

# A Hundred Things

by Bryan Quickmire

## Holed Up In Pecos

*It's New Year's Eve. My yellow biplane Two Whiskey Mike and I are racing the sun westward. The sun is winning. After four days we're only slightly more than half way from Boston to San Diego.*

We've just been aground in Texarkana for 42 hours, trapped first by rain then by fog. The forecast never got bad enough to give up on flying and go do something else. The weather however never got good enough to attempt a take-off.

I checked in and out of the same room twice, hung out in the hangar polishing Two Whiskey Mike and pattering around, and logged at least 20 hours watching the weather channel, checking the radar display and talking to Flight Service. I was beginning to think I'd have time to get a job, buy a pickup, raise a family.

Long VFR crosscountries have a hurry up and wait aspect that the pilot has to accept. Some days you spend eight or ten hours in the air, some days you never get off the ground. The weather is king.

This afternoon the fog parted over the airport and I scrambled. Special VFR clearance in hand we spiraled up directly above the runway. Thirty minutes of VFR-On-Top later and the fog became clouds, then haze, then clear air occupied only by eagles, blackbirds, ducks and geese.

We passed abeam Dallas. Going through the TCA I tuned in the Cowboy VOR, just for fun. After two nights in Texarkana it's amazing how easily I'm entertained. It got positively hot, probably seventy degrees. Jacket, sweater and gloves were shed while refueling in Stephenville.

We should be 400 miles north, on the great circle course, but the weather in the middle of the continent has been appalling for days. Our track has taken us down the Atlantic seaboard then over the Alleghenies and across Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, and Arkansas. The current plan is to head west through Texas and then along the Mexican border through New Mexico, Arizona and California.

Now, passing 15 miles south of Abilene, the terrain starts to rise. The elevation shading on the map goes from light green to dark green to beige to sand. Soon it will be shades of brown and burnt orange. Charts of

mountainous areas are works of art, almost three dimensional, helping the reader visualize the vertical real estate.

The farmlands fall behind, the oil fields of West Texas are below. Black and blue and orange rocking horse pumps dip their heads to drink from the wells. It's barren, desert and scrub, crisscrossed by pipelines, spotted by deer hunters' towers. Three horses cavort without riders. A jeep leaves a mile long dust trail backlit by the setting sun.

Midland comes into view, silhouetted against the orange sky. The sun disappears below the horizon before I put Two Whiskey Mike on the runway. The clouds above are ablaze, a brilliant band of yellow crosses the western horizon.

Everyone's rushing off to New Year's Eve parties. Two Whiskey Mike goes in the hangar and the FBO tosses me the keys to the hospitality car. Outside a dark blue four door sedan awaits, a carbon copy of the loaner in Texarkana. This vehicle would easily accommodate six pro linebackers.

Okay, let's go see what there is to do. Check in a motel and hit the streets. Pffit! Pflup, pflup, pflup. Aha, that's what I'll do, change a flat tire. The dinky little spare leaves the car canted at a bizarre angle. Let's go see if we can get a tire fixed in Midland on New Year's Eve. Nope.

Eventually I end up a few miles down the road at a truck stop in Odessa. No mechanic here either. After an appetizer of chips and salsa followed by a main course of chili con carne, I nurse my Coke and people watch for a while. It's not exactly Times Square. Then I steer the listing barge back to the motel and fall asleep channel surfing for reruns of Guy Lombardo and his Royal Canadians.

An hour before the first dawn of the new year I look out the window. No sign of stars. Flight Service says Midland is VFR right now but won't be for long. Big storm enroute. Never give up. Pack and check out. On the way to the airport the snow starts to fall lightly.

A helicopter pilot says if you can see the water tower over yonder it's still VFR. Pilots are of necessity optimists. I take Two Whiskey Mike out of the hangar, fill the tank, load up, strap in. The snow's heavier but I can still see the water tower. My hand poises to hit Start. My brain asks the \$64,000 question: "Why are you doing

this?" The hand drops. Pilots are of necessity realists. Undo the straps, unload, push back into the hangar.

A Cessna departs for Houston IFR, I feel concerned for his passengers. More hours of watching the weather channel, checking the radar and calling Flight Service. A pipeline patrol pilot shares the wait. He majors his engine every 2,000 hours, which occurs every ten months or so. Guess he doesn't have any duty time limitations. He's agonizing over whether to wait here in case the weather miraculously improves or go home to watch football. Football wins.

