

A Hundred Things

by Bryan Quickmire

A Whale Of A Time

Two Whiskey Mike, my yellow biplane, glows in the morning sun. I, in an olive drab flight suit, do not. Butterflies perform aerobatics in my stomach.

Butterflies even though Two Whiskey Mike and I have flown together hundreds of times. It's the usual mix of excitement, anticipation and nervousness. Today the nervousness is not unreasonable. We'll start out flying VFR over a cloud layer and later encounter high winds and substantial turbulence. We'll spend most of the day over unlandable terrain or open water.

If the Lycoming falters I fully intend to make it back. I wear a parachute and a life preserver. The pockets of my Nomex flight suit bulge with personal ELT, high-intensity strobe and survival gear.

I climb into the cockpit, looking like a bee whose limbs are bulging with pollen. The seven straps are secured, the map clipped to left thigh, the navigation log to right. Everything is in its place. The engine wakes up with a roar. Two Whiskey Mike and I are now one. I'm totally calm, and extremely focused. The butterflies are gone.

Today's mission is very special: we will visit the great fjord of the Saguenay. I've plotted and schemed to do this since last summer in Charlottetown when a fellow gypsy had waxed eloquent. After the fjord, where will we watch the sunset? Chicoutimi? Baie-Comeau? Sept-Îles? Gaspé? We'll know tonight, by dinnertime.

We launch from Plattsburgh, New York, on a positioning leg to Québec City. A low cloud deck extends north, south and east. The western edge covers Lake Champlain. Québec City is reporting scattered clouds - exactly where the deck breaks up we don't know.

The clouds slide below us, blotting out the ground. The air is perfectly smooth and we have 50 knots on the tail. We speed along, just south of the border, where VFR-On-Top isn't considered naughty. Mountain tops pierce the undercast, like Arctic islands in a frozen sea. The word awesome passes through my mind.

Vermont falls behind and we angle northeast through New Hampshire. In Maine we spiral down through a hole, trading white for green. Recent rains have freshened up the foliage for our viewing pleasure. We dogleg north, cross the border and head directly to Québec City.

On arrival we circle the only walled city north of Mexico. I wonder if the tourists below realize that the fortifications around Old Québec were constructed by the British in the 1820s, to keep the Americans out!

"Are you here for the airshow?" asks the customs officer. And the fuel truck driver. And everyone else. I suppose all yellow biplanes with red sunbursts look like they're going to an airshow! Not this time though.

I exchange waves with the French Connection and watch the Northern Lights (the aerobatics team, not the natural phenomena). We launch again, destination Chicoutimi, where we'll take on fuel for our expedition down the Saguenay.

Quelle surprise! Just past Valcartier there are canyons! Deep, spectacular canyons, not to be resisted. In we go, up Rivière Jacques-Cartier, prop paddling furiously. Trees blur past and vertical granite walls press in on our wings. Good thing I don't suffer from claustrophobia! White water rafters flash by, upturned faces wondering "What the heck was that!?"

The canyon forks. The left path feels like a dead end so we go right. This new, wider canyon admits the thirty knot surface winds, which ricochet wildly off the walls. Two Whiskey Mike complains bitterly about the abuse. We climb many long feet, not without setbacks, and pop to the surface.

All around, as far as the eye can see, there's naked bedrock, green swatches of trees and blue jewels of water. There's a strong sense of wilderness and lots of temptation to stray from course. We make numerous circles and passes to admire beaver dams and lodges. Several are absolutely perfect, tying for first place. We search for moose or bear and visit a logging camp. Wonderful lakes on high plateaus invite us to stay a while. If only Two Whiskey Mike had floats!

We detour way, way off course to check out Lac Saint-Jean. Une autre surprise! The lake is so vast and the surrounds are so flat. How did this happen, couldn't be glaciers alone? At Roberval we head northeast across the huge lake. We waggle our wings at some bathers then, fretting about fuel, make a downwind dash for Saint-Honoré.

Reaching our fuel stop with vapor to spare, we execute a runway inspection pass. The controllers, not having seen a biplane here before, rush out onto the tower's catwalk. Later they drive over to the ramp to chat.

We taxi past blue and yellow 2-33's belonging to the Air Cadet glider program. I gaze fondly at their L-19 tugs. The L-19 is an old flame - it was love at first flight. A thousand tows later it was even better. Two Whiskey Mike's tail wheel breaks! A fit of jealousy perhaps?

The Haigh tail wheel is non-steerable, being either locked straight or freely castoring. A link has snapped so we can't unlock it to maneuver for parking. How embarrassing! At least it didn't break on the runway. I shut down and climb out to assess the situation.

