

The 1000-Mile Odyssey

This is a story about five guys, four airplanes, planning, execution, and the great Angel Flight West (AFW) staff who somehow manage to coordinate everything and everybody involved. This story is dedicated to Patricia Santistevan, a cancer patient, and an AFW passenger.



Picture of Patricia from her first AFW flight last year

Patricia and her husband Thomas lived near Santa Fe NM. She is currently receiving cancer treatment in Santa Fe NM. Thomas is currently stationed near San Pablo CA. That is one heck of a commute by anyone's standards. Thomas is an active member of our US Army and I am very happy that he got to visit her in NM over the Thanksgiving weekend. AFW put together this four-leg flight to get him home to California again on Sunday November 25, 2007.



This picture (thanks to Dave P. who created runwayfinder.com) and altered for this story, gives you an idea of the whole day experienced by Thomas on Sunday 11-25-2007. It extends over 914nm or 1051 miles. Starting over on the right side, you see KSAF, which is the FAA identifier for

the Santa Fe NM Municipal airport. KSJN is St Johns Industrial Airpark in NE Arizona. KDVT is Deer Valley airport in NW Phoenix, where I stay when visiting my daughter Teresa and her husband Darrin. KAJO is the Corona Municipal airport, where I base my airplane at home. KOAK is Metropolitan Oakland International Airport in Oakland, California, the final destination for Tom's flying part of the day. All of the identifiers (minus the prefix K), sound pretty much like the name of the adjoining city except for my dear old home town Corona's airport AJO. Ajo is the Spanish word for garlic.

The other four participants in the day's activities have generously decided to participate in telling this story. The pilot who flew the first leg is John Courtright. The pilot who flew the second leg is Todd Underwood along with his young sons. I flew the third leg. The pilot who flew the fourth and longest leg is leg is John Birely along with his son and Mission Assistant, Paul. Our passenger that day was Thomas Santistevan. Here are our recollections about the day

The First Leg

It was clear and about 24° in Albuquerque at 6:10 MST when I got up to start the first leg of the mission to take Thomas from Santa Fe, "The City Different", to Oakland. Winds were light at the Sunport when I took off in N64307, my 1975 C-172M to go the 60 miles to Santa Fe. Winds were 17G27 as I approached, favoring RWY 33 with its 0.7% upgrade. I had time for a cup of coffee at the Air Center FBO before Thomas and Patricia arrived. Patricia told me she was sending cupcakes along for the pilots.

Tom and I departed about 9:10 MST, climbed 4,200 feet to 10,500, set the GPS and autopilot, for Saint John's Industrial Airpark, AZ, and settled into a relatively smooth flight. A half hour later, we passed just to the north of the Acoma Pueblo, the oldest continuously occupied community in the US. After that we passed over a lava field, spreading south and west of Mount Taylor, and farmhouses in western New Mexico, we saw the steam rising from the power generator plant 10 miles from St John's airport. We landed in calm winds about 10:50 MST and pulled up to the FBO, to get fuel and await the arrival of Todd Underwood, the second leg pilot, about 10 minutes later. My return trip to the Albuquerque Sunport was uneventful.

By John Courtright.

The Second Leg

I woke up early to a cold and clear Sunday morning in Prescott, AZ, but somehow the kids had still managed to get up earlier than I did. They knew we were going on an Angel Flight and they were excited as they always are on Angel Flight mission days. We left early for the airport in order to make sure our 1966 PA-260B (Piper Comanche) was ready to go as it had just received a new engine. As I fired up the engine the kids warmed up the headsets for our flight to St Johns, AZ where we would be picking up Angel Flight passenger Thomas Santistevan. Thomas is a "repeat" customer and we have flown both he and his wife Patricia many times. In fact, we flew this exact flight last year at the same time to the same place to get Thomas home to be with his family for the Thanksgiving holiday and it would be good to see him again. Thomas and Patricia have three sons just as my wife and I do and I often ask Thomas for advice. Our flight to St Johns was pleasant and uneventful and we made it in less than an hour averaging over 170kts.

