

A Tale of Two Cities

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times..."

This is really a tale of the same city visited twice in quick succession. It was the same departure city both times, and the same destination city both times. If you count the departure point and the destination point, you can conjure up 'Two Cities'.

The same 'best of times' occurred both flights as I had great adventures with special friends. The same 'worst of times' occurred both times as I had to deal with broken to overcast clouds impeding my direct route of flight both ways, both times.

Speaking of clouds, it was the clouds that sets this story off from so many others. For pilots, the sky is either 'Clear' (no clouds), 'Few' (you guessed correctly), 'Scattered' (more than a few of those pretty white puffy ones), 'Broken' (lots of clouds but you can see at least a little bit of blue sky up there), or 'Overcast' (a total blanket of clouds). As I am a VFR rated pilot, I am not allowed to fly into or through clouds. This makes life interesting on days like this.



Charles

The first flight left the ground on Saturday 3/29/2008. Charles Montgomery, a friend and fairly fresh student pilot wanted to appraise some property in Lancaster in conjunction with his business. The purposes of the flight were to introduce him to clouds way beyond what he would be subjected to in flight school and also to get him to Fox Field just outside of Lancaster.

It was mostly overcast around Corona, but with a bit of blue sky showing. The cloud bases were at around 3,500 AGL (Above Ground Level) throughout the greater LA basin. The holes in the clouds looked meager but there was a better looking area southeast of Corona, towards March AFB. We went over there. The problem with climbing up to a relatively small break in the overcast is that it seems to disappear as the slant angle changes as we climb. According to Charles, we never lost sight of it however. When we got there it seemed to open up rather suddenly to me and I started steering a slalom course in three dimensions. I cannot describe laying over into a climbing 30 degree left bank and then switching suddenly to the right as cloud separation began to get slimmer. Right about then ATC called me and asked what are my intentions. My bread crumb trail must be a sight on their radar screen. I then got to talk on the radio as my other 110% was concentrated on what I'm doing at the moment. Around and around we went until at around 7,000 AGL we were free and clear and up on top.



Reaching the top in a left turn

If you have never experienced this yourself, looking out of the front window of an airplane, I do not have the words to convey just what 'up on top feels like'. I did not say 'up on top looks like' because it is so much more than what it 'looks like'. Clear. Clean. Pristine. In the full sunshine. This is exactly the moment that the cost and toil to get through those flight lessons takes on a whole new meaning. This is the moment you are suddenly totally divorced from all of that crap that is going on down below. This is the moment you know you are truly free. I think Charles was impressed.

Well two seconds later, I noticed I was no longer totally free. I was more dependant than ever on my avionics. I could not look down and tell where I was, or which way I was going, as is usually the case. Hundreds of square miles of beautiful fluffy topped clouds were now my undercast and all ground features were hidden, save the mountain ranges that form the perimeter of the LA basin. The entire LA basin was obscured, and I didn't care a bit, in fact I felt a strong sense of freedom. I followed my flight plan on my GPS. That is why I bought it.



Clouds and clouds



A vague hole below us in the lower left corner



Awesome beauty

My pre-planned route was to go northeast out of the basin, through the Cajon Pass area over I-15 and then turn left to Fox Field once north of the San Gabriels. Near the Pass, we reached the end of the clouds and we could again see everything below. Five minutes later I made a left turn towards Fox Field.



Looking back at the LA basin's clouds



The High Desert was a whole different world, not a cloud in the sky

The High Desert winds were doing their thing with surface winds above 20 gusting to 30. As they were out of 240 and I was landing runway 24, it was no big deal except the ground speed on final approach looked so, so slow, that it seemed like it would be tomorrow before that sudden thud announced that I have landed.

I taxied over to transient parking and shut down. Dumb me, I parked wrong way, with the wind blowing from behind the airplane. The wind was trying to bang my ailerons all over the place, as I sat tense in my seat and held the yoke tightly to prevent any damage. Charles saved the day as he scrambled out in the wind and repositioned the Mooney into another parking spot facing into the wind. He also tied the wings down with the chains provided at that parking spot.

