

## Montana Trip

By Randy Carmichael

As a native Florida flatlander, for many years now I've wanted to learn a little about mountain flying. After a couple annual postponements when "life got in the way" I was finally able to pursue my plan in early August 2018.

I had booked 3 days of mountain flying training with Jeanne MacPherson, a highly recommended instructor in Helena, Montana. Jeanne runs a flight instruction operation called Mountain Airdance when she's not busy flying the Governor around Montana in the state King Air. She specializes in aerobatics and back-country mountain flying, and her history as a previous Bonanza owner made her an ideal choice to help me learn the capabilities and limitations of my P35 Bonanza in the rugged mountain terrain west of Helena.

In planning the trip I wanted to do a lot of VFR sightseeing in order to avoid my typical "point-A-to-point-B" travel mentality. Turns out the Missouri River, which ends where it empties into the Mississippi at St. Louis is not only the longest river in the U.S., but its headwaters are only 30 miles from Helena Montana at a place aptly named Three Forks by the Lewis & Clark expedition. Perfect!

After packing our tent and camping gear in N61RP, my black lab co-pilot Coaster and I set out on Sunday August 5. After a brief weather warmup over the Smokies we skirted the busy St. Louis bravo airspace and first picked up the mighty Missouri on Monday just west of Sprit of St. Louis Airport near Washington, MO. We turned west and headed upstream.



*"We're going where?"*

Approaching Kansas City we again decided to avoid their bravo airspace so we skirted it to the northeast side and then ducked under the outer veils to re-intercept the Missouri on the north side of the city after it made its turn northwestward.



Our first overnight stop was planned just north of Kansas City at a small airport in Atchison, Kansas named for their most famous "native daughter". Amelia Earhart Field is described as her home airport and the place where the famous aviatrix started her flying career. Very welcoming locals swapped a few flying

adventure stories and then left the FBO office open for me to use the restroom and the recliner overnight. Good thing. A nasty squall line pushed through just before dark that had me scrambling to secure my tie-downs for threatened high winds and possible hail. The worst of the storms missed the field by a couple miles so by first light Tuesday morning Coaster and I were packed up and ready to continue northward up the Missouri.

We wound our way in beautiful VFR weather up the Missouri, skirted west of Omaha then cut west of Sioux City, Iowa for our daily fuel stop in the neat little community of Platte, SD (1D3). What a great spot!

The airport was deserted but a sign on the fence near the fuel pump directed me to call Mr. Dave Johnson for help with fueling. Dave promptly arrived from town and unlocked the fuel pump for me while Coaster and I stretched. He advised that no credit card reader had yet been approved by the Town Council so he'd have to take my check or cash for the fuel.



*Platte, SD (1D3)*

He added that he might be able to get the credit card reader approved soon since he was now serving as Platte's Mayor. He had locked up his office for a while to come out when he got the airport call. Not too busy in Platte apparently. We had a great time visiting while I finished fueling up, then Coaster and I loaded up and headed out for the afternoon leg of our journey after saying goodbye to a wonderful little slice of Americana in Platte, SD.

Our next overnight stop was planned for Mandan North Dakota, just across the river from Bismarck, but we had an important diversion to make on the way. We departed the river westbound over the Badlands of South Dakota--what appropriately named country! Very desolate and uninviting, as viewed from above anyway. When we reached the Rapid City area it was only a short leg from there to a sight that I just couldn't miss without at least a flyby. Mount Rushmore is very impressive, and the local ATC folks were happy to approve my flyby after helping me understand the vertical and horizontal proximity limits. I took a couple turns around the mountain from a few thousand feet away and then turned back northeast toward the river and our North Dakota overnight stop.



*Mount Rushmore*

Mandan North Dakota, just across the Missouri from the Capital Bismarck, is named for the local native American tribe and is described in their city motto as "Where the West Begins". The FBO at Y19 was terrific. The Manager made me feel right at home by showing me the kitchen, showers, and the full size rollaway couch. He then gave me the keys to the crew car and said good night. Terrific local hospitality. I spent the evening visiting with some of the local Air Tractor and Ag Cat crews who were servicing their aerial sprayers for the next day's missions over the farm lands of North Dakota.



The Missouri generally turns westward again in upper North Dakota, so when we left Mandan just after daylight Wednesday morning we started working our way across some beautiful but sparsely populated country not far below the Canadian border. We fueled up in Chinook Montana, stretched our legs then headed south to rejoin the river just west of the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument. I learned that the term “Missouri Breaks” originates with the steep and ragged scars carved through this wilderness landscape over time by the course of the mighty river. Really rugged territory—beautiful but again appropriately named.

From Great Falls on the eastern slope we headed across 5,600’ Rogers Pass into Lincoln Montana to set up camp before heading for Helena fresh the next morning. With 8-9,000’ peaks on either side and 10,000’ terrain looming in the distance, Rogers Pass is not high by local standards, but it sure did serve to remind me that I had indeed found the mountain flying that I had left Florida in search of.

