

I Wore the Hat

It all started 3 – 4 months ago when Paul B. pulled up past the hangar in his shiny red, white and blue Commander. He said that he just had an Angel Flight that day. My curiosity was whetted, and so I inquired. Paul explained that he was a member of Angel Flight West, an organization that flies people with medical needs who cannot take a commercial airliner for emotional, financial, or other reasons. Angel Flight West volunteers are pilots who provide these flights out of their own pocket. I was impressed.

A month later, Joe A., my hangar neighbor said that he had joined Angel Flight West and thought that it would be a good idea for me to join. He mentioned that the cost of Angel Flight West missions might be deductible from my income tax. I had read about these charitable organizations in pilots' magazines, but now that I knew some members, it seemed to make a difference.

Paul later said that it gave him reasons to go places he had never been to before. Hmmm, I thought, kind of like flying on VMG outings but helping others in the process? I was intrigued. I checked about AFW at <http://www.angelflight.org/>, filled out an application, and sent in my membership dues. Pay money to volunteer? What a concept!

In a few weeks, a three ring binder, a name tag, and an Angel Flight pilot hat arrived in the mail.



The paperwork inside the binder informed me of the requirements to become a "command pilot", able to fly Angel Flight West missions. I carefully placed the hat in the hat rack of my airplane vowing to never wear it until I had earned it.

The first requirement that needed filling was my currency. AFW requires 50 hours flown in the past year and 25 in the past 6 months. I was good on the 50 but shy on the 25, so I went flying. The second requirement was that I needed to have an AFW orientation. Via email, I found Alan Dias and met him for lunch on 6/18 at the restaurant at the Whiteman Airport (WHP). This is one super guy and AFW is fortunate to have his services. He approved me and sent his recommendation into AFW.

The Great Poobah at AFW finally put his/her blessings in my file and I was notified that I had Command Pilot status at AFW, and that I could sign-up for a mission. So I did, way in advance.

Looking through the list of missions on the website is similar to looking through the offerings in the produce department at the grocery store. There are some that are right and some are not. I was looking for a Saturday flight, which must get scooped up right away by the other pilots. Then I hit upon Tom I. His flight was way in the future (6 – 7 weeks). He needed to travel from Fresno (FAT) to Yucca Valley (L22). I signed up for it, was approved, and called him up. He explained that he had made this trip six times before (via AFW) and told me where to meet him on the airport.

Fast forward six weeks. Tom called me Friday 9/30 to verify that I was on track. Thanks to David at DP Air, I had a fresh oil change in 27V, and she was ready. I told Tom that I was good to go and would call in the morning when I was ready to leave home.

Saturday morning dawned and hours later I finally got up. After I did all the usual computer and phone call checking of the forecast weather, I called Tom. "Ugghh". "Hello Tom?" "Agghhh". "Tom, this is Ed, your pilot." And so on it went for five sorry minutes. Turns out that Tom, who has a bone disease qualifying him for AFW flights, had been stricken

with tainted turkey at Denny's the evening before and could barely talk. He had been up all night as his body was rejecting the turkey. I prayed for smooth air.

Of course this would happen to be the day of Corona's Air Faire as well as the only day of the year that I could take my hangar's fire extinguisher to be re-charged on the field. Then I still had to top off my fuel tanks. I figured that Tom, as he was feeling, wouldn't mind any delays. Once everything was completed at Corona, I was finally able to push the levers forward and slip from the "surly bonds of earth".



First major task is to clear the San Gabriels. "Ahh" I thought, just what am I in for?



I did see a VOR radio station on the way.

Just over an hour and a half later, I was cleared for landing on runway two nine left (29L) at Fresno International (FAT). A couple of F16s made a screaming low pass on 29R but the Mooney got there first. I taxied to Mercury Aviation and parked with the help of a line man who was sent out to guide me with two bright red guide sticks in his hands. He signaled to turn, now straight, then the signal to stop. Just like the big guys. I shut down, climbed out and walked over to Mercury to meet Tom, my first ever AFW patient. On the way, I proudly took my AFW hat out of the Mooney's hat rack and covered my balding head.



Mercury Air's facility was fancy with couches and a coffee table just inside and pictures on the wall. Off to the left was a counter. Seeing no one, looking like Tom, I asked at the counter. Seems he was still trying to distance himself from the last bit of bad turkey in the men's room. The guys behind the counter made me a barf bag out of two plastic trash can liners. I thanked them and went outside for some fresh air (smoked a cigarette).

No one could have prepared me for what was coming next. Returning inside, I saw a very frazzled Tom on the couch in the reception area, lying down half asleep. Of course, he had been up all night, remember? Ten minutes later, after

thanking the crew at Mercury Air, we went outside where Tom took three drags off of a cigarette and tossed it. It was too much for him.

