

# The *Most Valuable* Flight



By LCdr. Dave Bouve

Ask any aviator on what flight they learned the most, and they will recall, with clarity, a tough check ride, a significant flight with their on-wing, or a hard-earned lesson learned in the fleet. I have never forgotten my flight, even though it happened 12 years ago.

I was in the early fam stage in VT-2 at Whiting. One of my roommates was going through primary at the same time. He and I were commissioned together at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. He became a very experienced pilot while flying in college; he had his private-pilot's license, an instrument rating—the works.

It was autumn, and he had a great idea: We could rent a civilian plane and fly ourselves to the municipal airstrip in Oxford, 30 miles north of Cincinnati, for homecoming weekend. You know, “Hail the conquering heroes,” and all that. Sounded great to me, so he set it up for the two of us, plus another classmate who had graduated from Miami before us.

The aircraft he selected for our journey was a Piper Arrow, a single-engine plane with four seats and retractable gear. The plan was to fly

to Oxford as early as possible on the Friday of homecoming weekend, but the schedule writers in squadron ops were unsympathetic to my on-deck-by-1200 snivel. By the time the three of us got to the civilian field in Milton and had our bags stowed in the plane, it was close to 1600.

My pilot classmate was in the left seat, I was in the right, and our friend was in the back seat. He had filed IFR, and when I asked where we would be stopping for fuel, he surprised me by saying the plane had the range to make it in one leg—if you plan on zero wind, as it turns out.

For those of you now figuring distances in your head, Pensacola to Cincinnati is about 650 miles, following the most direct route along the airways. The Arrow cruises at about 130 knots, and carries 72 gallons of useable fuel. I guess you know where this story is headed.

Off we went. My pilot classmate did all the talking to ATC, and a few hours later, I enjoyed the view from 6,000 feet as the sun set over the foothills of Tennessee. Boy, this was nice, I thought—flying without worrying about the pesky kneeboard cards, checklists, and instructors.

One thing about our Arrow was that the fuel

pump only could feed from one wing tank at a time, so we had to switch tanks every 30 minutes or so to keep the load balanced. When the needles on the two fuel gauges were at the half-way mark for each, I looked at the chart and saw we were only halfway to Oxford.

Hmmm, what does it mean if groundspeed is less than true airspeed? Headwinds, yes—I definitely recalled my on-wing mentioning those. Every pilot reading this story knows that little voice you hear and the feeling you get in the pit of your stomach when something isn't right. However, having no flight experience beyond fam 3, and no experience with ATC, instrument flight, or that little rule about 10 percent or 20 minutes, whichever is greater, all I could do was ask, "Are we going to have to stop for gas somewhere?"

In a classic case of get-there-itis, he said, "No, we'll make it."

In a classic case of not knowing any better, I said, "OK."

I had figured out what the aircraft symbols on the VFR and IFR charts meant, and I knew we were passing over airports that could have sold us gas, but we kept our eyes on the glow of Cincinnati on the horizon. The needles by now had dropped to one-quarter tank each. Checking our groundspeed and distance to go, even I could see it would be close, but we pressed on. Our planned route of flight took us over the Cincinnati VORTAC—right through the middle of their approach and departure corridors.

The airway had us going almost due north, right where we needed to go, but, surprise, surprise, approach had us steer 030 for vectors around the Cincinnati airspace. This possibility never had occurred to us, and the change definitely would add mileage to our trip. It was now 2100 on a Friday night, and, as we headed to the northeast, we approached the empty mark on both tanks.

The city lights spread out below our left wing didn't look so inviting now. Hey, that's Riverfront Stadium! Even at this late point, we could have declared a fuel emergency and landed at Cincinnati, but we didn't. The rationale was that the fuel gauge must have some tolerance built in, right?

Even though both needles solidly were on "E," there had to be some slop, just like in a car, right?

After cheating every assigned steer five or 10 degrees to the left and making repeated requests to resume own navigation, we finally had annoyed approach enough. They gave us a vector of 340 degrees, direct Oxford, and switched us. The Oxford airport came into view as we descended out of 6,000 feet.

The final kicker for the evening was that we

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didn't have the CTAF frequency for the field, so we guessed at the winds and aimed for the nearest end of the runway. The lights at the field were on, which was a good thing, because there was no tower, and we didn't have the frequency that activated the pilot-controlled-runway lighting. The lights could have gone off at any time during our approach, but they stayed on, and we landed. My legs still were shaking as we got out of the plane, split up, and went our separate ways for the weekend.

After refueling, we calculated that one wing tank almost was dry; the other had five gallons of fuel remaining.

This was a defining moment in my career as a pilot. Even though I had no part in the flight planning and wasn't much more than a passenger, I know we both did many things wrong. There were countless links in this chain that almost led to disaster.

At the time, I never had heard of ORM or CRM, but I should have spoken up. To say I was uncomfortable would be an understatement. I learned more in that single flight than in any other since. 

LCdr. Bouve flies with HSL-42.