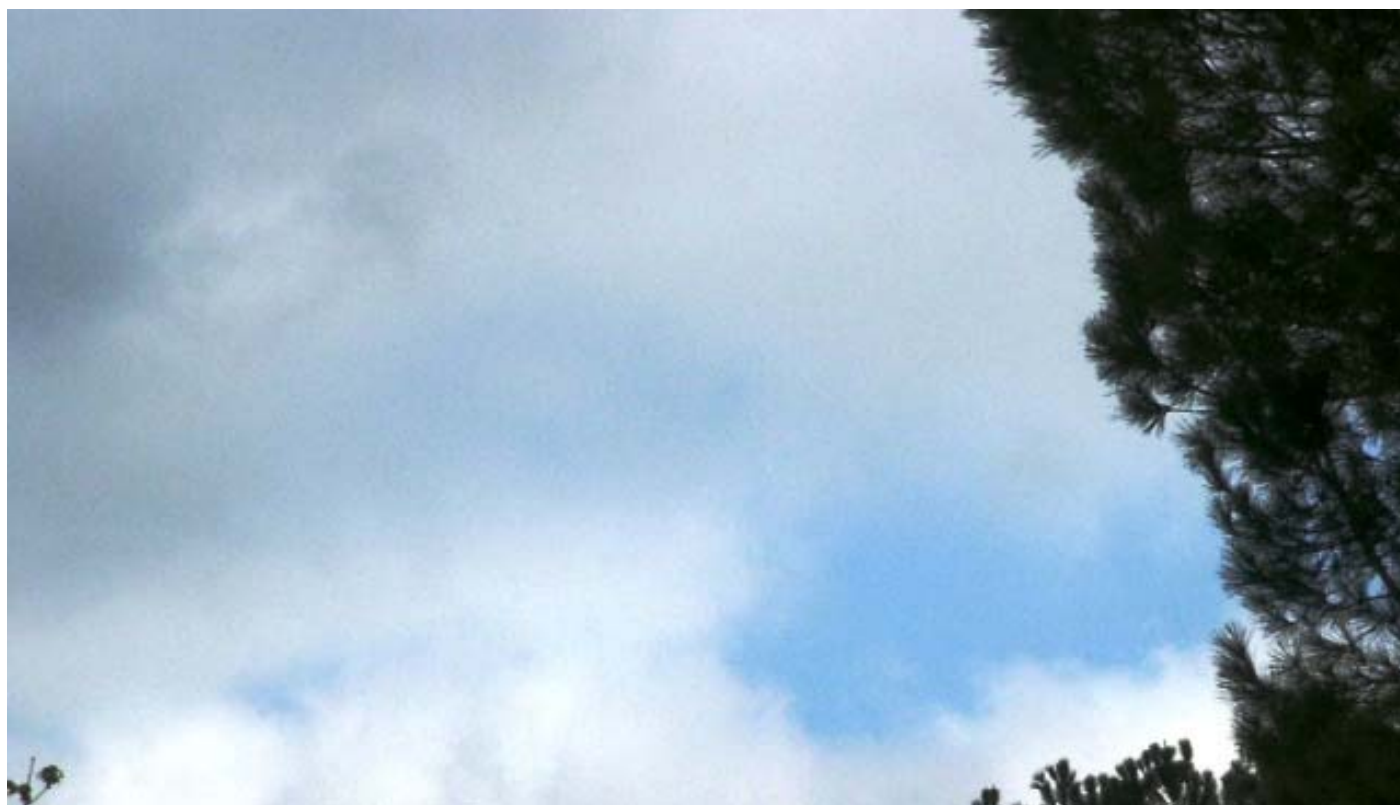
We were met by some of Charles' real estate business partners and went off to see the property. Upon return to the airport, Charles treated me to lunch. The airport café there is called Foxy's Landing. Charles had a bowl of chili and I had a Swiss on Rye grilled cheese sandwich. Scrumptious.

The return trip was clean and clear over Lancaster and Palmdale and all points east until we got back to the Cajon Pass again. Then the cloud cover started again (below us). We had checked weather at Fox to insure there *would* be a hole in those clouds.