Somehow, we got him, his five year old grandson, who also had turkey troubles, luggage, pillows, a blanket, and a big bag of medicine into 27V. I was still wearing the hat. Seeking comfort for my passengers, I climbed to 11,500', higher than I usually go. It was 49 degrees outside at that altitude. The air was smooth up there and coupled with the cool air, my passengers slept most of the time.



I got a break. Restricted area R-2515 was not hot above 6,000 MSL, so I did not have to go south to Palmdale and then turn left. I could "cut through" the area over Edwards AFB. That was the first time for me in a restricted area. Thanks to GPS, I found the small Yucca Valley airport and landed westbound, into the wind. We parked at the far west end where he wanted to get out. It was about an hour and 45 minute leg.

Tom and his grandson got out and I handed their belongings to them until I got to the huge plastic bag holding his medications. It was ripped up the side. Fortunately, I had four Stater Brothers plastic grocery bags with me, so I just transferred Tom's stuff into fresh bags. One of Tom's items was a large plastic bag full of pillows. As soon as everything was out of the airplane, I looked out and saw Tom and his grandson lying down on the tarmac right on top of the plastic bag of pillows. Poor guys were really in bad shape. I did them a favor and left the camera turned off.

I did a walk around and stuck the tanks and decided not to be in the next day's newspaper. There were 8 gallons in the left and 4 in the right and maybe Chuck Yeager could have coaxed 27V to Corona from Yucca Valley with 12 gallons to burn, but my name's Ed and I'm not about to try. The guys got up and cleared my area so I would be able to start the engine. They went into the small building nearby and I was alone. Oh yeah, Yucca Valley airport does not have fuel for sale.

Checking my charts, I decided to go 8 miles east to Williams (L08) and get some avgas so you would not have to read about another dumb airplane crash. Also, I did it because I have a project to complete for Kim next week. I then did something for the first time, I took off downwind. The wind was from the west at 6 to 8 but I had 4363' of runway ahead of me and I would be pointed right at Williams. Plenty of room – and I was still wearing the hat.

Williams had a rough runway and the taxi back to fuel had me worried about picking up stones which would damage my propeller. Now why didn't I just get fuel when I was parked at Mercury Air? Maybe because it is \$5.40 a gallon. Not a soul around anywhere but the fuel was self serve so I put in 10 gallons at \$4.50 a pop and fired her back up.



Conditions had definitely changed since my arrival. Picture a Podunk airfield out in the middle of nothing but desert. Picture it is almost dark. No one else around. I could see that there was at least a three mile radius of flat terrain around the airport when I arrived but none of the terrain features were now visible. I'm too old to be scared, but I am concerned. I fixed the fuel problem only to receive a visibility problem in return. This is a short (2493') field, so I taxied to the east end to take advantage of westerly winds. The bumps and loose stones again concerned me. I really did not want to damage that propeller.

With the run up done, I turned 27V into the dark gray western sky, with Mt. San Gorgonio looming in the distance, and who knows how many lesser hills are closer to me. It was even darker now. I was in a rush. All levers forward, we both bounce down Williams' dark runway and again are free from earth. All around it was so dark. I pointed up at the dimly lit sky knowing that nothing is in front of me, at least for a few miles.

Ten seconds pass. Gear comes up, flaps up, trim adjusted and it is noisy, even through my headset. I glanced to the left and saw that my little 5" x 7" pilot window was still open. Duh - did not finish my checklist due to my anxiety to get going before dark. Closed the window. Still noisy. Glance to the right and see gray light streaming in where it never has before. My door was open! I'm climbing up over dark desert landscape in a perfectly good airplane with wind noise because the stupid pilot did not complete his checklist due to anxiety to launch ASAP. Rule #1 for pilots is "Fly the Airplane" when distracted. So I did. Funny thing, it was not windy in the plane, just noisy.

In a few more seconds, I was high enough to see the cars on highway 62 which goes through Yucca Valley and leads south to Interstate 10. I reduced power to keep my speed down due to the door. The aerodynamics of the airplane made it too hard for me to close the door at a safe airspeed. The door was doing just fine holding itself open at about one inch at the trailing edge. I maintained my concentration on keeping a visual with the lights ahead and below.

A few more minutes and Palm Springs, then the Inland Empire made thousands of beautiful golden dots of light becoming the tapestry of night flight. I ignored the door and started a slow descent to Corona when I was 20 miles out. ATC, which had been giving me "flight following", turned me loose 10 about miles out. I know the Corona area very well even after dark. 27V and I made a standard traffic pattern for runway 25, and down we were again at home. After the taxi to the hangar, all switches were off and it was quiet. The GPS indicated a 621 mile round trip with a max speed of 202 mph. I reached up and smiled when I felt that hat.
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P.S. My next AFW flight is to pick up a cancer patient from Fresno. Do you think I should warn her about the turkey? Don't you dare write back and tell me to warn her about the door!

Ed Shreffler
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