-surfaced runway running slightly northeast and southwest. And I swear you can predict the kind of experience you're going to have at an airport by the tone of voice of the person talking on the Unicom frequency at the FBO. In this case, I could not have landed at a more friendly, accommodating airport.

The line boy, Dane, who was also the temporary acting-airport manager, marshaled me to a parking spot near the self-service pumps. When I shut down I noticed a persistent fuel

leak around my float-type fuel gauge, which screws into the underside of my top wing. I have to say, it's embarrassing to roll up to a nice FBO with fuel pouring conspicuously out of your flying machine.

Be that as it may, I quickly solicited Dane's help in locating a five-gallon bucket, since I was about to make an EPA-size mess on their ramp. To paraphrase my favorite rooster, Foghorn Leghorn, I always keep a correctly threaded brass plug in my tool bag for just such an emergency. So, with Dane catching the avgas in the bucket, I unscrewed the fuel gauge with one hand and screwed the brass plug in with my other hand.

The entire procedure went better than I thought and spillage was minimal, thanks to Dane. I wiped the fuel residue off the fabric of the bottom wing and, voila, we were done with what might have been news at eleven. Well that's a bit of an embellishment, but, nevertheless, just a few gallons of gasoline on an asphalt ramp looks like more than it really is. Technically, my airplane was no longer airworthy since I did not have a fuel gauge which could be read by the pilot from the cockpit, pursuant to FAA regulations. In fact, I really had no fuel gauge at all, but, while I do not normally flaunt such regulations, there was no way this little setback was going to impede my progress toward Blakesburg.

In reality, those fuel gauges are antiquated and terribly unreliable unless you are sitting on level ground with the motor turned off. That said, I certainly don't condone violating the regs, but sometimes common sense must prevail, especially when you're crossing America in an old biplane. I use my watch to calculate my fuel burn and I am very conservative in my calculations. My watch and my calibrated fuel stick are far more accurate than the bobbing, cork-on-a-wire gauge from the 1940's. No doubt someone reading this is shaking their head and saying to themselves what a terrible example I'm setting for fledgling aviators.

He's a crazy man!

They should revoke his license!

Dane told me I could push the Fleet inside their cavernous corporate hangar for the night, free of charge, if I wanted to. I gladly accepted his offer, as it's always a blessing to have a fabric-covered, open-cockpit biplane indoors overnight.

Inside the hangar I was introduced to Larry Cox, a helicopter pilot for one of the local coal companies, and whose brother, Gary, is the actual airport manager. Larry was very friendly and welcoming and immediately offered me the use of his pickup truck, which was fortunate for me since the nearest hotel was twenty minutes away in Prestonburg. There was something about this region of Kentucky starting to ring a bell, but I was certain I'd never been here before.

Beside the FBO sat a charming little airport cafe run by Larry's niece. It was late afternoon and I decided to eat supper there. At the risk of offending my fellow North Carolinians, who know a thing or two about cooking barbecue, I must confess that I had the best pulled-pork sandwich I have ever eaten, bar none. And, of course, Larry's niece would not divulge her secret to the succulent, mouth-watering pork. It was a perfect ending to a great first day of mine and the Fleet's excursion to Iowa, even without a cold beer, which she did not serve.

I threw my small knapsack in the front seat of Larry's truck and drove toward Prestonburg in search of a clean motel room with hot running water. Then it dawned on me why this area was gnawing at the back of my mind. Highway 23, the very road I was on, is the famous Country Music Highway. It stretches roughly north to south across Kentucky from Ohio to Virginia, right through its legendary coal-filled hills. And all along the way are the hometowns of more successful country music singers than any other region in the United States. From Dwight Yoakum to Loretta Lynn, the Judds, Tom T. Hall, and dozens more. This stretch of Appalachia has produced an inordinate number of great performers. It is sacred ground indeed.

The drive was delightful; the countryside was more interesting up close than it was from the air. The four-lane highway ran through dramatic gouges cut through the rolling ridges with straight, tall walls of rock towering up from the road's shoulder. I suppose it was in keeping with the overall strip mining theme of the region. Coal had been king here for a long time.

The pleasant, hazy coolness of the summer evening was enjoyable as I drove toward town. It didn't take long to check into a nice room and then I lavished in a hot shower for a while. The first day of flying had gone well. We'd seen lots of new country and had successfully overcome a couple of minor problems. I went to bed wondering if the valleys would be full of fog in the morning as Larry had predicted.

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