

# Westward Into The Fog

*Paul Berge's biplane Journey of Discovery from Ailerona, Iowa to Monterey, California (originally published in Antique Airfield Runway magazine)*

**L**ike blackened teeth in the lower jaw of a long dead titan, the mountain ridge northeast of El Paso, Texas blocked what I'd thought would be a shortcut to Carlsbad, New Mexico. But, whatever I'd thought in my former life before departing on this 4000-mile biplane ride rarely matched what the mountains and deserts viewed from an open cockpit had to teach. In short, there was no way I was getting over that ridge without a serious handshake from the ghost riders dancing among the craggy peaks.

It had begun two weeks earlier when I left Iowa in a Marquart Charger headed to Watsonville, California for its annual Memorial Day fly-in and spaghetti fest. I'd worked at that airport in the 1970s, and this was my first return flight. Doing so in a biplane seemed the perfect way to fly across both miles and time, only I didn't realize how broad both spectra were. The miles, I could measure on charts that ripped apart in the cockpit's wind, but above landscapes so wide the mind was sucked into unseen horizons that reworked all concepts of place and time.

Looking back, now, the journey plays out as a mind movie where the reels are run in no particular order—a mountain landing in Ruidoso, New Mexico with density altitude at 10,000 feet shares the screen with a hellish fire bog called Blyth, California where triple-digit heat on a deserted air field made me feel as though I'd flown off the planet and into a place where rattlesnakes complained about the heat.

Still, when all these disparate images are raked together, sorted, and laid end for end, the trip begins with a cool morning take-off from a small grass strip in Iowa and ends 45 flying

hours later on the same turf but with a changed pilot re-educated by a truly amazing biplane.

## About the Biplane

It's a Marquart Charger (MA-5) and was designed by Ed Marquart of Riverside, California's Flabob Airport and built 25 years ago by Dr. Roy C. Wicker of Quitman, Georgia. Not many were built over the years, perhaps a hundred, but at every stop on my trip, someone would slowly walk toward the biplane with that respectful I-think-

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*“The journey plays out as a mind movie where the reels are run in no particular order...”*

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I-recognize-it look.

“Is it a Skybolt?”

“Nope, Marquart Charger,” I'd answer while unbuckling the four-point harness and pulling myself out of the cockpit by the handles on the upper wing, a maneuver that, by itself, makes owning a biplane worthwhile.

“Marquette, huh?”

“No,” I'd say and swing first one leg then the other over the rim to climb down the wing. “Marquart—‘quart,’” and spell it out to drive the name deep into the stranger's consciousness. After that, I'd list the specs: “Four wings, four ailerons, two seats, but I'm using the front seat for baggage,” pointing to the metal lid with the compass on top covering the front cockpit.

“Aerobatic?”

“Yeah, but I'm lousy at it.

“What's it got for an engine?”

“Lycoming O-360,” and I'd pop the cowling open so heat rolled past us.

“Hundred and eighty horsepower, swinging a McCauley fixed-pitch prop.”

“Inverted fuel?”

“No.”

“Smoke system?”

“Only where oil leaks onto the exhaust.”

“Fast, is it?”

“For a biplane, sure, but speed's not the selling point. Cruises about a hundred and five knots at sixty-five percent power, faster if you wanna burn more gas, which since it uses hundred octane costing more than single-malt scotch, I don't always wanna do.”

“Burn about twelve gallons an hour?”

“More like ten, stop-to-stop,” I'd say. “Makes the math easy enough even for me.”

I've never liked math, so round numbers work best, and in round terms the Charger flies at Cessna 172 speeds—the old straight tails, not the stuffy new ones at a quarter mil each—while burning Cherokee 180 fuel rates with the advantage of having only half the Cherokee's range and load capabilities.