Lincoln airport (S69) turned out to be the absolutely perfect place to set up camp. At 4,610’ msl, the single paved runway is bounded on the south side by the Blackfoot River. I was able to tie down in the grass next to the airport fence and walk an easy hundred yards or less to pitch our tent in a perfect campsite on a bluff above the river. Local airport tenant, “manager”, and all-around nice guy Jerry Cain could not possibly have been more welcoming and hospitable. After showing me his hangar and his beautiful airplane Jerry just tossed me the keys to his “airport car” and told me to use it if I needed to make a trip to town. He also showed me the bike shed on the field where he and the local pilots maintained 3 or 4 bicycles for use by airport visitors for local touring or the short ride into town.

We spent 4 nights tent camping at Lincoln Airport while commuting to Helena each day by Bonanza for our mountain flying lessons. Tough duty! The 35 mile hop to Helena took us over 6,100’ Flesher Pass and back down to the Missouri River valley. We would finish our 2-3 hour lessons in the morning which left plenty of time for local sightseeing. The fly fishing in the Blackfoot right below our campsite was terrific, even if the fish I managed to catch were pretty small. A side trip out of Helena one day included a boat tour of the ‘Gates of the Mountains’ scenic wilderness area first named by Lewis and Clark and later made famous in the widely acclaimed book Young Men and Fire by Norman MacLean about the tragic Mann Gulch Fire of 1949. It’s a really moving story by the author of A River Runs Through It.

My first day of mountain flying training covered lots of basics but also included a couple stops at fairly easy fields near Helena. The best stop of the day for me was my chance to fly a canyon approach and



*Lincoln Airport (S69)*



*Montana Camp on the Blackfoot River*

land at Three Forks Airport (9S5). We landed amidst the local glider activity at the airport which sits right in the confluence of the Jefferson, the Madison, and the Gallatin Rivers. These three rivers, all named by Lewis and Clark converge here in aptly named Three Forks to form what is considered the origin of the mighty Missouri River. My mission was complete! I had reached the headwaters less than a week after leaving the mouth of the longest river in the United States. I bet it took Lewis and Clark a little longer.



*Three Forks Montana Headwaters of the Missouri River*

During two more days of mountain flight training with Jeanne we visited several more spectacular backcountry strips up in the Bob Carr Wilderness Area. Even though the smoke from the numerous wildfires in the region was now beginning to be a problem, we found several areas and periods where the spectacular beauty of the terrain near and between these backcountry airports was apparent.

Most of these backcountry strips, many grass but some paved, originated as US Forest Service strips. Many are still partially maintained by the Forest Service, but often only with the encouragement and tremendous volunteer support of the local GA communities in Montana and Idaho. Locals have built and maintain campgrounds and outhouses at many of these fields for the convenience of pilots who wish to use them. Both Montana and Idaho have very active Backcountry Pilot's organizations that can also provide tremendous educational resources for pilots who wish to experience this beautiful part of our country with its unique and challenging aviation opportunities.



*The Bob Carr Wilderness Area, MT August*

So what is this "mountain flying training" all about anyway? Flying is flying, right? It doesn't matter what kind of ground you're flying over, right? Wrong! For any pilot, regardless of time or skill level, who hasn't trained and flown in and around high terrain I would strongly encourage a thorough course of training. Both ground based chalk talks and flight time with a proficient instructor who is familiar with local terrain are essential. Meteorological considerations are also an extremely important part of high terrain operations and a thorough understanding of the tremendously variable and diverse weather impacts is a must before any flight into the back country. The actual flight training consists of basic stick and rudder reviews with emphasis on slow flight configurations, turn rates and radii at different speeds, along with relatively advanced short and soft field takeoff and landing techniques. Tangible demonstrations of piston engine performance degradation brought on by high altitude operations are also best seen and felt to be



believed. You can read all you want about how your aircraft and engine will perform differently at high altitude grass strips, but nothing will make a believer of you like actually feeling it and experiencing it with someone who has properly prepared you for it.

Upon completion of our training, and after a couple nights' R&R in a local motel (with much needed laundromat next door) Coaster and I were ready to resume our travels west. We headed up the Flathead River Valley toward Kalispell before hopping across into Idaho and on up to Sand Point just forty-some miles from the Canadian Border.

By now the smoke from the seasonal wildfires had gotten so bad that most all flying was IFR and airborne sightseeing was pretty much shut down. We spent some time with friends in Idaho before making our way south and east through several more beautiful 'first-timer states'. If you happen to plan a sightseeing trip to the northwest, I will join the locals out there in telling you that earlier in the summer is better than late. By late July and August, for the last several years anyway, the numerous wildland fires throughout the region have created challenging flying conditions.

All in all our trip logged roughly 60 flight hours covering over 5,000 miles in thirteen days to stop in fourteen states, eight in which I had never landed before (the "first-timers"). We met some wonderful folks, saw some spectacular sights, and learned a lot about flying and about our beautiful United States of America. I truly count myself blessed to have been able to take such a trip and hope that this little story may help someone else pursue such a dream trip—large or small!



*Benchmark Airstrip (3U7) MT El.5,431*



*Seeley Lake, Montana*

