

A Hundred Things

by Bryan Quickmire

A North Dakota Gust

The sun says goodnight in orange and indigo as it pulls the blanket of black from overhead to the horizon. The magical colours remind me of the legend of the Indian Paintbrush. Eight Zulu Alpha is stunning under the ramp lights. The white Zlin's curvaceous yellow and blue stripes exactly match the shades of the flag of Sweden, where the airplane spent the first five hundred hours of its life.

Now I'm delivering the 242L to a farm in North Dakota. There it will serve the pleasure of Jake Gust, soybean grower and the new owner. Jake will treat Eight Zulu Alpha right, I could tell by his smile as we did aerobatics over Georgian Bay last weekend.

The VFR trip from Barrie, Ontario is about a thousand miles, including the detour for customs formalities here at Port Huron, Michigan. A couple of miles east, the Saint Clair River acts as a drain at the bottom of Lake Huron, and separates us from Sarnia, Ontario.

As I strap in, passing pilots stop to stare, some peeking in the cockpit. This is obviously no Cherokee and the long sticks, purposeful panel and guarded switch banks give the Zlin a fighter-like air. I slide the canopy open to answer questions.

We launch off runway four and angle left, taking a northwesterly heading into the blackness. Lansing Radio activates the flight plan. Level a mile high, I point Eight Zulu Alpha south for a time to enjoy the lights of Detroit, then head back on course. A little while later, Flint glows off the left wing. It's not as impressive as Detroit but the night does have a way of magnifying charms.

A pilot somewhere over Michigan tells Saginaw Approach about the great seafood buffet at the local Holiday Inn. Their voices are so clear it's tempting to imagine they're right here in the cockpit.

By and large though, the airwaves are silent. There's a barely discernible purr from the engine and a low whooshing sound from the airframe parting the atmosphere. It's all quite serene.

The Zlin requires only an occasional gentle reminder to stay on course. The horizon is no longer visible. It's existence is suggested by the colour of the twinkling lights: sodium yellow from the earth and pure white from the stars.

I turn the panel lights down low, take my hands and feet off the controls, and lean my head way back. The Zlin continues along straight and level as I gaze through the bubble canopy at the Milky Way.

Ahead lies Lake Michigan. The Lycoming up front has a marvelous track record for reliability, and presents none of the irregular sounds single engine airplanes are wont to make in the dark or over water. Fifty miles is a significant amount of water though and I have a policy of taking no chances of going for a swim in the dark. We'll be landing at Traverse City, Michigan to remain overnight and will cross the pond in daylight.

The ATIS says the active runway is 28. The only traffic is a Mitsubishi climbing out so I ask the tower for runway 36 which has a Visual Approach Slope Indicator. This is one of those airports that's hard to spot from afar at night. We end up on a high, close right base. Full flaps get us down in plenty of time for a stabilized approach on the glide slope.

The tower seems enchanted by this unusual visitor and offers vectors to the general aviation ramp. The fuel truck rumbles over. Linemen full of questions surround the Zlin. Does it do aerobatics? Yes. Can it do tailslides? Yes. Could we unload your bags and drive you to your hotel? Yes.

In the morning we go feet wet over Lake Michigan at 10,500 feet. The swells and whitecaps are visible even from this height. The scan for traffic includes boats to use as targets in the unlikely event a ditching is required.

The clouds start at the western shore of the great lake. I elect to stay at 10.5 because it's clear, mostly smooth and the winds are less uncooperative than down below. The passage over Wisconsin alternates between being under an overcast and over an undercast. The foliage, when visible, is hinting at a splendid spectacular coming soon.

Nearing the planned pit stop, we have tons of fuel, my seat is very comfortable and nature hasn't called. Green Bay Radio is advised we're going to continue on to the last chance for gas in Wisconsin - Burnett County Airport.

This place, for a variety of reasons, reminds me of Pecos, Texas. One of those reasons is that I was once trapped in Pecos by weather, which could well happen here today.

The direct route to Fargo is blocked by a trough with marginal VFR ceilings and visibilities in rain, plus definitely non-VFR conditions caused by Level 3 cells. In an ideal world I would simply drink coffee here for a few hours until the weather passes.

In the real world though, what's left of Hurricane Nora is bearing down on Fargo with even worse conditions, plus 50 knot winds. A delay here could cost a day or two! The weather seems relatively predictable, not inclined to worsen rapidly. There are lots of escape alternatives. I decide to go take a look.

The plan is to detour north up the face of the system, making forays west when possible. If I can't get through or around without acquiring too many new gray hairs, there's a decent shot at making Duluth, Minnesota, a more appealing place to be holed up than Burnett County! If that doesn't work there's plenty of little airstrips to park the plane.