Advantage? Absolutely, because with a Charger you make lots of stops, and if you arrive in Lordsburg, New Mexico in a Cherokee no one walks through the ramp's furnace to ask you about your airplane. They don't stand beside it while their sneakers melt into the hot pavement and stare at the stacked wings laced together with shiny flying wires and bug-crusted struts. They don't ask the Cherokee drivers where they're from, are they mad, or what's it like to ride across the

sky with nothing above their brains but a coat of SPF 500 sunscreen and a canvas flying helmet?

When I landed in Kansas after dodging Toto-eating thunderstorms, the owner of a Hawker bizjet that'd landed behind me rushed over to circle the biplane in awe saying how much better it must be to see the world from my machine than from his kerosene tube-o-comfort. I offered to swap him even, but guys who own jets and wear dreamy dot.com smiles have more sense than biplane pilots like me who've been too long in the air and are in need of a bath, real food, and a clean rag to wipe the oil leaks dripping from the cowl.

He smiled, climbed into his jet, and ordered the two pilots up front to whoosh him back into his world where, no doubt, that night over white wine in Aspen he'd retell his friends about the gray-haired, smelly bi-winged bum he'd met in Kansas, "Pass the brie, please, Clarissa..." and

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**Below:** Thad Fenton (on left) and author (at cowling) in front of the EAA Chapter 119 hangar at Watsonville, Ca (WVI). (Photo by Curtis Kelly.)

the Marquart would fade from his memory.

For 25 years this Marquart—built from plans, no kits—has turned heads and brought smiles to flyers and non-believers alike. Ed Marquart apparently spent years designing what was for him the best of all biplanes, and I'd

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*“ Guys who own jets and wear dreamy dot.com smiles have more sense than biplane pilots like me... ”*

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say he got it right.

Walk around one and study the shapes. As your eyes pass the images to your brain you'll see a Great Lakes Trainer, or perhaps just a hint of Bucker in the swept wings. Many see a Steen Skybolt until the Charger owner explains how Rubinesque in the waist and tail Skybolts are by comparison.

Others see Starduster or Hatz—all gems in their own ways, but in the end this biplane with so many influences in its pedigree is a unique item—it's a

Marquart. It's a funny name to say (sounds like the Aflack duck clearing its throat), but it's a good biplane to fly.

Structurally, it's nothing exotic and that adds to its charm. Wood wings—spars and ribs—with a welded steel fuselage lined with aluminum stringers form its Lauren Bacall waistline above a tight tail, all covered in cotton and dope that's still tough after 25 hangared years. N645's US Navy paint scheme is a tribute to its builder's (Wicker) wartime career as a Naval Aviator.

The tail looks too small, and in that momentary transition from tail-high wheel landing to tail-down taxi, it feels briefly inadequate especially in crosswinds. While it wheel lands as sweetly as a Citabria, Aeronca Champ, or Cessna 140, it's easy to overreact to the turning tendencies at slow speeds—at least in this Charger, I can't speak for others.

Since I routinely operate from a 2200-foot grass strip in Iowa, the mile-long runways so common out West seemed like child's play, but at the higher density altitudes—routinely above 5000 feet—my touchdowns tended to be hard. Until I got the hang of higher altitude ops an embarrassing whiff of burning rubber accompanied each arrival. With faster touchdown groundspeeds and the lack of soft grass to correct my sloppy technique, landings were, well, *spirited* at times.

Where I've been used to a soft rumbling touchdown on dewy turf followed by a short roll as the tailwheel acted like a hook in the grass, the heat-soaked pavement in Benson, Arizona squealed as scrub raced past, runway lights threatened to clip the lower wing tips, and coyotes ran for the hills.

The temptation is to bring the tail down too soon, which simply increases the angle of attack, adds lift, and makes the arrival even squirrellier. Full-stall landings might be better, but, hell, I like wheel landing. The secret is to trust in Ed Marquart's design and allow the biplane to roll without too much pilot-induced interference. Properly rigged and aptly flown—



meaning don't get too aggressive—the Charger rolls straight. Thankfully, it has the old Goodyear brakes, which are so crappy there's little chance of aggravating the situation with amateurish braking.