About 20 miles out I heard the first leg pilot, John Courtright, call on the radio that he was downwind for 32. John and I have been splitting Angel Flight missions at the St Johns airport for about a year and a half now and he is a really great guy with a big heart for our patients. We landed right behind him and both John and Thomas were there to meet us. After the usual enjoyable airport banter Thomas gave each of us, even the kids, a homemade cupcake baked for the pilots by his wife Patricia. They were fantastic – filled with fruit and goodness and the kids ate every last bite. After paying for our discounted fuel (Thanks to Gary, the airport manager at St. Johns!) and bidding our adieus, Thomas, the kids and I took off into the still below freezing air en-route to Phoenix Deer Valley

airport where we would meet up with the next leg pilot Ed Shreffler. Our flight was smooth as could be and the visibility was excellent. At one point we could see the San Francisco peaks near Flagstaff, the New Mexico border behind us, the Superstition Mountains to the south of us and the Four Peaks in front of us all at the same time. If you have never flown in Arizona you are missing out!

As we arrived at Deer Valley airport, the busiest general aviation airport in the United States two years running, the controllers were doing an excellent job of keeping the traffic flowing on this Sunday after Thanksgiving. With no delays we landed and exited onto the taxiway with a smiling and waving Ed Shreffler and his Mooney. As we deplaned Ed came right over eager to shake hands and clearly excited about today's Angel Flight. Ed's son-in-law Darrin took pictures of all of us just before eating one of Patricia's cupcakes. Darrin had previously prepared lunch for Thomas as they knew he would be hungry during this all day event. After moving Thomas's bags to Ed's plane we said our goodbyes and took off again for our short flight home back to Prescott. We put the plane away but left it semi-prepared for another Angel Flight mission the following day. There is nothing more rewarding than the flying for Angel Flight and being able to take part in the transportation of our patients who might not otherwise be able to get the medical treatment they so badly need.

By Todd Underwood

The Third Leg

I woke up a half an hour early because my subconscious was on special flight alert. Perfect blue sky was my good fortune. Both runwayfinder.com and wunderground.com gave me the total weather picture. Three cups of coffee later, Todd called and gave me a planned 12:20 arrival time. I called John Birely and gave him an update on my arrival time in Corona. Darrin made two awesome turkey sandwiches for us to enjoy in flight. I hugged my daughter goodbye, and we were off to the airport.

We got to Deer Valley and I called Flight Service to confirm the weather and all was good to go while Darrin was out on the ramp pre-flighting 07T. Once outside, I saw Todd taxiing his Comanche, and waved him to a parking spot right next to us.



Todd's Comanche, Todd, Thomas, and Ed (badge missing) gripping those cupcakes!



Looks like we've been friends for years (Pictures taken at Phoenix by Darrin)

Cupcakes, can you believe it? Mine was awesome at 8,500 feet! The flight itself was a non-event. Smooth as sitting on a living room couch and George [the King KFC 150 autopilot] was flying. The altitude-hold feature kept us within 10 feet of 8500' for almost two hours. I could never do that manually. ATC sure was busy. I put us down on the centerline at Corona, and taxied to my hangar. Thomas and I pushed 5807T up the rise into her hangar and we drove over to transient parking. There, we met John Birely and his son Paul.



Ed (badge upside down), John's blue and white Cessna, Thomas, and John taken by Paul



Soon, they were off for Oakland

I tidied up the hangar, made friends with a Blue Can, reflected on the day, and went home to start writing this and become an all around pest to get the other guys to do the same.

By Ed Shreffler

The Fourth Leg

I was pleased to accept the fourth and final leg of AF Mission #140552 for Thomas Santistevan on Sunday, November 25, 2007 from Corona, CA (KAJO) to Oakland, CA (KOAK) . Thomas, his wife Patricia and I had flown together before, so that I knew what a great guy Thomas is, and it was a privilege to fly a member of the US Army who serves our country with pride and commitment.

The day started with the usual questions. Would the weather allow each of the four legs to be flown safely? Would I be fit to fly my leg? Would I find my airplane, a 2004 turbocharged Cessna T182T with tail number N65377, to be airworthy when I arrived at my home base, Buchanan Field in Concord, CA (KCCR)? Perhaps the most unique thing about this mission for me was that my son Paul, who had recently moved from the East Coast to live with me in Oakland, would be flying his first Angel Flight as my mission assistant. As Paul is attempting to enlist in the Army, he was looking forward to meeting an active duty soldier.

