

## By Comanche to Mardi Gras Plus

Planning is everything, particularly when considering a long distance flight into unfamiliar territory. The plan was to fly from eastern Connecticut to visit family in Louisiana and take in some of the 2009 New Orleans Mardi Gras festivities, go on to the west central Florida coast, and then return home by way of North Carolina and Pennsylvania. Total time away was to be two weeks.

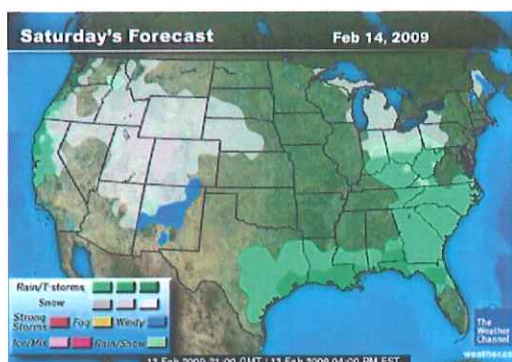
The weather in mid-February is challenging at best, and this year a steady parade of winter storms has flowed up from the Ohio River valley. To be ready I planned two routes from Danielson CT (LZD) to Slidell LA (ASD), one going down the west side of the Blue Ridge mountains, the other going along the east coast, and both avoiding the DC airspace.

The western route generally followed the great circle route along V-39 over Connecticut, New York and Pennsylvania, skirting the P-40 airspace and AOPA headquarters, with a fuel stop at Luray Caverns (W45). We had vacationed in the Shenandoah Valley last summer and were looking forward to seeing the area from the air. The route continued down the east side of the Blue Ridge along V-143 to Athens GA (AHN) for the next fuel stop, just outside the Atlanta Class B airspace.



The alternate route followed V-139 from the tip of Long Island to Newport News (PHF). This route is often referred to as the “shark route” and takes you over the Atlantic, well outside best glide distance to shore, but it is a route I have used often before. After fueling up we would continue along V-66 over the Virginia and Carolinas piedmont area, well east of the mountains, to Athens for the fuel stop.

Which ever way we got there, from Athens we would continue westward along V-20, landing at Slidell after a total of about nine hours of flying.



The weather for the day of departure was forecast to be lousy, with snow and freezing rain along our western route through New York and Pennsylvania, but with scattered showers for the lower east coast. We chose the coastal route and I filed three IFR flight plans. The early morning briefing revealed clear or scattered clouds all the way to Athens, and even a tailwind for the first over-water leg - much better than the western route.

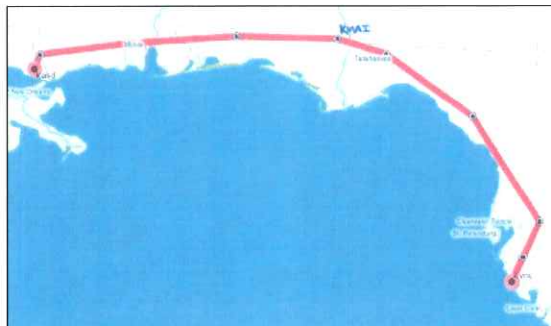
I elected to depart Danielson VFR and request flight following. Providence Departure gave us a squawk code and then said, “We have your IFR flight plan and squawk. You can use that code for your VFR flight if you like, and switch to IFR at any time as needed.” Boy, talk about user friendly! We accepted the offer, changed the squawk, and continued to Newport News at 7500 feet without problems. When I contacted departure for the next leg I suggested the same approach – IFR squawk for VFR flight – and the tower readily agreed. We continued to Athens at 5500 feet, mostly on top of a scattered layer, dodging occasional buildups and leaning into an increasing headwind.

At Athens, after fuel and some homemade sandwiches, I contacted Flight Services on WxBrief for the final leg. Ahead of us were broken to solid ceilings at 4000 feet and overcast at 20,000 all the way to Louisiana. Our destination reported broken at 1500 and west winds and light rain, with clearing reported further west. I



picked up my IFR clearance (“as filed”) and we headed west around Atlanta. Our 5000-foot cruise altitude put us just above the lower layer and not too deep into the headwinds above. I requested and got “higher” for a thicker cloud region but gave up another 10 knots to the wind, so back to 5000 when the clouds began to disperse. By the time we reached Slidell the cloud layer below us was broken, with occasional larger holes, and the high overcast was gone. We found a nice hole, cancelled IFR with New Orleans, and descended to Slidell as the sun neared the horizon – a very satisfying day of Comanche flying.