Takeoffs can be a directional challenge, too, at high altitudes with full fuel and light winds. That little bit of extra runway needed before lift-off gives more exposure to stupidity (aka: Pilot Induced Stupidity Syndrome).

The trick is to feed the throttle in smoothly and anticipate the left-turning tendencies both from normal torque and p-factor as the power increases and from the gyroscopic left-turn tendency induced as the tail rises. Then, gently correct with the merest breath of right rudder while holding aileron against the crosswind—all basic stick-and-rudder technique used at sea level but magnified somewhat by heat, altitude, and the self-induced anxiety of knowing that a thousand miles from home is a dumb place to drag a wing tip.

The Marquart was never over gross even with two on board, and with many of its 180 horses available on take-off (assuming you lean properly), if all else fails just squeeze back on the stick to coax the whole bundle of wires, wings, and sweaty owner clear of the ground. Lower the nose into ground effect, and as the speed nudges 85 knots, climb away. Once clear of the taller cacti, oilrigs, and cowboy hats, a 95-knot climb gives descent cooling but never good forward visibility.

Although never over gross, the CG does shift aft with weight, which aids cruise speed but took all nose-down trim from the biplanes screw-jack trim system. While stalls in this swept-wing biplane are somewhat benign, practicing them at low altitude when fully loaded isn't advisable, so close attention to airspeed and coordination—as in any airplane—is a must in the pattern.

### Limiting Factors

The Marquart is blind over the nose to the rear seat pilot in command. My



beginner's tendency was to lower the nose too much for cruise. The result was a 200 foot-per-minute descent—good airspeed, but down you go.

Properly trimmed you won't see much past the cowling in level flight so occasional pitch dips or gentle banks are in order throughout cruise to spot traffic and TV towers. In a Cherokee or other traveling machine this might be considered a design flaw, but the biplane mind knows that straight-and-level is not a goal here. In fact, it's nearly impossible to travel more than two minutes without rolling left, then right, while tilting your head back to watch for Fokkers, or to gaze over the cockpit's rim in envy of the buzzards circling through nearby thermals.

The biplane's mission is to fly not to travel. Getting to a destination is a happy byproduct of the adventure. Before taking the biplane plunge you have to ask yourself, "Do you want to *get* somewhere or do you want to *be* somewhere?" In open-cockpit, you're always somewhere even though it might be nowhere near your intended destination. Time, somehow, loses its earthly grip in flight.

Still, my destination was northern California along the Monterey Bay, and en route I stopped in Van Nuys to pick up Curtis Kelly, a friend who's

**Above:** *The Marquart Charger on the ramp in the 100-degree heat at Benson, Az (E95).*

also a tailwheel pilot. From Van Nuys, where I'd irritated just about every air traffic controller with my microphone-in-the-wind voice, to Watsonville, Curtis rode in the front seat while I discovered how miserably windy it gets in the back when the front hole is open. The problem is the windshields.

A quick look at the two cockpits shows each with a windshield equal in size. Both were transplanted from a Ryan PT22—classy but that front screen generates hurricanes in the back. Picture the slipstream flowing along the fuselage when the front seat is buttoned up; it hits the rear screen and coils into space leaving the solo pilot grinning in relative calm. I can fly alone from the back seat wearing a baseball cap turned 'round and a pair of sunglasses without fear of losing either.

But when you open the front seat for guests and tack on the forward windshield things change. The wind now smacks the front glass, which, because it stands so tall, deflects the blast into the under side of the upper wing

where it ricochets down onto the rear pilot's head. The sensation is like losing an hour-long pillow fight. The front-seater, meanwhile, sits in comfort, confused why the guy behind him is so punch drunk on landing. The solution, I'm told, is to cut the front windshield down by a third to reduce that deflection. Since I can't bring myself to damage a 60-year-old airplane part, I'm having a smaller wind-

shield made from Lexan®. We'll see how that fits and report back. Either that or you'll see a Lexan windscreen for sale on e-Bay in a month.