I give up too. The FBO tosses me the keys to their backup loaner, another dark blue four door sedan, and I head over to the Confederate Air Force Museum. The storm shut down the airlines, dumped ice all over Dallas and eventually pummeled New England.

An hour before the second dawn of the new year I look out the window. This time there are stars. It's bitterly cold, there's ice everywhere. Flight Service says Midland is clear but there's weather headed this way, ETA soon.

El Paso, the obvious next major place to head, has a four hundred foot ceiling and a half mile visibility in snow and fog. The wind is gusting to thirty. The other little problem is that it's right at the limit of the Skybolt's range, with no refueling opportunities on the direct route. Arcing north through Carlsbad would mean crossing the Guadalupe Mountains where there are no decent passes.

Swinging south through Van Horn looks better. There are several airports with fuel. On average, the terrain's lower and there are lots of creative ways around or through mountain obscuration. As well, the interstate follows this path so in a real pinch it's available for navigation, or landing. The plan is to head this way until we hit the weather, then land and wait for it to pass over.

Two Whiskey Mike is unhappy about spending 2 nights in an unheated hangar and refuses to start. Fuddle-duddle! Back inside we go, unbutton the cowling and use giant Bunsen burners with fans to bath the Lycoming in hot air. Finally the engine fires and I taxi the taildragger gingerly over the icy surfaces in the gusty wind. We'll be much safer airborne! Two of the three runways are still closed. It's overcast as we climb out and head west helped by wind on the tail.

We pass Rattlesnake Bomber Base, twin 12,000 foot runways and huge ramp long since abandoned. A half a century ago the Enola Gay was stationed here before its historic trip to Japan. The visibility's not bad if I stay out of the snow. There's something incongruous about dodging snow showers while flying over sand dunes.

We cross the Pecos River. This tributary of the Rio Grande has seen more than the usual share of arrows and bullets, wagon trains and stagecoaches, cattle drives and outlaws. Out here, west of the Pecos, Judge Roy Bean was the law. The original hanging judge made the rules as and when necessary.

The ceiling keeps lowering and the terrain keeps rising. The pass is blocked by snow so I rein in Two Whiskey Mike and hole up in Pecos, hopefully not till spring.

Pecos, Texas. Eighty nautical miles from Midland, forty minutes by Skybolt. Former hangout for rowdy cowboys and fast-draw lawmen. In the century since its founding Pecos has seen its population explode to a dozen thousand, over a hundredth of a million.

Dennis Blanchard, a tall fiftyish gentleman, comes out of the office. His expression suggests that he didn't expect any visitors this month. Without asking, he gets in the fuel truck and drives to the biplane. There's only one reason planes stop in Pecos.

Dennis doesn't fit my preconceived notion of the locals. He's quite soft spoken, clearly very intelligent, rather worldly. He doesn't wear a ten gallon hat or carry a six-shooter. He does draw! though!

There's no weather reporting between Pecos and El Paso. From the Western Flight Guide I get the number for the airport at Van Horn, population 3,000, elevation 4,000. The call is forwarded to the airport manager at his store in town. He says it's VFR if you can see the top of the hill just outside town. He can't even see the bottom.

A scrapbook proves that Pecos is often visited, in season, by interesting airplanes. I write something profound and use yellow post-its to block off a space for a Two Whiskey Mike picture I'll mail from home.

Dennis spent four plus years helping his brother build a Glasair, then realized that if he wanted to fly his half of the plane he'd need a license. He took some flying lessons, married his instructor and bought the airport.

Two children, come in, speaking impeccable French! A thirty-something petite blond woman follows, also speaking impeccable French. It's Isabelle Blanchard, former Citation pilot for the Coast Guard, former flying instructor, former manager of Pecos Airport, now co-owner of Pecos Air Center. Born and educated in Mombasa, she also speaks impeccable Swahili!

To summarize, we have a drawling Texan with a French surname marrying a blond African who's flown jets, runs an airport, speaks Swahili and raises children in French in a land called Far West Texas. I'm not smart enough to make this up!

Isabelle points out that Two Whiskey Mike is icing up in the precip. She helps me put the biplane in a vacant hangar and I head off to town for an early lunch in, yes, a loaner dark blue four door sedan. That used car salesman must have made a bundle!

The transmission and brakes argue constantly about who's in charge. I come across a motel which looks exactly like you'd expect a motel in the middle of nowhere to look. The sign pronounces it to be the Swiss Clock Inn. This I have to see! Inside is an authentic Swiss restaurant, decorated with cuckoo clocks, possibly the entire world's supply.