Everything looked good on our weather briefing. In particular, Santa Ana winds led to better than usual visibility in the Los Angeles basin. Although the weather looked good for a VFR flight, we filed an IFR flight plan and received an IFR clearance that Paul and I flew upon departure from KCCR. For once, Murphy's Law of Aviation, that the wind is always in your face, wasn't operative and we had a faster than planned flight to KAJO. Owing to heavy traffic, and realizing that KAJO was clearly in VFR conditions, we cancelled our IFR clearance about 10 miles from KAJO to the delight of the overworked SOCAL Approach controller.

After the usual pit stop activities for Paul and me, and a quick refueling of N65377, we met up with Thomas and our third leg pilot and mission maestro Ed Shreffler. Thomas was his usual positive and energetic self, and surprised us with a cupcake that Patricia had baked. Paul snapped some pictures of Thomas, Ed and me

that came out great, and then it was time to fly to KOAK. Owing to good weather, we departed VFR. Although we had an IFR flight plan on file, we flew to KOAK with VFR flight following. Again, we had a smooth flight, with Thomas getting some sleep and no intervention of Murphy. Upon landing at KOAK, we taxied to the Kaiser Air FBO, which continued to be a great supporter of Angel Flight. Paul and I said farewell to an appreciative Thomas who drove home, and our mission ended with a quick, uneventful VFR hop from KOAK to KCCR.

This was a complex, four leg mission that we executed as smoothly as could be hoped for. I look forward to flying Thomas and Patricia on future AF Missions, as well as to working with Ed and the other pilots who made the day such a success.

By John Birely

Our Passenger's Perception

1st Pilot John (Sorry I'm terrible at last names). I always enjoy flying with John. He seems to typify the warm kindhearted father type figure or older brother who watches out for the younger brother. His plane is a two seater Cessna (don't know what model number it is), and when you get two big guys like him and me next to each other, we don't have much elbow room. Since it was a little cold when we left Santa Fe (I believe John said it was near 13 degrees), he asked me to pull on the knob for the heater whenever I noticed it going back in. I guess the force of the air pushing in through the nose of the plane kept closing the vent so we had to keep pulling it out. And since it was on control panel in front of me it was easier for me to pull. No biggy, I felt it nice to be able to contribute a little to the flying of the plane if at least to make sure we had a nice warm supply of heat coming in. Because of the traffic over the airway, we didn't talk much except for a few words now and then as he had to continue to listen in and ensure he heard any new instructions given to him to adjust altitude or direction for example. We flew over a vast lava field from an ancient volcano south of Grants, NM just before we got to St. Johns, AZ. It was amazing to see it from the air. We had a nice landing and were immediately greeted by Todd and his two younger sons. Getting down from the plane we were happy to see the weather was a lot warmer than when we left Santa Fe. After going into the airport office there, I gave Todd and his two boys and John also, a cupcake each from the batch Patricia gave me. Her instructions were to make sure and give each of the pilots one to show our appreciation for flying me back to San Pablo, CA.

2nd Pilot Todd (same problem here can't remember his last name). After we said bye to John, and everyone finished their cupcakes, we quickly boarded his plane and were on our way. His two boys sat in the rear seats. I always enjoy flying with Todd. He has three young sons, Gavin, Griffin and I don't recall the name of the younger son. Patricia and I also have three sons, Joshua, Abraham, and Uriah. The first time I flew with Todd he told me how him and Patricia talked extensively comparing notes on the upbringing of the boys and it turned out we did the same. This last time however, and on the trip bringing me to Santa Fe, we talked quite a bit on experiences in the various churches we attended. It is so awesome because even 3-4 thousand feet up in the clouds we could feel the presence of the Lord as we shared our mutual faith in Jesus. The trip with Todd always goes by so quickly - not sure if it's because he flies so fast (Todd just put a new engine in his plane), or because time flies when your having fun. His boys lulled to sleep by the steady hum of the plane's engine (or being bored from our conversation) fell asleep in the back of the plane. They are so precious at that age. As always Todd, enjoy every minute with them while they are small - they grow up so quickly. We landed in deer valley airport in Phoenix and met up with Ed. After saying goodbye to Todd and loading up my bag in Ed's plane, we said goodbye.