Despite the backseat pummeling, I found that by wearing goggles throughout the flight with a front seat passenger I could survive with only minor brain damage, which my neurologist assures me isn't permanent...isn't permanent...isn't

per...*(Thwack!)*.

I'm fine, really.

Engine heat was another issue even before the journey. With the Lycoming turning money into power, a lot of heat needs to escape and usually through the firewall and into the fuselage, where with the front cockpit sealed shut, it quickly flows to the rear seat to cook the pilot's feet. Being open cockpit does nothing to cool

## The Good, The Bad, The Hotter 'n Hell Stops

*When planning your next vacation trip don't ask me for help, because I can't draw a straight line let alone follow one. Over two weeks and 45 biplaning hours, we covered roughly 4000 miles from Indianola, Iowa (IA66) to Watsonville, California (WVI) and back again. Along the way, I smoked the tires at 34 different airports, several of which I visited twice. Some stand out as excellent stops while a few have already faded into heat-soaked blurs. Lordsburg, New Mexico, for instance, conjures wavy images of crushing heat and the sudden appearance of Border Patrol wagons full of temporary visitors about to be processed back to Mexico. All in all, a depressing stop.*

*The route from Iowa wandered south to Lubbock, Texas taking advantage of a slot of clear air between two cold fronts. Lubbock (LBB) Airport is about the size of Delaware and home to the WWII Glider Pilots Museum next door to Aero Lubbock, a descent FBO that—oddly—doesn't allow you to camp overnight on its couch.*

*From Lubbock we pushed west at dawn into New Mexico. It was cool on the ground and had I stayed low I could've enjoyed a smooth ride all the way to Lovington. Instead I climbed into the inversion layer of heat. When descending back into Lovington 100 mile later, I discovered the mistake and stayed low for the next leg to Roswell where aliens*

*invited me into their mother ship for refreshments and what I thought were rather probing questions. I refueled, gawked at the dozens of ghost airliners parked nose to tailpipe on the ramp awaiting the guillotine, and launched in the late morning heat for the high country where up the mountains west of Roswell is Ruidoso, New Mexico. The name means "Noisy River," not terribly clever but a pleasant enough tourist trap with a great airport at the 6800-foot level. The temperature was in the 80s making the density altitude 9600 feet, my highest density altitude operation of the trip. The biplane handled it fine, both landing and the cool morning departure the next day.*

*The short trip from Ruidoso to Alamogordo was marked by contrast. At Sierra Blanca the air was cool, the scenery stunning with snowy mountain peaks and rolling forests—most of which catch fire each summer to clean out all the mansions built over the winter. Drifting down the slopes toward Alamogordo, the land turns dry again with the White Sands moon-scape and missile range stretched out as far as I could see to the west. At Alamogordo I asked advice about heading to El Paso and was told, "Stay close to Highway 54 and you won't get shot down in the restricted areas that straddle the highway for 70 miles."*

*Next stop, Dona Ana County*

*(5T6) west of El Paso with 8500 feet of wide runway. From there Interstate 10 shoots north than west, so we took a shortcut along a railroad toward Deming, New Mexico. Fuel status was good, and we pushed on to Lordsburg, arriving in time for the border festival. Then, off to Benson, Arizona, where it was so miserably hot ("But a dry heat") that we spent the night. The Benson FBO was great. They loaned me a van to head into town and the next morning I returned it to depart at dawn when the desert is beautiful, and all the scorpions and snakes are too tired from a night of eating each other to pester you too much.*

*Casa Grande (CGZ) is a must for any AAA member. Not because the airport is exceptional—it's nice enough and has some cool airplanes—but just because the people are, well, they're some of us. In particular, there's a small shop near the self-serve pumps run by a mechanic named Sonny. I think he's been there since Goldwater bought the land from Spain and was tremendously helpful clearing up a plug-fouling problem. The problem was I wasn't leaning properly. I was leaning like a wimpy Easterner, and in the hot highlands the Lycoming demands aggressive leaning as soon as the engine starts.*

