

# A Hundred Things

by Bryan Quickmire

## TwoWhiskeyMike - A Swan Song

*Dawn in Phoenix. Strapping into the yellow biplane. For the last day. After six years we have six hundred miles to go.*

My Skybolt, TwoWhiskeyMike, and I are on the final notes of an eight day swan song. Together, we've experienced six hundred hours of the intensity of aerobatic competition and the enjoyment of wandering like gypsies.

Now we are on our last mission. Tonight, TwoWhiskeyMike's new owner will take possession.

Today we will fly the last task of this last mission. The task, an out-and-return, from Phoenix to San Diego and back, will complete our coast-to-coast flight.

The actual route from Boston to San Diego covers over three thousand miles. We steered south of the great circle, giving wide berth to winter weather monsters.

This was not to be my longest trip ever, but Boston to San Diego in a biplane, in the winter, east to west, against the wind, day VFR only, still seemed a worthy challenge.

Along the way, TwoWhiskeyMike and I encountered snow and ice, then rain and fog, then more snow and ice. Most challenging was having to spend New Year's Eve in a truck stop in Odessa, Texas, dining on chili and watching replays of Lawrence Welk and his Royal Canadians.

All this after two days stuck in Texarkana, Arkansas. Perhaps in exchange, there was amazingly little headwind enroute. I'm still not sure if that was a fair trade.

Back to the task at hand, the forecast is a bit worrisome. Halfway to the coast we'll be greeted by headwinds of thirty-plus knots, the source of a sigmet for severe turbulence in mountainous terrain. And to cap it off, the entire coastline of Southern

California is blanketed by fog. "VFR flight not recommended", intoned the briefer.

In Phoenix, however, hot air balloons are suspended in the morning stillness. I decide to launch. The key to progress, indeed survival, in these situations is flexibility, being ready, almost eager, to change the route or destination to please the weather encountered. I like to think of this as adventure rather than inconvenience.

Westward we fly, over the desert. Some think the desert is monochromatic, even dull. I love it. Like the Arctic, it has a unique beauty, full of subtleties. Numberless shades of gold, brown and black. An infinite variety of shapes and textures. If I had nine lives, I would spend an entire one here.

Our planned outbound refueling stop, Blythe, California, passes under the nose. The forecast headwinds haven't materialized yet. If anything, we have a few knots on the tail. And there is zero turbulence. Fortune is smiling on us. We press on.

The Banning Pass, with peaks around 11,000 feet, has been visible for some time as the Salton Sea comes into view beyond the next ridge. Three hundred square miles of water is a remarkable sight in an area where the annual rainfall rarely exceeds a handful of inches.

The Salton Sea has always fascinated me. It was but a salt marsh before 1905. Then the Colorado River broke through an embankment near Yuma, Arizona and overflowed into California. It kept on overflowing until 1907! Over the last ninety years, net evaporation has shrunk this salt water body by a hundred and fifty square miles.

Now TwoWhiskeyMike is thirsty, so we decide to land at Thermal. Thermal, California: elevation minus 117 feet and temperature plus 117 Farenheit (in the summer anyways).

We are honored to park next to two Falcon tri-jets and a Lear. What illustrious company!

TwoWhiskeyMike takes on fuel, I take on coffee, and we launch again for the last leg west.

Ten miles west of Thermal the terrain is nearly ten thousand feet higher than the airport. TwoWhiskeyMike can't go up quite that steeply, so we angle off course and squeeze through a notch at six thousand feet or so.

The look and feel of the landscape changes here. From the desert sand, rocks and ridges east of Thermal to high plateaus west of Thermal. Vegetation starts to increase and we see more signs of habitation, even an occasional lake.

The ocean announces itself with a stratus layer, which only recently was fog. In a continuous descent since cresting the last ridge, we slip through the gap between cloud and ground, sliding under the coverlet to penetrate the warm moist maritime air, out of sight of the sun.

Here, where the terrain is still high, the ceiling is measured in hundreds of feet. The visibility seems appalling, but, measured by normal standards, it's fine. We've been spoiled by the triple-digit visibility of the desert, where, if something exists you can see it, from as far away as you are.

As we emulate the contours of the land, the ceiling seems to lift. But it's really the floor lowering as we continue inexorably downhill. Now we've got a thousand feet, then more.

We pass over Escondido. To our left, ten miles or so, beyond our visual range, lies Miramar, the home of the Top Gun school. Fightertown, USA. And just south of it, the city of San Diego.