Fortunately I'm able to jury-rig a fix so we can continue our adventure. It could've been worse. I might have had to carve a new prop out of a tree. Or re-cover the biplane in birch bark.

Rising out of Saint-Honoré with 30 knots pushing in back, Two Whiskey Mike hurries south, eager to catch the first glimpse of the fjord. We skirt the Bagotville control zone and then, there it is! World-class splendor!

From a carpet of trees, vertical granite walls, in places nearly two thousand feet high, plunge into a two-mile wide flow of very blue water. The wind-driven waves accentuate the impression of a lot of water going somewhere important.

We cross the edge of Cap à l'Est and dive towards Baie des Ha! Ha! At the mouth of the bay is a good-sized white cruise ship. We circle at a respectful distance, saluting the brave souls who trust their lives to Archimedes' principle of buoyancy. If man had been meant to float he would have been born with watertight compartments.

Meandering downstream, we cross back and forth admiring lovely villages and exploring the coastline. In the distance we see something we can't quite believe. Six hundred feet up a cliff, on a tiny ledge, is a giant statue of the Virgin Mary! A hiker, dwarfed by the statue, waves. Rounding Cap Trinité in a dive we enter Baie Éternité, where we exchange waves with a sailboat taking respite from the wind. Everyone loves a biplane!

At L'Anse-St-Jean we search for the covered bridge rumored to be on the one thousand dollar bill. We find a bridge but can't be sure it's the one. Maybe someday I'll stop flying long enough to accumulate a thousand dollars and see for myself.

After a magnificent voyage we reach Tadoussac at the mouth of the fjord. Here the currents of the Saguenay and the St. Lawrence stir up a delicious broth which whales travel thousands of miles to enjoy. Can I spot one?

Pas de problème! Been there, done that. Having watched humpbacks off Massachusetts, California and Hawaii, this'll be like spotting goldfish in a bowl. We climb to a thousand feet and wait for the first sighting. And wait. And wait.

Okay, so I'm not so smart! Now what? Aha! That flotilla of boats way over there must have the same objective, and their captains probably know what they're doing. We head over. The boats range from schooners to rubber

dinghies. There must be a Uniform Dress Code for Whale Watchers, to a man they wear yellow slickers! Great, the yellow biplane will blend right in!

The fleet turns as one and heads for a patch of empty water. Wait, it's not empty, there's an arched back, then a spout. "Thar she blows!" We beat the fleet to the whale. What a sight! It's at least fifty feet long. We circle the animal at close quarters, awestruck by its massive size and how smoothly it propels itself through the water. After a few minutes it sounds, leaving a strange disturbance in the water which I can only describe as a whale hole.

There are tons of whales, today must be a banquet. Two Whiskey Mike and I flit from sighting to sighting. Some whales are alone, others swim in groups of three or four. Some are smaller, perhaps youngsters. They seem so tame, so likable, one day I'll do this in a kayak. I talk to Two Whiskey Mike in a Jacques Cousteau accent.

For no particular reason we climb to 50 feet, rolling to 60 degrees left bank, looking down at the water, which suddenly darkens.

A nose, a mouth, eyes! A leviathan does rise! Up, up, up from the deep. Fins! A body! The whale comes out of the water, like a missile from a sub.

"Oh my," says Two Whiskey Mike, "he's bigger than I!" Not by an inch, not by a foot, by two or three times!

The whale hovers in space, staring. Nowhere had I heard that the whales watched back! We look each other in the eye, mammalo é mammalo, for an impossibly long time. Something magical takes place, some form of communication.

The spell breaks, the whale falls away, in an eruption of spray. Perhaps gone to tell his friends of the noisy yellow bird, and his near miss. Or perhaps, like trout and fly, to tell his buddies over a few beers of the one that got away.

Just imagine if I'd been a few feet lower. Imagine explaining to the insurance adjuster you were downed by a whale strike!

Imagine, to prevent future recurrences, the National Research Council firing whales at windshields.

That's it, I'm past it! "On Two Whiskey Mike! To Baie Comeau for the night!"

Later, at Le Manoir, after an excellent dinner, I relax on the terrasse, sipping cognac. Watching the moon rise over the St. Lawrence. Watching, for the first time, seagulls play at night. Reflecting. Wondering.

What will we do tomorrow? Go up the Manicouagan? Visit Percé Rock? Or go play with our new friend, the Humpback of Tadoussac?

It's late. To bed! Perchance to dream, a hundred things.