

It's said that good judgment comes from experience, but that experience comes from bad judgment. While that might seem a bit glib, there are moments when it's undeniably true. It happened to me on a trip from Massachusetts to Oregon last year. The mission was one for which I'd prepared very carefully. I'd spent most of the previous two years planning my RV-8's paint scheme and I was finally ready to deliver the airplane to the painter. As the design I'd commissioned wasn't a simple white-with-pinstripes job, I was unable to find an aircraft paint shop willing to undertake the work at an acceptable price. Fortunately, I'd made the acquaintance of a real artist who was willing to paint the plane. Inconveniently, he was located all the way across the country. Never one to avoid an aeronautical adventure, I'd agreed to bring the plane to him so he could take his time with it in his own shop. Having my chosen paint scheme executed well was very much more important to me than having it done locally or, for that matter, quickly.

I was no stranger to long cross-country trips in general aviation airplanes, and had previously ranged throughout the entire eastern half of the country, both VFR and IFR, to various places in different airplanes. I'd been as far northwest as Madison, WI, as far southwest as New Orleans, LA, and pretty much all over the country east of those points. In other words, as I prepared to make the long flight to the Pacific Northwest, I felt very familiar and comfortable with the detailed trip planning necessitated by such an adventure. In spite of my comfort level with the upcoming flight, I realized that I'd be crossing more weather systems in a single trip than I ever had before and I needed to preserve as much scheduling flexibility as possible. Complicating matters somewhat was the fact that my RV-8, while equipped with gyros, was set up for operation under visual flight rules only.

Despite my best scheduling intentions, the reality of such a trip is that specific return reservations must be made and so, no matter how much 'extra' time you think you've allowed yourself, you're still operating under a deadline. Airline reservations can be changed at the last minute, certainly, but we all know about the financial penalties incurred in such situations. With all of this in mind, we (my friend & fellow RV builder Eric Classen and I) planned to depart Massachusetts on Monday, with the intent of making it to Oregon on Wednesday to deliver my RV-8 to the painter. I planned to spend Thursday removing the plane's control surfaces and answering the painter's questions about the airplane. I had an airline reservation for the flight home on Friday morning.

We got off to a later than planned start on Monday, departing Chatham, MA mid-morning on a beautiful New England spring day and headed for our first fuel stop in Jamestown, NY. The weather was gorgeous all the way to western New York and the first leg of the trip was uneventful. After topping off the tanks and having a quick snack from the FBO's vending machine, we launched for our next planned stop in east central Illinois. The first portion of this leg went fine, but by the time we passed into Indiana the weather was beginning to take a turn for the worse. It was increasingly clear that we wouldn't make it all the way to our next destination, so I made the first PIC decision of the trip and diverted to South Bend, IN.

Tuesday morning we took off early under clear skies and headed for Faribault, MN. I've always enjoyed watching the scenery and terrain change as I travel from one part of the country to another and this leg of our trip didn't disappoint. Actually, each leg of this trip provided its share of visual changes, from the woods and rolling hills of the northeast, to the farm fields of the Midwest and on into the mountains of the far west. Faribault was just a single strip in the middle of farm country, but the people were friendly, the weather computer worked properly, and the vending machines were well stocked. What more could a traveling pilot desire? We made a quick turn and launched for Bismarck, ND. We made it into Bismarck uneventfully beneath gathering clouds, though the weather for the following day did not look good. Rain was forecast and, as we rode the shuttle van to the hotel, was already starting to come down.

The third day of our long cross-country began in the hotel watching the Weather Channel and continued at the FBO, repeatedly checking the weather computer for updates as the rain fell outside. Toward the end of the morning it seemed to be clearing and flight service concurred that we had a good shot at making our next destination of Lewistown, MT. The rain had stopped and the overcast was starting to break up as we departed Bismarck under a broken ceiling of about 3500 feet and headed for Montana. The ceiling continued to disperse and, about fifteen miles into the leg, we succeeded in climbing on top through a scattered deck.

After a few more miles the scattered clouds beneath us had almost entirely dissipated and we were flying in the clear several thousand feet below a solid and apparently level overcast. It looked to be clear flying for the rest of the leg and we both relaxed and enjoyed the unfamiliar and, to us, exotic scenery of western North Dakota and eastern Montana. About fifty miles east of Lewistown, I noticed that the overcast was slowly coming down and I descended to compensate. It was raining lightly at this point, but visibility was excellent beneath the clouds and I had no qualms whatsoever about continuing. Forty miles east of our intended destination we had to descend again to preserve our cloud clearance beneath the overcast. We were now down to about 1500 AGL and I was starting to think about diverting to another airport, possibly Jordan, MT which lay some sixty miles behind us but had still been in the clear when we passed just to the south a little while earlier. I was receiving our destination's ATIS which was reporting better VFR conditions than those in which we were currently flying. With the ATIS report and the good visibility in mind, I elected to press on despite the steadily declining conditions.

Lewistown, MT is located on a plateau just west of a range of hills. About thirty miles east of Lewistown, the land began rising toward those hills at the same time that the overcast began lowering again. In effect, we were being squeezed down into a corner between the clouds and the ground. As the saddle in the hills east of our destination airport came into view, it became suddenly apparent to me that I couldn't see past the hills; the clouds and the rising terrain had met and closed off our path. I immediately made the proverbial 180, with the intention of heading back along our route toward a clearer area. As soon as I'd completed the turn, it was obvious that the weather had, to a great extent, closed in behind us. I was forced to descend once again as I reached for the 'Nearest' button on the GPS, looking for a field somewhere to the east where I felt certain lay better weather.

