

Never Again Online: Chain of events

By Kirk Fowler

June 24, 1967. It was a CAVU morning and the delight of any pilot planning a cross-country trip. Mine was to be from Moline, Illinois, to Bartlesville, Oklahoma, where I would meet my mother to help her move to Tucson, Arizona. A quick check of current and forecast weather across Missouri and into northeast Oklahoma showed generally clear conditions with the possibility of afternoon scattered thunderstorms across central Missouri.

I planned to be airborne by noon and at my destination by mid-afternoon. The trip in the Mooney would be less than three hours, with a comfortable one hour and 20 minutes of fuel remaining. This excursion would be an uneventful delight. Little did I know.

Work at the office took longer than planned, and my departure was delayed three hours. Not a major problem until I checked the weather. The briefer pointed out a line of severe thunderstorms running from Springfield, Missouri, to Chicago. However, after thumbing through the teletype weather reports I received good news: There was an opening in the line of thunderstorms between Quincy and Peoria, Illinois. Flying due south to St. Louis would allow me to pass safely south of the squall line and travel west to Oklahoma across southern Missouri.

The Mooney's key was missing, and it took another half-hour to locate and retrieve a spare key from the flying club. After a final weather check I was relieved to be in the air at last heading south. My relief was short-lived. Twenty minutes into the flight I spotted a thunderhead ahead across my route. It appeared to be an isolated air mass thunderstorm, and I decided to circumnavigate it to the east.

I was about to call the Springfield Flight Service Station (FSS) when an Ozark DC-3 captain provided a pilot report: Conditions appeared to be clear down to St. Louis. I reached St. Louis with only a minor deviation and picked up a southwesterly heading. Since the heavy clouds of the squall line had been pushing me farther south than anticipated, I decided to recheck the weather with St. Louis FSS. While southern Missouri and northern Arkansas were to be generally clear, there was a probability of rain showers and thunderstorms, stringing out in a north-south line.

Sure enough! Before long, the line showed up ahead of me. After rechecking fuel I decided to fly south along the weather line to see if there were any holes. Soon, I spotted sunlight between the darker areas of heavy rain. Was this a sucker hole or an opening that would allow me to complete my flight? I decided to probe, while I was prepared to do a one-eighty. To my relief I found severe clear on the other side. Fuel was getting low, and I selected Monett, Missouri, as a fuel stop. With Monett in sight one of the two fuel tanks went dry. I calculated that I had about 45 minutes left in the other tank.

I landed and taxied up to the fuel pump in the pink afterglow of the sunset. No one was around, but the sign on the fuel shack door listed a telephone number to call for after-hours fueling. There would be a \$15 call-out charge. What to do? Joplin had all-night fuel service and was only 35 miles to the northwest. My estimate of fuel was about 40 minutes, enough for a 25-minute reserve — or so I thought.

Now it was deep dusk with the moon not yet visible. I set the VOR to Joplin and took off. Instead of paying attention to the VOR, I oriented the aircraft on the highway that I thought led to Joplin — numerous auto lights illuminated it. After about 10 minutes I realized that the city lights ahead couldn't possibly be Joplin's. Had the VOR receiver gone bad? I forced myself to trust the VOR even though it showed Joplin almost due north. I concluded that I had picked the wrong highway and was headed to Neosho. Ten minutes later I was on a long final approach into Joplin. It was dark because of a cloud overhead and dark woods underneath. and I was relieved to see the approach lights only a mile or so away.

Suddenly, I was in a rain shower that obscured the approach path. I was concerned that I possibly didn't have enough fuel to make a safe go-around, so I guided the aircraft to a safe landing by looking out of the side window. Filling the fuel tanks showed that I had only 10 minutes left until flying on fumes.

As I completed my final leg to Bartlesville under a moonlit sky, I contemplated how this chain of events and decisions might have led to an accident. Although the delayed departure had not really caused me to be alarmed, it had adversely affected my flight; the diversions to avoid weather had nearly depleted my fuel reserves. I should have refueled at Monett and should not have worried about paying extra for the fuel call-out. My mistrust of the VOR added to my dilemma. I've learned to adequately plan fuel reserves and fuel stops and not push beyond my safety limits.

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