

Touched by an Angel

I am blessed, I was touched gently by an Angel today. Her name is Kristen. The mother of two young boys, an ex-marathon runner, and a scientist who cannot work these days due to the devastating effects of dermatomyositis, an extremely rare form of cancer. I think I heard her say it affects just one in a million.

Just when I chose to look on the Angel Flight website this week, her mission became available, and I signed up for it as if I knew her already. I called her to let her know that she had a ride, and she was so much fun to talk to that I knew it was going to be a great flight. We looked forward to it.

The weather was not cooperating this week. I checked the weather daily, but Monday and Wednesday of this week had given us cold air, heavy rain, and snow storms in the California southlands. Thursday was predicted to have good flying weather. And it did. Hallelujah.

This flight was a little bit intimidating for me, because I was to fly the published 'Mini Route' right over LAX. I usually avoid that whole LAX area. I stopped at the flight school at Corona and bought a Los Angeles Terminal Area Chart to study the procedure.

In spite of some car trouble, my fly-buddy Krystal was able to join me around 11 o'clock at my hangar. I was studying the new chart on the wing of my Mooney, when she arrived, snuck up behind me, and poked me lightly in the ribs. I turned around, smiled, and she gave me a hug. It was all good.

We launched into scattered to broken clouds. When talking to Air Traffic Control, I usually am referred to as Mooney 5807 Tango. Today I was to be known as Angel Flight 07 Tango. Deep inside, that felt good. We headed northwest from Corona towards the El Monte airport, and then turned west just north of the LAX class Bravo airspace. Look at these pictures.



Clouds, mountains, clean air, and snow - beautiful



I had to pitch the nose down through a large hole in the clouds to get beneath them and Krystal was fine with that. Nothing seems to scare her up there. "It's all good".

Maybe it was because I was doing an Angel Flight, but it seemed that air traffic control was so very accommodating to me today. They vectored me into safe havens in the air, whenever that needed to be. They cleared me into the class Bravo airspace and later turned me direct into a 5 mile final for runway 21. Santa Monica Ground Control was so polite and gave me progressive taxi guidance right to where I had to go for parking. We exited the airplane, looked around, and my cell phone rang. It was Josh from Angel Flight West. I told him where I was and he said he would bring Kristen to me.

Instead of me having to find Kristen and the AFW office, he found us. Two minutes later they walked up and greeted us on the balcony of the SMO administration building. Josh introduced Kristen to us and I introduced Krystal to them. When I said hello to Kristen, I had an impulse and gave her a hug. It was the right thing to do, she smiled big time. She is so enthusiastic, she is going to beat this cancer! Heck, even Krystal and Kristen hugged each other. And they just met at that moment. Can you sense the love? Josh took a picture of Krystal, myself, and Kristen. I felt great, just to be there.



Krystal, Ed wearing 'The AFW Hat', and our Angel Flight Angel, Kristen

Santa Monica Ground Control had told me after landing to check with them and they would set up the coordination for my departure with Los Angeles airport to go through the Mini Route right over the top of LAX. And so it happened when I was ready to depart. I was told to take off on the runway heading southwest bound, make a 270° climbing right turn right over the shoreline, while climbing to 2500 feet, and expect 119.8 as my next frequency. They also gave me my squawk code in advance. Krystal dialed it into the transponder for us. It feels so good to be prepared before launching. You pilots out there know what I'm talking about. Even though I am VFR, they called it a clearance.

For the non pilots wondering about the meaning of class Bravo airspace terminology, the continental United States airspace is divided up into various classes, each with their own set of rules for pilots. We have class A, B, C, D, E, and G. Other countries also have class F. Class Bravo is just the way we refer to class B using our phonetic alphabet of Alpha, Bravo, Charlie - all the way to Zulu. Class Bravo airspace surrounds and protects the biggest and busiest airports. There are about 35 of them in America. Three of them are in California. I was in the one that surrounds LAX and was headed to the one for SAN - San Diego International. Two in one day is a big deal for a pilot like me. By the way, Class G airspace is not controlled by Air Traffic Control, so it includes all airspace in the United States that is not classified as Class A, B, C, D, or E.



Taken out of the right window by Krystal over the shoreline in that 270° climbing right turn



California's Marina del Rey



Los Angeles International Airport just ahead looking north to south

After we were south of the Los Angeles area, and were clear of the LAX class Bravo airspace, we were able to climb higher than 2500 feet and went up to about 4500' for a while. Then a line of clouds were in front of us, and I was going to have to either go up or go down. I chose to go down to 3500'. That gave air traffic control clear space for John Wayne Airport departures over the ocean (and over us). Yes, we mix it up with the big boys sometimes, but always under ATC control.



It can be so much fun up here, motoring along at 175, with my hands in my lap

From there it was a straight line right to San Diego. That put us about six or seven miles off shore for a while. That was a little bit intimidating, because if my engine quit... but I have great faith in this Mooney, it is well maintained by David, my A&P at DP Air in Corona.