*From Casa Grande I attempted to fly direct to Buckeye, Arizona (BXX) with radar service through the*

**(continued on next page)**



things below the belt. In fact, the open cockpit acts like a chimney drawing heat onto the pilot. A pair of NACA vents at thigh level brings in some air, but still the heat persists, and knowing I'd be headed to places named Death-By-Heatstroke, Arizona, I cut two vents into the boot cowling and padded the firewall on the passenger side. The results were good; heat was greatly reduced. Still, near the surface on scorching days it's bloody hot in any airplane.

Sadly, in winter that heat isn't there, so you'll freeze your butt in the Marquart in January. Its detachable bubble canopy helps on sunny winter days, but the key word is detachable. On a particularly cold morning I tried to taxi with the bubble canopy par-

tially latched only to discover how easily it becomes detached from the airframe, taking rivets, eye-glasses, and my choicest swear words with it.

All the comfort issues from wind and heat were minor and in no way overrode the tremendous joy this open-cockpit biplane offers. I've been flying and teaching in tailwheelers such as Champs and Citabrias for years, but the step into the biplane life unlatches and demands a whole new appreciation of the sky.

Biplanes are made for grass, but the Marquart mixes well with the big stuff. Returning to Van Nuys from Camarillo, the tower growled at me to



**Above:** Pilots Curtis Kelly (left) and Paul Berge pre-departure mug shots at Van Nuys, Ca. (VNY). (Photo by Stephanie of Hollywood.)

proceed direct to the end of the runway and keep my speed up because

*Phoenix Class B airspace, but Phoenix Approach was highly uncooperative, so I flew west of the Sierra Estrella range and into Buckeye, which is infested with gyrocopters. No FBO, but self-serve 100LL was available and I was soon headed to my favorite desert vacation spot of all—Blyth, California, elevation 397 feet MSL and located equidistance between nowhere and nothing.*

*This is one bleak place where you don't want to land after the FBO closes, because even the gila monsters won't talk to you. I fueled there in late morning on the way to Van Nuys, and it was a good enough stop for fuel, ice cream, and running water. But on the return trip, I touched down at 5:30 PM, thirty minutes after the FBO had locked up and left. The place was deserted and miserably hot without much shade—a truly dangerous place to linger. There's no outside phone, no water, and nobody within survivable walking distance.*

*Luckily, my cell phone worked and a less-than-enthusiastic motelier picked me up. Blyth, too, was a WWII military field and still retains traces of the old ramps and hangars. Strangely, the city built a sprawling power plant off the end of runway 8*

*when they had the entire desert to put it elsewhere.*

*From Blyth we crossed Palm Springs to land at Banning Airport (BNG) in the Banning Pass where the wind always blows straight down runway 27. Little traffic for an airport so near to L.A., but the FBO was friendly and I refueled and launched for the final leg into Van Nuys, where I displayed to all on several ATC frequencies just how little I knew about southern California landmarks by remarking to tower that there was no way I could tell the Ventura Freeway from the Four-O-Five, at which point he sighed and asked me to make a short approach to get out of his hair. Marquarts can make short approaches, so honor was saved, and we taxied to Million Air, which to my surprise, was one the best FBOs of the entire trip. No doubt, they mistook me for Harrison Ford, because although I bought only ten gallons of gas they gave me a free covered tie down spot and let me use the indoor plumbing. Way better than Blyth.*

*Other good stops on the trip included: Camarillo and Paso Robles, California. The former (CMA) has a great café and loads of war birds; the latter (PRB) has pretty scenery and great wines within tasting distance.*

*Watsonville has a good Mexican restaurant (Zunigas) on the field. Guymon, Oklahoma (GUY) was an unplanned escape from fog but turned out to be a terrific airport with a smattering of Beech 18s and a DC-3 on the ramp. There's also a good Mexican restaurant in tow. Another fog stop was Marysville, Missouri (EVU) run by Kevin Rankin, who bent over backwards to help.*

