

What a day!

I am glad it is over, yet I am glad it took place.

My son Bobby called me a week ago to say he would be in Sacramento today taking a test for a potential job opening with an agency of the State of California. Would I fly up and bring him back home? More than just transportation, he wanted to experience a genuine cross country flight in a private plane. He had been aloft with me before on local hops in the Phoenix AZ and Corona CA areas, but never on a real trip. I said sure, let's do it.

The straight line (as the Mooney flies) distance from Corona to Sacramento is 385 miles. In a no wind environment, it is a 2 hour and 9 minute ride. Today, I experienced winds and more. The sky around Corona was full of white clouds with some areas of blue opening up around 10 AM. I called FAA Flight Service (now contracted out to Lockheed Martin) for a pilot weather briefing. She said initially that once I could get out of the LA Basin, I was pretty much home free. Her later mention about conditions on the second half of the ride made me ask some more in depth questions. Now, I felt I was better prepared for this flight. I thought it might be different than usual.

Upon departure, the blue holes in the sky were in all the wrong places for me. I called up SoCal Approach Control on 135.4 MHz as I couldn't enter Ontario's Class C airspace without 2 way communication with SoCal. No answer. I climbed and continued to turn below the clouds over the city. Tried calling again and again. Maybe my 2 way radio was not working? I was about to consider scuttling the whole thing and just go back and land at Corona. I got a response on the 4th try. Finally, I thought. Now I could point toward that hole in the clouds and get out of Dodge. I headed northwest on a true bearing of 325° - but for my use, a magnetic bearing of 312°. This pointed me right at Sacramento.

Once up to 5,000 feet, I was on top of my fluffy friends. They were all over the LA Basin as I looked around. The ride was smooth. The sun was bright. I cleared the San Gabriel Mountains with ease at 10,500 feet. The forecast tailwinds kicked in and I was seeing ground speeds in the 170s. I soon flew by the Palmdale and Lancaster in the High Desert with Joshua Approach watching me on their radar, and soon I was being watched by Bakersfield Approach as I chose to descend to 8,500 and sped by. It was still a smooth ride. The air was somewhat hazy but I could still see 10 miles.

Then I noticed something different up ahead. It was a band of white and some darker clouds that were stretching from left to right somewhat ahead and below me. I knew I had to go lower to remain clear of those clouds. I chose to not fly on top for concern that there might be no opening to get down later. I descended to 6,500'. Getting closer, I thought it was still no good at that altitude. Time to go below them.

The ride started getting bumpy as I expected. Then 10 minutes later, as the clouds kept getting lower, I descended to 4,500'. Clouds ahead started getting closer to me at a faster perceived rate. Time was running out. There was wiggle room over there to the left. I cranked over into a steep descending 45° left turn and aimed for that patch of clear air. For those that like the E ticket ride, this was your chance.

That worked for a while. It got really bumpy and pretty dark outside. The visibility was not much more than 3 miles. Lower clouds loomed up ahead. OK, down to 4,000' approved by ATC because of WX conditions. This was just south of Fresno while I was being watched by Fresno Approach. That worked for 15 minutes and then there was more dark crud ahead near my present altitude and ahead. I went down to 3,500. A dark gray rainstorm went by 5 miles to my right. This is called 'Scud

Running' by some pilots and I was very alert looking left, right, and ahead. I was not used to this low flying as I am usually flying thousands of feet higher.

As these were new conditions for me, even though I have been departing the earth for 20 years, this was certainly a head trip for me. And a very good learning experience. You are never too old to learn. I was now talking with and being observed by NorCal Approach. On and on under the clouds and constant bumps until I reached the Sacramento area.

I switched to tower frequency, found the airport, and made a nice landing. I got to park close to the tower and noticed how much cooler it was compared to Corona. My son and I found each other with a welcome hug. I had also planned to meet my granddaughter Olivia but she never made it to the airport while I was there. We kicked back for a while but I knew what was next. The low flight return trip. It was not really so bad with my newfound knowledge. I knew what to expect, and what it would look like out the window.

Bobby said he wanted to experience hands on flying. I had him co-steer as I departed. Just a minute off the ground, while we were heading southwest on runway 20 heading, I asked him to bring it around to 134° and I put my hands in my lap as he tried to master driving in 3 dimensions. Now he was thinking 100%. He did good considering the bumpy conditions but after a while I was concentrating on too many things between his driving, low visibility, and the clouds just ahead. We agreed that the autopilot is a prime candidate for this task. Although it does not mitigate the bumps, it does keep us on a constant course and my defined altitude of 3,500 feet.

After an hour of bouncing along under gray and silver overcast, we were once again south of the clouds, the ride smoothed out, and I took us up to 5,500 then 7,500 feet to clear the terrain ahead. Bobby didn't want to drive some more as his tummy was feeling the effects of the bumps for the past hour. He still wants to, but just not right then.

We saw some snow just NW of Tehachapi as we crested a big hill just before arriving back over the High Desert. Past Lancaster and Palmdale it was time to climb up to 9,500 to clear the San Gabriel Mountains once more. There was a whole lot of snow 20 miles over to the east on the highest peak. Some normal turbulence over the peaks jiggled us for a minute or two.

Once past the terrain, Joshua turned us back over to SoCal as we sped down to the floor of the LA Basin. The air was filthy but the ride was smooth. We maintained a straight line while a Southwest Airlines Boeing 757 departing from Ontario was restricted by SoCal to level off to remain below us. I smiled.

I got to show off my shiny red speed brakes over Corona as we descended and circled into the standard landing pattern. That was followed by a smooth landing and taxi to the hangar. Oh boy, that Blue Can tasted good.

Epilogue

We had planned to fly to Phoenix on Monday as that is where he lives but we were overcast here Sunday even though the forecast promised some clearing. The forecast for Monday is a 70% chance of rain and possible thunderstorms. I have had enough for a while. He will go Greyhound.

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04/11/2010

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