Interesting but too bad. I'd sort of hoped to go chest first through a set of swinging doors, roll up to the bar and

say in a big voice: "Whiskey." Oh well, I'm flying, I'd have had to order Diet Coke anyways.

After quite a good meal I hurry out moments before high noon. I've left my Dave Clark headset in the airplane! Coaxing the dark blue four door sedan to nearly thirty miles an hour, I manage to be out of earshot before the clocks strike twelve.

Back at the airport, I sprawl on the couch watching yet another episode of *As The Weather Churns*. Then it's another call to Flight Service at five past the hour, another call to the store in Van Horn. Then another episode, more calls. Pecos doesn't have a computer with a radar display, which is probably just as well since I'm not sure I'd be able to fit it in my busy schedule.

Hmm! El Paso is perking up. This weather has a little less easterly trajectory and a little more southerly trajectory than the forecasters suspect. The hill is still not visible from the store in Van Horn though. What if I make a direct shot at El Paso? The ridges mostly run south to north. If I can't get across one I'll fly north up the valley towards the improving weather until I can get over, then head west. Two Whiskey Mike has enough fuel in case it's necessary to keep going north to an alternate.

I call the Flight Guide number for Dell City, which is straight north, and eventually connect with an elderly lady who assures me that the sky condition is broken, ceiling at least 2,000 AGL. She also tells me the runway is snow covered and there's no fuel available. Any port in a storm! There's always Carlsbad even further north.

As soon as the snow thins for real I say good-bye to the Blanchards, fire up and launch. Climbing out isn't part of this mission profile. Staying low, under the clouds, I weave around snow showers, in the general direction of El Paso.

The terrain rises continuously. The pass just north of the Apache Mountains is impassable. To the southwest lies a solid mass of clouds clogging up the view from the store in Van Horn. I steer Two Whiskey Mike north up the ridge and slip through a slit between cloud and ground. The west side of the ridge drops away precipitously. In general, to the south the clouds and ground are one, to the north the ceiling slants up to provide some room for maneuvering.

We cross a broad desert valley and go up and around the northern end of Sierra Diablo. To the right, many miles distant, the foothills of the Guadalupe Mountains are evident. Here in this no-man's-land of dry lakes and salt flats are not one but two VOR's! I transmit a position report over the Guadalupe Pass RCO and get the current El Paso weather, which is quite decent. Flight Service is unabashedly curious about how I came to be out here today.

More ridges, more valleys, more passes. Mountains and valleys, cones and craters, mesas and desert. Snow and sand, caliche and rock. A kaleidoscope of white, gold, orange, brown, gray, black. All dappled by sun and clouds. Most magnificent!

Now we're nearing El Paso, where Texas and New Mexico meet Mexico proper. To the right, the U. S. of A. To the left, the urban sprawl of Ciudad Juarez. In between, the concrete flood channel for the Rio Grande serves as a moat against illegal aliens. Out here they take this matter seriously. The map shows circular restricted areas, two miles across, labeled 'Unmarked balloons to 15,000 ASL'. Apparently the balloons contain alien detectors.

North of El Paso, in New Mexico, are all sorts of mysterious places, quite off limits. White Sands Missile Range and Alamogordo are examples. I'd love to know what percentage of the southwest is Restricted Airspace or an MOA. New Mexico also has all sorts of interesting place names. Truth Or Consequences and Whiskey Creek are just a couple.

An hour and a half out of Pecos we're over El Paso. To the west there are only scattered clouds, just enough to make the sky interesting. In the clear desert air 'Visibility Unrestricted' takes on a whole new meaning. I decide to keep on going, overflying El Paso, and advise Albuquerque Flight Service of my intentions.

Deming, New Mexico is about as far as this tank of gas is going to last. I tune in 122.8 and get an airport advisory. "Roger Deming Unicom, we copy, Two Whiskey Mike." My camera is red hot from overuse on this leg. I declare a low film emergency: "Ah, Deming, is there any film available at the airport?"

"Two Whiskey Mike, that's a negative."

"I'm trying to get to Phoenix before dark and am just about out of film. Do you have a car you could loan me to make a real quick trip into town?" Please, not a dark blue four door sedan!

"Two Whiskey Mike, I'll have someone drive over to Wal-Mart right now. What kind of film would you like?"

In a short while, I land, taxi up to the pumps, unstrap, climb out, stretch, take a deep breath. The cold, pure, high desert air fills my lungs. The sky is blue, the mountains white, the ground dry. I've just seen some of the most beautiful sights of my career. The lineman walks over carrying a Wal-Mart bag. It doesn't get much better!