Here is where they start – indescribable without pictures

As I remember it, we started a normal descent to Corona until the clouds below us forced me to level off, to maintain clearance above the cloud deck. A few minutes later as we were over the (obscured) I-15 and I-10 freeway intersection, ATC asked us to 'expedite our descent' to get us below the east to west path of LAX arrivals. I was forced to initially reply "unable due to the undercast". But, before five more seconds had passed, a huge hole in the clouds opened up just ahead and below us. ATC was happy to hear me saying "SoCal, N5807T expediting descent now" before she had to re-route a 747 around us. I got to push the yoke forward and got to momentarily pretend that I was a WWII fighter pilot, guns blazing, zooming down to - - -. A few minutes later we were landing at Corona and taxied to the hangar. Charles and I re-counted the whole flight over a couple of Blue Cans and all was well with the world. The sky still looked pretty cloudy up there though.



The following weekend – just one hole in the entire sky

On the following Sunday, 4/6/2008, I got up early and took a picture of the sky over my neighbor's garage, of the only patch of blue sky available in any direction. I went back to bed. A while later the sky looked much more promising, but it was still full of white puffys. Sofie, my fly buddy of several flights in the past year opted to go with me to a Corona Pilots Association fly-in to the same place, Fox Field at Lancaster CA.

I got to the hangar 5 or 10 minutes late but Sofie was not there yet so I continued driving down the field to see if I could make contact with anyone at all from the Corona Pilots Association to verify all plans were in place. I made as much contact as the Republicans and the Democrats are doing with each other in this presidential election year.

I returned to my hangar to see Sofie parked adjacent to my hangar door. I looked again at the cloudy sky as I got out of my car.



You are supposed to be noticing the clouds



Fewer clouds to the south

Plane out, cars in, hangar doors locked, engine started right up, taxi to runway 25, all systems good, and we launched looking at clouds ahead.

First she heard a little extra noise, then she felt a breeze, then she saw daylight at the top of her door opening. The top clasp had not engaged. Sofie informed me of the inadvertent departure from a normal closed door, and grinning right at me, asked "You're not going to kill me, are you?" This was not at all good. I throttled back and brought 07T around the Corona traffic pattern just as a student pilot would do if touch and goes was the plan for the day. Four minutes later we were parked again at Corona's airport and the door was closed securely. Sofie and I had fun talking about her shortest airplane ride.



Still below the cloud deck, the whole city was visible to us

We launched again. The blue breaks in the overcast seemed bigger than the previous week, but they disappeared as our slant angle changed. All of a sudden, "Ahh" – there it is.", and I again maneuvered to climb into the blue area presented to us. It was again a great feeling, not of accomplishment, but of escape. We looked at each other in that little airplane way up there, far from everyone else we knew, and just smiled at each other.



Again on this trip, I had to go some 10 to 20 miles southeast from Corona to get on top and now our destination was exactly behind us. So I carved a beautiful arc in the air and pointed us this time directly at Fox Field, right over the top of the San Gabriels. Looking left and right during that 50 mile climb, I was again presented with a 'landscape' of undercast clouds that could have been presented to us by only one entity. I choose God. You make your own choice.



Back on top again this weekend



Passing by a small hole



Pine trees and snow



Agriculture east of the Palmdale airport – notice no clouds in the high desert this weekend either

It was a tad windier at Lancaster this time than last week, and it was windy last week, so I came in at half flaps. The landing turned out to be "A Greaser!". No bounce this week. Not even a chirp from the tires. I parked upwind, learning from last week's mistake. It was blowing like heck. Sofie chained us up tight. We wanted cover from the wind and went to over to Foxy's.

The Corona Pilots Association was not there! Just us. We were OK with that but it would have been nicer if ... Anyway, I tried the chili this time and Sofie had a cheeseburger, and we had a great time.



Sofie wasn't driving



I was

Walking back to the plane was a healthy chore due to the wind in our faces. Sofie graciously unchained us as I held the brakes secure. 07T apparently did not notice a difference, and cheerfully started up and was dutiful in the run-up area as well. She gave us a strong lift on take off and I enjoyed the bank to the left, to Corona, after departure. It felt like the engine was giving us 110% and we were soon well above anything nearby. Time to again turn left toward Corona.