3rd Pilot Ed (hopefully by now you know I have no idea what his last name is). Ed is a really great guy. We got going after he made sure he had all the instructions and navigation items in place. He gave me a bag with a bottle of water, a delicious turkey sandwich, and a baggy with chips. Our conversation was mostly sparse, again due to the large Thanksgiving holiday traffic over the airways from everyone flying up there, but a few times we did get to talk about various things. I don't remember much about his plane. I think I was starting to get sleepy and I believe a few times I kind of dozed off. When he opened his lunch, I did the same and we ate our picnic lunch on blanket of clouds (no ants) ha-ha. The trip went smooth and again, seemed to pass very quickly. I remember the last part when we had to fly between two mountains to enter into the Los Angeles basin. He showed me on his instrument panel how the red portions indicated the mountains to our left and right that were equal to or above us - basically saying we did not want to get too close to them. We quickly began our descent, Ed flew in his approach angle and we safely touched down in California. I had given the last two remaining cupcakes to Ed because when I first met him, I thought the gentleman next to him was also flying with us. Turned out he was just helping Ed get the plane ready to take off. So Ed gave me one of the cupcakes back to give to the next and last pilot of the final leg of my trip. When we landed, Ed asked me to help push his plane into the hangar, then we got in his SUV and drove around to the airport building where John and his son Paul were waiting for us. They talked for awhile and after I went in to use the restroom, we said goodbye to Ed and boarded our plane.

4th Pilot John (not the same as the first John, and no I don't know his last name either - sorry). Guess I was pretty tired by this leg of the trip. I sat in the back, John and Paul were up front. His plane had two large TV screen type monitors on the dashboard on the left and right. His son Paul helped him with the navigation, and John was careful to use the time as a training session to teach his son the important technical intricacies of flying. I really didn't talk to either of them while we were flying, but before getting on the plane, Paul told me he was talking to a recruiter and was definitely going to be joining the Army. He sounded pretty excited about it and reminded me of my years as a recruiter when I had an applicant join at MEPS. Sometimes they were a little scared, but most of the time they were excited at their decision and the job they got in the Army. We saw the most beautiful sunset from the plane, and as it grew dark, it seemed to get a lot colder up there. Fortunately, I had my thicker jacket in the bag and was able to reach it behind me. I snuggled into the warm fleece lining, closed my eyes, and fell asleep. I awoke as we were nearing Oakland. John and Paul were both watching out for about three or four different planes at one time that they received warnings from that they may be flying below us and or being near to intersecting our paths. Nothing to worry about, but they notified the dispatcher whenever they saw one of the planes. We landed safely in Oakland, I said goodbye to John and Paul as they had to get back in their plane to fly to Concord - John said it would take them about 15-20 minutes to get there.

5th Pilot Tom. Well, I made it to my car, my little flyer Subaru WRX STI, that drove me the 15 miles or so North of Oakland up I-80 to San Pablo, CA. It was a long day of flying, but I made it safely home. I had four wonderful flights with four different and very special pilots. Words cannot express the thanks both Patricia and I and my family (my 93 year old mother came and spent Thanksgiving with Patricia and I and the boys) have for all of you. In spite of all that Patricia has gone through, she remains in high spirits. Being apart from her has been difficult for both her and me. Right now, I'm in the process of requesting a compassionate reassignment back to NM to be near to my beautiful wife as she continues the struggle for life and her battle with cancer. But for now, the year and four months I've been out here, being so far hasn't felt so far thanks to Angel Flight and all it's wonderful people who contribute to providing such an honored, needed, and very appreciated service. May God bless all of you who make this happen. Thank you again to all you special pilots who take the time to fly us safely to our destinations and to be with our loved ones.

May God richly bless you now and always, and with Christmas being so near, may you all have a truly Wonderful Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

Sincerely,

Tom Santistevan,

SFC Thomas L. Santistevan

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by Ed Shreffler