As the GPS responded with its entry for Sand Springs, MT, we were down to about 100 feet over the rough terrain of central Montana and I'd slowed the RV-8 from its usual cruise speed of around 180 knots down to 100 knots indicated. The rain was falling steadily, though it was still light under the solid overcast. I was following a road toward a brighter patch of sky, back where I knew there had been higher ceilings fifteen minutes earlier. My left hand was on the throttle and I was spring loaded to simply close it and land on the empty road below at the first sign of additional trouble. My passenger was quiet, as if he sensed that I needed to concentrate and that it wasn't a good time to distract the guy flying the airplane.

As we followed the road back in a predominantly easterly direction, the GPS showed us still nearly thirty miles west of Sand Springs. The GPS database showed it to be a public airport with a gravel strip and fuel available. Sounded good to me! The road I was following was meandering in generally the right direction and the ceiling was slowly going up as we flew east. It eventually rose to a thousand feet or so and I climbed back to 500 AGL with some relief. When the GPS showed us nearing the airport, the ground ahead still seemed to be all but deserted. I certainly didn't see anything like a gray gravel runway anywhere in the vicinity. My passenger & I were both scanning the ground for all we were worth as the distance remaining counted down to zero. It took three passes over the area, but I finally realized that the runway wasn't actually gravel, as the GPS database had indicated, but grass. As soon as that particular light went off in my head, I easily spotted the strip right next to the only building within miles and landed uneventfully.

We sat in the plane for at least five minutes, letting some of the accumulated tension of the preceding forty minutes or so drain away. We were definitely relieved to be safely on the ground, though the airport appeared to be abandoned and way out in the middle of nowhere. I quickly discovered that my cell phone wasn't getting a signal, so we covered the airplane, climbed carefully over a barbed wire fence and determined to walk up the dirt road next to the 'airport' until we found civilization.

To make a long story short, we walked a couple of miles to a sort of combination general store and post office. The woman running the place went out of her way to be friendly and helpful. She placed a call to the guy whose father leased the airport and, after a short wait, he came to collect us. We returned to the airplane, topped off the tanks and, realizing that the weather wasn't going to permit any more flying that day, accepted the offer of hangar space for the RV. As the weather was forecast to remain unflyable for at least the next several days, we spent the afternoon as guests on one of the largest cattle ranches in central Montana. For a lifelong Easterner such as myself, it was an amazing thing to watch real cowboys at work. I even got to pet some cows! Late in the afternoon, our host's girlfriend drove us to Billings to spend the night prior to flying out commercially in the morning.

I learned a lot from this (mis)adventure and I'm certain that those lessons will affect both the planning and conduct of my long-range VFR flights for the remainder of my life in aviation. Some of those lessons, in no particular order:

- Don't let the perceived 'need' to be somewhere on a particular schedule (get-there-itis) overwhelm your better judgment about the weather.
 - I knew that the weather was forecast to be rainy, though VFR, in Montana, but I still launched from Bismarck to go 'take a look'. That alone wasn't, in and of itself, a bad decision, but not turning back as soon as the overcast began coming down sure was.
- Don't be so lulled into complacency beneath an apparently level overcast that you disregard the fact that it's gradually lowering.
 - Visibility was so good beneath the clouds that I allowed myself to keep descending 'just another hundred feet or so' in the hope that I could make a little more progress toward my destination. To what end? Preserving a schedule...?
- Don't let your unfamiliarity with a particular area of the country box you into a corner (the unexpectedly rising terrain combined with the lowering overcast made for some high-pucker minutes).
 - I clearly remember thinking that, because there were so few airports to be found in the hostile terrain of central Montana, I 'might as well' try to continue on to my destination. A better thought would have been, because of the serious dearth of available fields, to avail myself of the first good one that came along. I should have diverted to Jordan when we originally passed it, instead of pressing on as I did.
- Don't think that 'it won't happen to me' because you're too experienced and regularly preach about the dangers of this sort of thing to others, including your own students. It can happen to anyone.
 - It's clear to me now that, at the time of this trip, I had allowed myself to think that, after more than a decade of reading NTSB reports, I was too well educated about the potential pitfalls and dangers of flying VFR in marginal conditions to ever fall prey to them myself. Wrong.
 - As a CFI, I'd preached the weather flying gospel to every one of my own students, cautioning them against exactly the sort of situation in which I placed myself and my passenger. I believed that I was too conscious of the dire possibilities to ever find myself in that very situation. Wrong.

In over a thousand hours of flying, and after a handful of emergencies, this was the first time for which I was responsible for creating the potentially perilous situation. From the moment I passed a good divert field under lowering conditions, I continued to add to the potential accident chain. It was only through the greatest good fortune that I'm able to sit and write this account today. It's one thing to successfully handle an emergency that arises in the course of one's

normal flying. It's quite another thing entirely to find oneself solely responsible for creating the emergent situation in the first place. While I won't hesitate to make another long cross-country trip in a GA airplane and have, in fact, done so since my Montana debacle, I have resolved to never again allow my hard-earned good judgment to be further augmented by circumstances and scheduling pressures of my own devising.

The RV remained in the hangar at Sand Springs for about two weeks, before being picked up and delivered to the paint shop in Oregon by Van's chief instructor. Six weeks later, in early July, I flew my completed (and gorgeous!) airplane home to Massachusetts. That flight, with the joyful reactions my RV-8 received at every stop, more than made up emotionally for the unnecessarily harrowing trip west.