Clouds nearby and Catalina Island in the distance



All manner of commerce stuff



Over land, over water, and over clouds



Very impressive shoreline, cliffs and beaches



I pulled off a few silly comments to the gals enroute when I was looking for waypoints on the way to San Diego. Kristen, sitting in back, explained what we were looking at and said that she was going to charge me a lot as she was not only being my tour guide, and my backseat driver, but also our chaperone. We all giggled. Sometimes I think I lose 30 years every time I leave the ground.



Back under the clouds, we enjoyed the view in the shade



The impressive Coronado Bridge

Again, SoCal approach and the San Diego Montgomery Field airport ATC guys and gals were so accommodating. They gave me a San Diego class Bravo clearance and vectors to direct me right to the airport. I even got a chance to pull off a nice landing. Just a little tick, tick, touchdown. Then they gave me directions right to the correct parking place once I landed. I felt it was all good, because Kristen said "I can see my car" over the intercom. We parked and got out in a bath of beautiful sunshine. After I unloaded Kristen's things from the Mooney's baggage area, Krystal toted much of it to the car. It was two o'clock straight up, and Kristen was happy that she was going to be able to see her seven year old son's performance at school at 2:30, just five driving minutes away. After goodbye hugs, Kristen drove off and we walked back to the ramp and got back into the airplane.



I took off westbound, turned downwind to the east, and continued going east until we got past the perimeter of the San Diego class Bravo airspace, then we turned northwest direct towards Corona. Krystal was already working the transponder and now she was changing frequencies on the radio for me. But her flying day was not over yet.

Blink, Blink, my JPI reminded me that I was below 10 gallons of fuel after 15 min. Now, some pilots would've just gone on to Corona. After all, it was only a six or seven gallon trip from that point. That is way below my personal minimums. So I dialed in French Valley airport (F70), just north of Temecula, for a fuel stop. Yes, a slight annoyance, but you are not going to read about me in the newspapers. 10 gallons later at \$3.99 each, we were off again and heading towards Corona.

Right about here I was showing Krystal how to turn an airplane. You turn the yoke and hold it there until the airplane reaches the desired bank angle, and then turn the yoke straight again, and the airplane maintains that bank angle until you decide that you have completed the intended turn. Then you turn the yoke the other direction to level the wings and go straight again. It is quite different than driving a car. She had her hands on her yoke, while I was doing the turning with mine. Then my hands went into my lap, and guess what, she was driving. I looked over to the right, and I saw a great big grin. So I kept on explaining little bit up, a little bit left, whatever correction was appropriate and she kept on flying the Mooney. She picked it up so doggone quick. She wants to go there someday (becoming a pilot).

She let me fly the airplane for the last 5 miles, and I let it touch down gently at Corona's airport. We taxied to my hangar and then we drove our cars out and pushed the Mooney in for next time. A little bit of conversation ensued, like it always does, and then the whole day was over - {Poof}. After a quick hug, she was gone. Mooney people seem to hug a lot and it is awesome.

Now I am here at the typewriter trying to recapture the day. Oops, almost forgot to mention about the Blue Can this time! It was that good of a day, a day in the heavens with an Angel.

Ed Shreffler
12/18/2008

Contact me at eshreffler@sbcglobal.net

PS

I usually send my story out at this point. This one is different. This is where I am privileged to switch from sharing my flying experiences and the views out of the windows, to sharing **love**, pure and simple. The following is more special to me than you will ever know. I had asked Kristen to send me something that I could include here if she chose to, from her point of view of the day. A special email treat from Kristen followed late Saturday, December 20, 2008 after I had gone to sleep.

Hi Ed,

I'll write something soon for you. I've been taking longer this time to bounce out of this chemo...guess it's the cumulative effect.

Thanks for everything,

Kristee

On Sunday 12/21 I replied to her with a note of appreciation. I was delightfully surprised with this prompt reply later Sunday evening. I think she is amazing. I am done typing now. The rest of this is from Kristen.

Dear Ed,

I sat down to write my thoughts and it came out in the form of a poem. Speaks volumes coming from me because I am a scientist not a writer!!!! Hope you like it.

Thanks again for everything!

Kristee

SPECIAL GRATITUDE TO ANGEL FLIGHT WEST

The Gift of Hope

The Gift of Love

Unmatched by all

It's a gift from above.

Truly it's the gift of Life

Of Urgent medical care

That I would not have

If ANGEL FLIGHT were not there.

It's a trip full of smiles

And laughter and fun,

New friendships remain

When the flying is done.

Gorgeous sights

Of clouds overhead,

And terrific answers to

How instruments are read,

By myself, the travel was way too hard

By myself, it could not be done.

But ANGEL FLIGHT WEST came alongside

And even made it tons of fun!

To all who volunteer

and to all who may,

Remember the ANGEL FLIGHT MISSION

Truly is Life's Way.

I hope to get better

And to someday give back,

But until that takes place

The pilots keep my care on track.

THANK YOU ANGEL FLIGHT WEST

YOU ARE DEFINITELY THE BEST!

Kristen Taylor

12/21/2008