Once free of the earth, the effects of surface winds just disappear, and the Mooney is in its natural environment regardless of the winds aloft. It is up to the pilot to compensate, if he/she has the proper knowledge and real time information. As I cleared Fox Field's class D airspace area, I asked Fox tower for clearance through Palmdale's class D airspace just ahead. Fox tower asked me to contact Palmdale and gave me 123.7, Palmdale tower's frequency. The nicest tower controller I have encountered in years gave me clearance to transition her airspace.

Once clear of the Palmdale airspace, I called up Joshua Approach on 125.5mhz.for Flight Following to Corona. As we climbed over the Palmdale area and continued to climb towards the San Gabriels on a direct course to Corona, something disturbing came into view just ahead. It was that silly little mountain peak. It was higher than we were for heaven's sake. Just ahead, is a relative feeling and we still had 10 more miles to go before crashing. No big deal, a gentle 5 degree right turn took us over a lower saddle with at least 1000' to spare. Life is really fun up there. There are just so many more options available, than back at the office where I make my living.

Then Joshua Approach dumped us. [I felt euphoria switch to despair in 5 seconds]. He was really, really busy right then and did not have time to coordinate with SoCal to effect a handoff. I am used to having Flight Following carry us all of the way to the destination airport. When I was a fresh pilot, always feeling like I depended on Flight Following (or I would be all alone up there), the phrase "Radar Services Terminated" would devastate me.

No longer. I just looked at the chart for the proper SoCal frequency for the area that I was in, (actually, I had it memorized, as 124.55 mhz) and called them up. I keyed the mike and said "SoCal, This is 5807T right over the top of the San Gabriels southbound. Joshua Approach just dumped us, can you take us home to Corona?" Not official pilot radio speak for sure, but informative. SoCal gave me a squawk code, Sofie set it in the transponder, and SoCal started tracking us for Flight Following again. Life is beautiful when you have friends on the radio.

Looking right and left from our lofty vantage point, the LA Basin still was completely undercast from the ocean to our right to the Banning Pass to our left and all points ahead. It was absolutely beautiful and no photograph could ever do justice to what we experienced right then. I had plenty of vertical room below us so I eased the airplane down to the area (legally) close to the top of the clouds. A few minutes later, I noticed a 192 KTS ground speed reading on my 496. That is 220 MPH and we were booking. Life doesn't get much better for us grunts. Pasaden... oops by the time you see where you are, it is behind us now and everything slamming by at near Boeing speed. (In my dreams).

Just like last week, SoCal wanted us below the LAX arrival route through the LA Basin. As the orange paint of a Southwest Airlines 737 wouldn't exactly match my paint scheme, the thought of high speed paint swapping was beyond my intents for the day.

It was almost like "Shazam", the 'The Corona Hole' which is often available, opened up, pretty suddenly right then. I told SoCal that we could now expedite a descent and without skipping a

beat, un-keyed the microphone, looked to the right, and told Sofie on the intercom "Here comes the fun part". I yanked the power back and initiated a twisting nose down left turn toward the street patterns visible through the hole in the clouds below. This is way better than an E Ticket ride, and I am in control. That worked out great for eight or ten seconds and then a darned cloud was looming again right in front of us. Not to worry, there was plenty of clear space off to the right, so the Mooney carved a beautiful arc to the right. My diving, twisting, and turning, again saved the LAX arrival fleet from devastation. SoCal was happy that I was out of the 'busy area'.

I think I had her slowed down to 50 when the tires met Corona's runway. You weren't there, so it was a smooth landing. Unlock hangar, open doors, back cars out, push plane in, and Blue Can time once again.



What's that Blue thing in her left hand?

When I got home I had a special surprise in store for me. My flights with Sofie to Fox Field and back to Corona on Sunday April 6th, 2008 filled the last line on the last page of my first Pilot Log Book that I had started way back in the summer of 1989 as a 49 year old student pilot.

"It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done."