

A Furnace in Winter

01/20/2007

Some of my flying stories get forwarded to friends of friends, and that is how this story starts. I often invite people who want to come along someday, to let me know via email. I first met Leslie through one of those emails, a few months ago, when she had expressed an interest in going flying. Well, I love to fly, the Vintage Mooney Group was going to have a fly-in coming up today, and of all the people who wanted to go with me, my random number algorithm picked her.

The destination airport was to be **Furnace Creek** (L06) and it is located at the north end of Death Valley. I had never been to Death Valley before. She hadn't either. I had always assumed that it went east and west, but no, it goes up and down on my chart.

The Vintage Mooney Group is a bunch of people from Arizona, California, Nevada, and Utah, who own or fly vintage (older) Mooney airplanes. 'Older' is defined as "pre M20J models of Mooneys". In English that means Mooney models M18, M20, and M20A through M20G.

At last count, 42 pilots / airplanes had signed up on the Vintage Mooney Group website for this fly-in, which is amazing for the winter months. Richard Todd would have been proud. Mother Nature blessed those of us from southern California with nice weather. I hoped the others had the same fortune, but I heard Arizona had their troubles

I had never met Leslie in person before. I was inspecting the airplane for the flight as she drove up to my hangar and waved at me as she got out of her car. It was around 9:15 and it was still chilly. She was a tad anxious. She had never been in a (small) general aviation airplane before. It was a whole new experience for her. I was thinking of ways to make Leslie less nervous. We walked around the airplane in the hangar as I explained what the various parts did in the whole orchestra of the flight environment. She seemed to be quite interested.

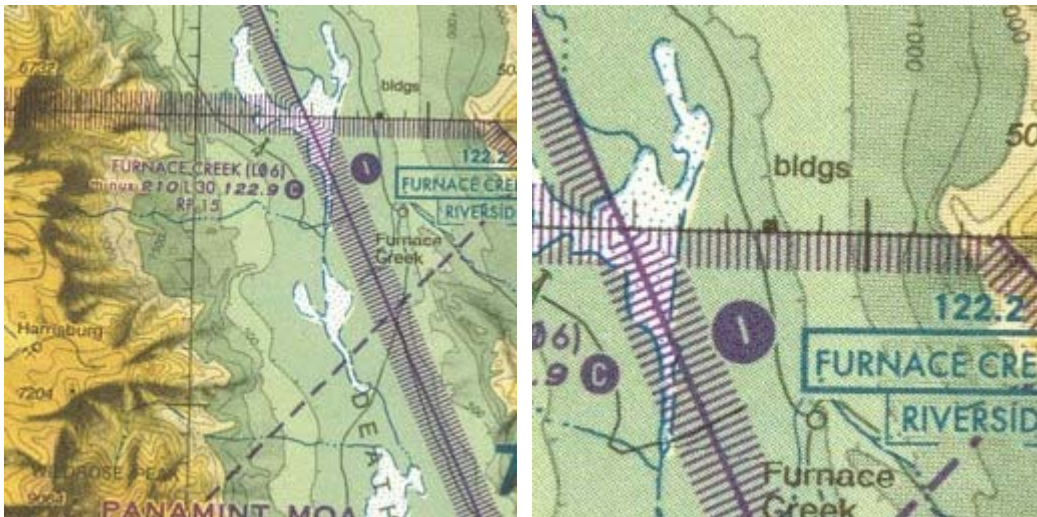
As we rolled down the runway, I was so brazen as to say "Hold on to the yoke with me." She did and we launched together. As I adjusted the trim, I kept giving more and more control of the yoke to her. Ten seconds later, when the Mooney was trimmed out, the control was all hers but I doubt that she knew it at the time. My hands were in my lap. Another fifteen seconds passed and I said to her "OK, let's make a gentle left turn." "No way!" came back through the intercom. "We need to go over there." I said pointing out the left window, and then she turned into a beautiful left crosswind turn. I think that she was becoming so busy 'driving' that she forgot about her anxiety. I did the downwind turn and then activated the autopilot to take over the flying chores. We were soon outa Dodge.

In the following ten minutes, Leslie had so much to see out her window that she said she was quickly becoming more comfortable. Over the intercom, I heard "Look at that." and "What's that over there?" and "Oh, my."

Way back at Corona, I had dialed in the always-welcome Flight Following with SoCal Approach on 135.4 and later they handed us off to Joshua Approach, who handed us off to LA Center, and we had Flight Following almost all of the way, until they lost us on radar in Death Valley.