Eight Zulu Alpha has triple redundant navigation capability: GPS, VOR and ADF. I have my Garmin GPS 90, with fresh batteries, strapped to left thigh and a chart strapped to right. Getting lost isn't a worry!

Airborne, looking down the course line, there's an ugly mess. Execute Plan A! With five hours in the tanks at max cruise we can do a lot of detouring! The southerly flow boosts the ground speed to 140 knots.

We weave through the weather, keeping to the light areas, avoiding the dark areas, darting from airstrip to airstrip, always able to return to the last runway if the path ahead is blocked. Rain streams back along the canopy. There's just enough ceiling and visibility to minimize the worry of flying into an immovable object.

Ahead, to the right of a rather inky spot, is an exceptionally bright area. We pop out the back of the system into the clear!

Another decision is required now. This clear area does not extend very far before a low overcast deck dominates. The murkiness beneath the clouds is less than appealing so we climb up on top. At altitude, Flight Service confirms that Fargo does indeed still have clear skies, so we have at most a hundred and a half miles of VFR On Top.

The sunlight is brilliant, especially compared to the gray world from which we just emerged blinking. The intensity in the cockpit since takeoff would have been palpable to an outside observer. Now, over the whitest cloud deck beneath the bluest sky through the clearest air, life is so good!

Only a hundred miles later the cloud deck ends and we continue motoring along enjoying the beauty of sunlit western Minnesota, aptly named the land of 10,000 lakes.

The ultimate destination of this cross-country is a piece of grass on a farm just the other side of Fargo, North Dakota. The strip isn't shown on any chart however Jake has assured me that ATC will help me find him. I'm a bit

dubious but we're almost there and it's time to try! "Fargo Approach, Zlin November Eight Zulu Alpha."

"Zlin Eight Zulu Alpha, Fargo Approach."

"Eight Zulu Alpha is two five east at six point five squawking VFR. We have Juliette and, ah, we're landing at Jake's strip and would appreciate vectors if you're able."

"Zlin Eight Zulu Alpha, we can do that! Squawk zero three one five. Maintain at or above four thousand for traffic."

"Zero three one five and at or above four. Eight Zulu Alpha, thanks."

"Zlin Eight Zulu Alpha, cancel the altitude restriction. Jake's is twelve miles at twelve o'clock." Interestingly enough, it's also twelve noon local time.

"North West 400, Fargo Approach. Cleared for the visual. Remain well clear of Jake's." I didn't realize this guy was famous! I wonder if Jake's gets more traffic than the International?

"Zlin Eight Zulu Alpha, Jake's is straight in front of you. Contact Tower on one one eight point six. Have a good day."

"Tower on eighteen six. Thanks and have a good one! Eight Zulu Alpha."

"Fargo Tower, Zlin Eight Zulu Alpha is with you descending through two point eight."

"Zlin Eight Zulu Alpha, Jake's is dead ahead, just the other side of the airport."

I'm aiming for a spot one mile north of a point four miles west of the airport, looking for a rectangle of grass. Here in farm country there's a lot of rectangles to confuse the issue! That one ahead looks promising. Let's see: a treed homestead site, on the east side of the grass, with two houses, and outbuildings which could be hangars. That's it!

The green grass runway is almost fluorescent in the middle of a large field of brown stubble, which was soybeans until a recent attack by a ravenous combine harvester!

"Fargo Tower, Eight Zulu Alpha has Jake's in sight. Thanks!"

"Eight Zulu Alpha, no sweat! Squawk one two zero zero, frequency change approved."

I position the Zlin for a left 270 overhead approach and get the airplane prepped: Fuel Selector to Both; Fuel Pump On; Prop to Max. It's kinda bouncy down here, better cinch the straps in a bit tighter! I leave the throttle at 25 inches and keep the nose coming around until rolling out on short final.

Clearly, at a strange grass strip it would be prudent to do an "inspection pass"! Throttle full forward, cowl flap open, we level out over the grass at a high rate of knots. Stick back, then to the right, and we zoom effortlessly up and

over, tilting our wings in greeting, leveling out on close downwind. This is such a nice airplane!

Throttle back, cowl flap closed, I roll into a 180 and get the speed below 100 knots to drop first half flaps, then full flaps. The windsock is, of course, in a horizontal position at ninety degrees to the strip. A good sized crab is required to maintain the lineup. Just shy of touchdown a gust sends us back up. A gust chez Gust - Nora is looming! I add a bit of power and fly back down to the flare. Touchdown! Retract the flaps to plant the wheels!

The Zlin has landed, a thousand miles from Barrie, in Jake's back yard!

Eight Zulu Alpha has found its new home. Jake Gust is half Czech - I'm sure the two of them will get along famously!