*The cheapest avgas en route was at Lovington (E06), a skid mark of a town in the New Mexico oil fields. A former TWA pilot who doesn't fly anymore but does his best to keep the rest of us aloft runs the airport.*

*My favorite airport of all, though, was Hooker, Oklahoma (O45). No FBO, no traffic, but a great name for their local baseball team: "The Horny Toad Hookers."*

*You don't learn things like this filing IFR in a Cessna 210; real vacation gems only come from taildraggin' around in an open cockpit biplane looking for a place to refuel, grab a cheap meal, and skirt whatever weather, mountains, or government-restricted airspace threatens ahead. Just don't call me if Hooker doesn't live up to your expectations.*

a jet was to follow. Debates over shock-cooling aside, the Marquart can give ATC good climb and descent rates and a decent speed to short final, where with power back you gently lift the nose to bleed off speed to make the runway and a reasonable turn-off.

Several times when wheel landing at towered airports, I had to ignore controllers asking me to make a turn-off while the tail was still in the air. Landing at Salina, Kansas, for instance, the tower controller—swamped with two airplanes—harped at me to make the first intersection, but with one wheel barely on the ground at that point, I ignored him (I'd been a controller for 17 years, so I know how to ignore authority). When he repeated the request and told me to "expedite my taxi," I lowered the tailwheel and politely explained that unless he wanted to call the wrecker, I'd need to be a little more cautious in ground ops.

Inexperienced line personnel exhibit a similar lack of understanding

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**Below:** *Guymon, Oklahoma (GUY). An unplanned stop for thunderstorms and fog turned out to be one of the best.*



when directing tailwheel airplanes into tie-downs. They'll signal me to a spot and then wave at me to taxi directly toward them until I can no longer see their arms. They get the message and step aside when the spinning prop keeps coming despite their signals to stop.

### Endurance

The Marquart Charger, like many biplanes, isn't known for its range. It's designed to run about the sky on pretty days having fun. Cross-country trips are best planned with the knowledge that you'll make lots of stops.

The Charger holds 28 gallons, 27 of which are usable, divided among

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*“ I followed a highway across a vast expanse of dryness leading to Carlsbad, New Mexico ”*

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three tanks. The main holds 17 gallons in the fuselage forward of the front cockpit. It has an electric fuel

gauge on the rear instrument panel and is accurate to within 15 gallons. Two five-gallon aux tanks are in the top wing. Each tank has a tiny filler neck, so the airplane was regularly flushed clean with avgas at each refueling. Reaching the upper tanks is an awkward balancing act when standing on a stepladder's warning placard: *Do Not Sit Or Stand...*

With 27 gallons burned at ten gallons per hour, the Charger gets roughly two-and-a-half hours range if you don't mind landing in the desert. I planned one to one-and-a-half-hour legs, netting from 100 to 200 miles depending on winds.

Drinking bottled water en route assured that I wouldn't be tempted to stretch that, although, over Santa Barbara when that extra cup of morning coffee called ready to leave, I seriously considered standing up to relieve myself while Curtis flew.

The fuel selector is located in the rear cockpit. I'd normally take off on the main tank, climb, and then level off and set power and mixture. Then, I'd switch to aux and hit the timer. Fifty minutes later—about one hour into the flight—I'd switch back to main where I knew I had at least an hour left plus a few gallons sloshing around in the upstairs tank. The longest leg I flew on this trip was 1:40.

I did run a tank dry over the Oklahoma panhandle. It's surprisingly easy to do when you're not paying attention and, instead, staring at a wind turbine farm below. The sound of coughing silence, however, gets the message across and with boost pump on it was only a few agonizing seconds before the engine growled back to life. A few more and my heart did the same.

### The Route

Headed across country you're going to cross mountains at some point. I chose the southern route for several reasons, but mainly because in years past I'd flown two northerly routes via Interstate 80 and even further north along Interstate 90 through Missoula,

Montana. Foul weather blocked these routes for the entire time.

