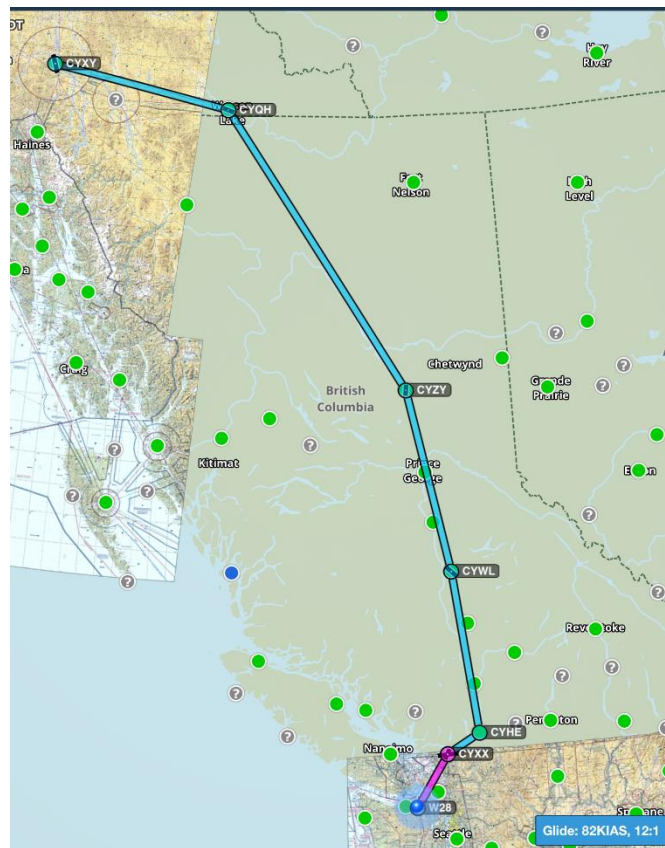


NORTH TO ALASKA

A Journey to Remember

Our 3-week adventure began at the Brown dinner table with our favorite pilot friends. Three had extensive experience, one with limited experience and one non-pilot with experience only as a passenger. The question was asked, “Ken, “What is on your bucket list?” His answer, “Flying to Alaska.” Six weeks later, after several planning sessions, purchases of camping gear (which we never used) and hours of studying maps of British Columbia, Yukon Territory and Alaska, we packed our bags, stuffed them into our airplanes and off we went.



This is the route we flew to Fairbanks.

We knew weather would be the deciding factor for the day of departure, but we picked July 1, 2019 as the day our trip would begin. Since the three airplanes would be leaving from three different places on the Olympic Peninsula in Washington State (W28 Sequim Valley Airport, 2WA1 Diamond Point Airport and WA59 Rakes Glen Airpark), we planned to leave at 9:00 am and meet at CYXX (Abbotsford British Columbia) to go through Customs together. We woke up to low clouds and fog in Sequim, but found a hole in the sky, so off we went (MVFR), arriving close to our scheduled time, 10:15. (92.30 nm). Being the only non-pilot in the group, I was experiencing 50% anxiety and 50% anticipation. After making the call to Customs, we were told, “Welcome to Canada and have a safe flight.”



The three planes took off in the formation we would be flying for the next 3 weeks: Ray and Lisa in their GlaStar (#1) would be the lead with the two wingmen, Ernie in his Swift on the left (#2) and Ken and me in our RV 9A on the right (#3). We had all agreed that keeping visual sighting of each other was our goal. Away we went, heading for our first fuel stop, Williams Lake. Arriving at Williams Lake Airport (252 nm) at 12:30, we refueled, visited the bathrooms and got a snack from the vending machines. Realizing the weather was

not conducive to continue flying, we waited a couple of hours, hanging out at the airport, hoping for a weather change. When that didn't happen, we agreed unanimously to spend the night in town. Lisa got on her phone and found us a motel. The planes were parked and tied down while we called a taxi and \$45 later arrived at the local Super 8.

After our first happy hour in Ray & Lisa's room with our boxed wine, cheese & crackers (which became a daily ritual), we walked next door for dinner at the Laughing Loon Restaurant. Although we had not achieved our goal of spending our first night in Dawson Creek, Ray reminded us what he had said at our final planning meeting. "Although we have painstakingly engineered our plan, it will probably not work out; however, we ARE going to Alaska!"



The following morning after lift off at 9:30, we landed at McKenzie Airport (219 nm) for fuel at 11:10. Vicki at Flight Service handed us all a vanilla ice cream cone before starting the next phase of the trip ... down the TRENCH. Our plan was to fly the trench, depending on weather. We had no first-hand knowledge, but knew about the potential risks and alternatives regarding weather and fuel. Airplanes rarely use that route through British Columbia: no roads, few places to land in an emergency & unexpected weather

patterns, but we were game to try.