We were cruising at only 160 MPH because of headwinds. There were no bumps. The engine was purring. Visibility must have been 50 to 75 miles. The scenery was awesome. Leslie was almost mesmerized and I was monitoring the aircraft's systems.

Let's fast-forward 45 minutes. Joe took great pictures of this area. 30 or 40 miles out I started a gentle descent so we wouldn't have plugged up ears or headaches. Turning to 122.9, we listened in on what the pilots ahead of us were doing. They were all landing on 33. In a stroke of luck, I found the airport (It isn't always easy.) and set up for a left pattern entry for runway 33. I thought I had everything nailed. Pattern altitude was nailed. Speed was nailed. Descent rate was nailed. Gear was down. Flaps were down.



Usually, a great approach insures a good landing. **Not this time!** Furnace Creek has a kind of short runway at 3065'. We were halfway down the runway and hadn't touched down yet. Something unusual was going on. Right then the airplane started beeping at us through the headsets. Not a comfy place to be. Rule # 1, Fly the airplane is always in my mind. All levers went forward, we did a 'go around' applying full power back to the engine and climbed back up just like a take off. The beeping can wait.

My luck! Actually, something my instructor told me 15+ years ago came into play then. He said, "If something's wrong, fix it." And so, I did.

After flying once around the traffic pattern, I used a lower glide slope and a slower approach speed, around 70 knots. Damn beeping was still trying to distract me. No, it wasn't the gear.



Joe snapped this one of our landing roll

This time everything was much better, and I did a slow and easy turn off to the ramp. After we got parked, and started talking to other pilots, we found out exactly what was going on. Runway 33 is downhill, and more importantly, had a tailwind. That tailwind had picked up shortly before we landed and had not been a factor for the previous VMG landings.



Mine and Joe's



Leslie relaxing

A nice man in a white van picked us up right on the ramp and took us past the Death Valley Museum and the National Park Service Visitor's Center, to the nearby restaurant for lunch, probably a mile at best.

Leslie and I were fortunate to share a table with Ransom Hicks and Mike Harney, both Mooney pilots based at Cable (CCB) airport at Upland, which is in southern California, near Corona. The lunch and the conversation (flying stories) were great. The restaurant has a super salad bar. There were at least 50 of us in the left side of the restaurant.



That's me - the dorky old guy in the dark blue shirt.

Back outside an hour later, we stopped by a group of people (a club, a society, an organization?) who had set up specially filtered telescopes to look at solar flares on the sun. It is amazing what we happen upon.



Ransom Hicks looking at the sun



Leslie and Mike



Back at the airport again, I inspected 07T again and we climbed aboard after Joe Aldendifer asked me to do a fly by so he could snap a picture. I remembered to get this Pic of the altimeter 220' below sea level. It had been two or three hours since we landed, but the cold start technique produced no results so I reverted to David McGee's hot start procedure. Thanks David. The beeping was no longer happening. I am still looking for the answer to that. New airplanes bring new questions.



Joe got us in the take off roll



Joe walked over to the west side of the runway to snap one of us going by at 200mph.

The next 45 minutes were uneventful until we were 30 within miles of Lake Arrowhead. That's when I could see the LA basin had filled up with haze and it was spilling over the passes ahead. It always looks YUCKY! There was also a very wide (50 miles) blanket of clouds covering the area, a little lower than we were. Looking down on Lake Arrowhead was beautiful with snow in everyone's yard.

We crested the last hill and started down. Lucky me, the low sun was dead ahead. That and haze makes visibility impossible. Slightly below the sun was the top of the blanket of clouds. Below that is uncertainty, as you cannot tell if that I cloud or haze. Leslie didn't like what she was looking at either. Off to the left, visibility was much better, so I did what I can't do on the highway whenever I feel like it, I turned to the left. We came down with those clouds rising to our right until they blocked the sun, instantly restoring visibility when we were in their shade. Then I turned back to the right and headed to Corona.

After we pushed the airplane up the rise into the hangar, I popped a Blue Can, and presented Leslie with an AOPA First Flight Certificate for her first time up in a GA airplane. Leslie smiled and shook my hand, thanking me for the day's fun, said she would write up something from her perspective, and went home.



Leslie's First Flight Certificate



That cloud blanket from below

I sure would like to fly back to **Furnace Creek** someday. Maybe, it will be with you?
ed