The day for departure from Louisiana was CAVU so we went VFR with flight following. The man at the Marianna FL (MAI) airport remembered my plane and me from two years previously, and happily filled the tanks. Once we turned south we picked up a 25-knot tailwind and, with a slight deviation past Tampa at ATC’s request, got “direct” to Venice Muni (VNC) where we were met by more family. It was great to see the kids and grandkids, and to get in a couple of tour flights. We even enjoyed a back yard smoked barbeque of wild pig with all the trimmings!



On February 27<sup>th</sup> I would begin my solo journey back to the cold of New England. This was also the day that President Obama was visiting Camp Lejeune in North Carolina so there would be four TFRs between Georgia and New Bern NC (EWN). The St. Petersburg FSS briefer was careful to look through all the red tape and I filed two IFR plans – Venice to Statesborough GA (TBR) and then on to New Bern. About a half hour after we hung up, the briefer called back to say that, after further checking, my route would pass through one of the no-fly zones. A suggested change, a modified flight plan, and I was good to go. Again, great service!

Friday dawned clear and cool. When I called for my clearance I was told “revised clearance, advise when ready to copy.” Instead of V-157 up the middle of Florida I was sent west over the Gulf of Mexico and past Tampa that way. The shoreline seemed a long ways off, but when the controller offered “direct Statesborough” I accepted and flew the next 242 nm in a straight line. Nice!

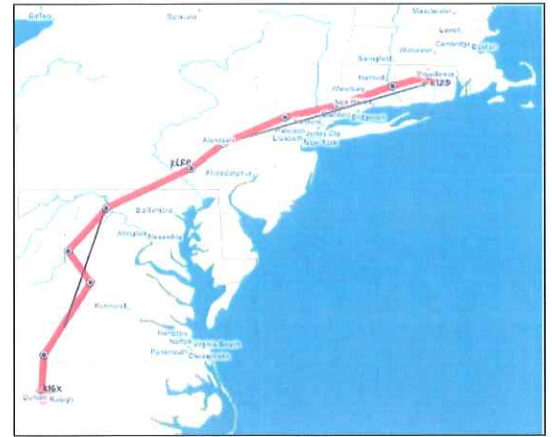


After fueling at Statesborough I continued IFR along V-157 to Fayetteville. Once I was past the TFR no-fly zones to the east I was given “direct New Bern” and landed there to meet my brother and his wife. They had arrived from the Boston area the day before, and meeting for lunch would not have happened without the Comanche to get me there.

By mid-afternoon the threatening cold front and associated showers had moved east of the Raleigh – Durham area. I said goodbye and picked up my clearance “as filed” to Chapel Hill NC (IGX). As I climbed into the clouds I was again struck by the capable manners of a well-trimmed Comanche. Trim and power for climb, enough right foot to counter the left turn tendency. RPM, mixture and trim for cruise and keep an eye on the VSI, while the map GPS keeps the course honest. Power back 5 on the manifold for descent with no speed change – who needs an autopilot? (Well, I can dream, can’t I?) I flew through the Raleigh – Durham airspace between layers, and descended easily into Chapel Hill in light rain.



The next morning it was still raining, but the weather was clear in Pennsylvania and north. I was headed there for a Northeast Tribe fly-in at Lancaster (LNS). Once again clearance gave me the dreaded “cleared to xyz, expect further clearance.” I knew that writing clearances in the clouds while juggling charts and tuning nav-aids would be a lot, even with the Comanche on it’s best behavior. “You know,” I said to the controller, “ I am a single pilot IFR with no auto pilot. Copying clearances, once I’m in the soup, could be a handful.” “Well, how about ‘cleared as filed’?” the controller asked. “Beautiful! I’ll take it!” I replied. So my clearance became “depart on a 270 heading, right turn on course when able.”



I climbed through the lower clouds into an area of light rain between the layers and headed North around the Washington airspace. Soon after the South Boston VOR I was given “direct Martinsburg” and flew along between the thinning layers with the Blue Ridge peeking up out my left window. Then it was “direct LRP” and past the non-expanded P-40 airspace, to arrive at the Lancaster ICS-NE fly-in and find a great bunch of Comanche drivers all ready for lunch and fellowship.



The final leg of the trip home was pretty uneventful. Depart IFR into clear skies, cancel over Harrisburg but keep the code for VFR flight following, and approved for “direct Danielson” – boy, I like to fly straight lines! There is certainly a different feeling when you are watching the GPS time and distance tic down to your home field identifier.



After many hours and thousands of miles, through all kinds of wind and weather, and without missing a beat, N6632P is parked in its familiar spot, taking a well-earned rest. Of course the foot of snow that fell starting the day after we go home buried my Comanche, but it will be ready to take to the skies again, as soon as I can dig it out.

Ain’t life grand?

Pete Morse, ICS# 16012  
Mar 5, 2009