The southerly route from Lubbock, Texas (home of the WWII Glider Pilots Museum) through El Paso, Lordsburg, Benson, Arizona, Tucson, Phoenix, Palm Springs, Banning, and across Los Angeles offered lots of fuel stops, easy-to-follow Interstate 10 (a comfort if the engine quit), plus lower terrain when compared to routes through Wyoming or even via Albuquerque along the old Route 66. High temperatures were a concern but just a few thousand feet above most terrain the air was smooth, and wearing tee shirt, shorts, and cloth helmet I was comfortable.

The scenery from up there was mind bogglingly stark yet beautiful, and I'll admit at times it felt intimidating since I was used to lush green Iowa. I carried lots of water but I'd made the mistake of not drinking regularly on the first legs and found myself dehydrated—a syndrome that's not automatically recognized but easily prevented.

## Unto the Maw

So, somewhere northeast of El Paso, Texas, after a week and a half in the Marquart Charger, I followed a highway across a vast expanse of dryness leading to Carlsbad, New Mexico my next fuel stop. On the map, the road bowed to the right but looking around the biplane's nose I saw a wide valley dotted with green circles from pivot-point irrigation.

The desert literally bloomed through here and beacons for me to shave a few miles off my safety route along the highway and go direct. I veered away from the concrete ribbon and felt good following the lily pads across this sea of brown. To my right was a giant salt flat, a place that would drain all traces of moisture from any ill-fated traveler who landed there. To my left were miles of a New Mexico that routinely ate up conquistadors, silver prospectors, and Iowa lame brains like me with no respect for its

harsh immensity and our own insignificance. Ahead, the lily pads quit at the base of a mountain ridge where at the south end the blackened teeth of the long dead titan offered a foreboding specter. I checked the gas gauge and timers knowing I had plenty of fuel, especially with the tailwind, but the closer I came to the hills, the louder the ghost riders laughed until the lily pads disappeared and I saw I'd need to climb even higher to cross the last few dozen miles of earth that looked as though it hadn't softened since whatever volcanic heave that created it had cooled millions of years before. And it was then I chickened out and turned toward the highway I'd abandoned miles back.

Green gave way to salt flats and then climbed into the rugged teeth of a ridge that loomed well above my head poking out from my tiny biplane shell. The wind pushed me along at groundspeeds over 150 knots, amazing for a boxy old pile of cotton, wood, and wire.

As I paralleled the ridge headed for the left turn that would reconnect me with the relative comfort of the highway the thought dawned that whatever wind pushed me so smoothly along this ridge would likely prove amusing when I made the turn to the leeward side. It was then the ghost riders laughed, and the wind hooked me around the mountain's point like a scrap of litter swirling down a storm drain. Still smooth, the air seemed to reach a giant enveloping arm that turned me over the highway, and as I accepted the shove I felt the biplane sink—and not just a little.

The VSI pointed down 500 feet per minute and I cracked the throttle, which only amused the mountain, as the winds now tumbled in a wave across the ridge and sat like a crushingly soft weight on the biplane.



*Above: Lost in time (and in what few thoughts might be had) somewhere over California's Salinas Valley. (photo by Curtis Kelly)*

No lenticular clouds, no dust, no mobile homes swirling past, just a blue sky dying over me, taking me toward the desert floor despite the biplane's now full power climb and prayerful utterances from the cockpit.

Finally, when the ghost riders were fully amused and I'd turned to the safety of the flat lands to my right, the sky seemed to wink, as in, "Got yer attention, now, didn't we?" And I nodded politely toward the toothy ridge, giving a quick salute from a sweaty palm, and said, "Hey, I'm just learning." And the mountain let me, and the biplane, pass.

It would be three more days of dodging Kansas thunderstorms, scud running beneath foggy decks, and turning back when I was only 30 miles from home before the journey decided I'd learned enough...

For now.

*The End*

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