Now, here's the Pacific, our destination, dappled by sun and shadow. The ceiling's breaking up. Fortune really is smiling broadly.

We've been following a river and, reaching its mouth, we're disgorged, past the beach, along a pier and out over the ocean. A week ago, it seems like longer than that, TwoWhiskeyMike and I were over the Atlantic. Where the air was fifty degrees colder, the water green instead of blue.

Passing New York, we had circled the Statue of Liberty at a few hundred feet. Now we were circling surfers waiting to catch the wave. From overhead, looking at their silhouettes, I can imagine how, from below, a great hungry shark could mistake them for sea lions.

We head north, just above the waves, paralleling the cliffs where the ocean has munched on the continent, and land at Oceanside.

While taxiing in, I find myself looking for a welcoming band and an admiring crowd. To no avail. Does that

mean there won't be a ticker tape parade when I get back East? I knew I should have gone to Le Bourget.

Two tourists, Canadians, come over to admire TwoWhiskeyMike and chat. Today, Boston is getting fifteen inches of snow, from the same storm which trapped us in Texas for two days.

I eat a sandwich while basking in the sun, feeling not the slightest guilt about the weather at home. Some bees alight on TwoWhiskeyMike's cowl, apparently also basking in the sun, and supplementing it with the heat from the engine. I refuse to share my sandwich with them, and hope they don't try to hitch a ride.

Target reached, I strap back in and we launch, for the first time heading east. Climbing, to parallel the rising terrain, I realize that sometimes it's not the destination that counts. It's the journey.

The track back is a little north of the track out. Palomar Observatory comes and goes, a white dome on the edge of a cliff. Palm Springs passes under the left wing after we crest the ridge.

The forecast thirty knot winds have appeared, albeit without turbulence, just in time to speed us on our way. With groundspeeds in the one-forties we might make Phoenix without a fuel stop.

Prudence prevails, the wind is unlikely to survive that far. So we visit Blythe. This is a serious quantity of concrete for the size of the town. Must have been a military field years ago.

Leaving Blythe eastbound, we pass over Quartzsite, a randomly arranged gathering of RV's parked in the desert, with neither water nor sewerage. There's an airstrip for sale in Quartzsite - for a mere \$650,000 (US). No thanks!

On the way back we talk to Luke AFB Approach. The MOA's which were idle on our way out (the Air Force was still asleep) are now hot. Eyes peeled and head on a swivel! If this trip makes headlines, I don't want it to be because TwoWhiskeyMike and an F-16 try a Vulcan mind meld.

We've had incredible luck with the winds, from sea to sea. Instead of howling westerlies, with discomfiting turbulence, they've been relatively light. And mostly on the tail, air smooth as glass.

And on this final day, tailwinds out and tailwinds back. Ask the meteorologists how!

Back in Phoenix, the last landing TwoWhiskeyMike and I will do together. All thoughts include the phrase "the last time". The last time I'll enter the pattern, the last time I'll sideslip down final, the last

time I'll straighten TwoWhiskeyMike in the flare. The last time I'll make a less than perfect landing. (Not!)

We're down! Three thousand two hundred and forty-three miles. Sixteen legs. Exactly thirty hours logged over eight days. A swan song befitting this extraordinary bird.

Taxiing in and shutting down, I have a strange sense of calm. There is closure, now I can go home. I did not experience the sadness I'd expected. That's coming now as I write. It seems I bonded with an inanimate object. TwoWhiskeyMike the yellow biplane had achieved Old Yeller status.

TwoWhiskeyMike is now officially retired in Arizona, like a race horse put out to pasture. The new owner doesn't do aerobatics and he doesn't travel far. But he will pamper TwoWhiskeyMike, as befits a champion.

I wonder if TwoWhiskeyMike will miss the screaming of flying wires at redline, the grunting as G's approach the limit. Or pushing over the top in a humpty, still flying at less than stall speed. Or avalanches, snap rolls embedded in loops, where the world twirls in the most exquisite fashion.

I wonder if TwoWhiskeyMike will miss the thrill of going to wondrous places, seeing sunsets where we've never been before. Seeing rainbows in rainshafts or our vortices etched in the top of stratus. Or clouds pouring over a mountain. Meeting people who rarely encounter such a sight as us.

TwoWhiskeyMike's retirement home is a comfortable hangar at Deer Valley Airpark, Arizona. A hundred yards away lives an F-104, the airplane of my dreams since I was an Air Cadet thirty years ago.

Enjoy your new friend the Starfighter, TwoWhiskeyMike. And your retirement, you earned it.