After refueling our planes, we took off in our formation at noon, heading to Watson Lake. In the #3 position, our plane had just lifted off when a very large bird collided with the back of the plane. Ken checked all the control surfaces, noting the plane was operating okay, and we radioed to the other pilots that we could continue. We headed down Williston Lake (Reservoir). The lake is the largest freshwater body in British Columbia created by the W. A. C. Bennett Dam.



The lake (251-km long and 155-km wide) provided a beautiful sight as we traveled down the trench for three hours. Ray carried a 5-gallon can of fuel as his extra reserve. We agreed the other two planes could circle if he landed to add fuel. Fortunately, this never happened. The weather was fine, a rare day.

We all breathed a sigh of relief (and a feeling of pride) when we landed at Watson Lake (402 nm) for refueling. After checking out the airport lounge, we took off at 4:15, heading for Whitehorse (236 nm) where we would spend the night.

Visibility lessened as we had our first encounter with smoke from forest fires, plus a series of rain showers, requiring us to navigate around the terrain. After landing at the Whitehorse (Erik Nielsen) International Airport, Lisa booked us a room at Canada's Best Value Inn. We had a brief happy hour in Ray & Lisa's room which had a view of the Yukon River but no air conditioning. After a dinner at the Klondike Restaurant next door, it was early to bed since we were all exhausted after our very long day of flying (6 hours 50 minutes). The next morning, in front of the motel, we met Mike Barrow from Reno who was wearing an EAA cap. We invited him to visit us in Sequim at an EAA 430 gathering and he showed up later in the year at one of our gatherings.



The world's largest weather vane, a DC-3, at the Whitehorse International airport

The next morning, after a walk along the Yukon River and breakfast at the Burnt Toast Restaurant, the guys went back to the airport (\$40 taxi ride) to check on the planes while Lisa & I checked out the town & bought some groceries. We all spent the rest of the day sightseeing.

At 9:30 on July 4th we left the Yukon Territory and headed to Customs @ Northway, experiencing a lot of smoke along the way. We landed at 12:00 (300 nm), hoping to get cleared to enter the State of Alaska USA. Since there were no customs agents, we sat in our planes for the next 2+ hours, watching helicopters take off for fighting the numerous forest fires in the area. We were following the rules of the United States ... you may not leave your plane until you have been cleared by an agent. When an agent finally showed up, he threatened us with a fine of \$5,000 each for some obscure rule he said we had broken. Welcome to Alaska USA! We had followed the correct procedures in contacting Customs; however, after we gave the required information, the phone line disconnected and we missed the last message of when the agent would arrive.



Leaving Northway, we flew to Tok (41.30 nm) for refueling and lunch at Fast Eddy's on the Alaskan Highway. Because of the current weather forecast & flying time to Anchorage, the decision was made to fly to Fairbanks instead of our intended destination, as it was a shorter time to Fairbanks and we were all tired. Again we experienced skies filled with smoke.



We landed at Fairbanks International Airport (FAI) at 6:30 (184 nm) and were greeted at the airport by Ray & Lisa's friends and a friend of Ernie, who let us use their Troopers for a few days while we were in Fairbanks.

Fairbanks International Airport with 3 runways: asphalt, gravel, & water

We spent the next four days sightseeing around the area: Chena Hot Springs, the Trans-Alaska pipeline, University of Alaska Fairbanks Museum, River Boat Discovery down the Chena River, Pioneer Park. Because Ray had worked for the FAA at Fairbanks Airport, we were given a private tour of the Control Tower, Approach Control & Radar room. Thanks to a Fairbanks EAA member, Terry Wighs (EAA1129), Ernie was able to obtain a replacement trim switch for his Swift.



Because of all the forest fires and low visibility around Fairbanks, we were unable to fly out of the area, so as an alternative, we rented a Ford 150 & headed to Anchorage on Parks Highway. We had lunch at Denali National Park but because of the smoke and typical summer weather at Denali, we did not see the mountain. Lisa found us a very nice and affordable Air B&B in Anchorage and the following day, because Ray had worked for the FAA at the Anchorage Airport Tower, we were able to have a private tour.

DC6 @ Chena Hot Springs



Heading to the Kenai Peninsula, we spent the next few days enjoying all the various attractions Alaska has to offer: Whittier, the Gateway to Prince William Sound, Homer Spit, the Salty Dawg, Deep Creek in Cook Inlet, and Dip Net Fishing for salmon on the Kenai River.

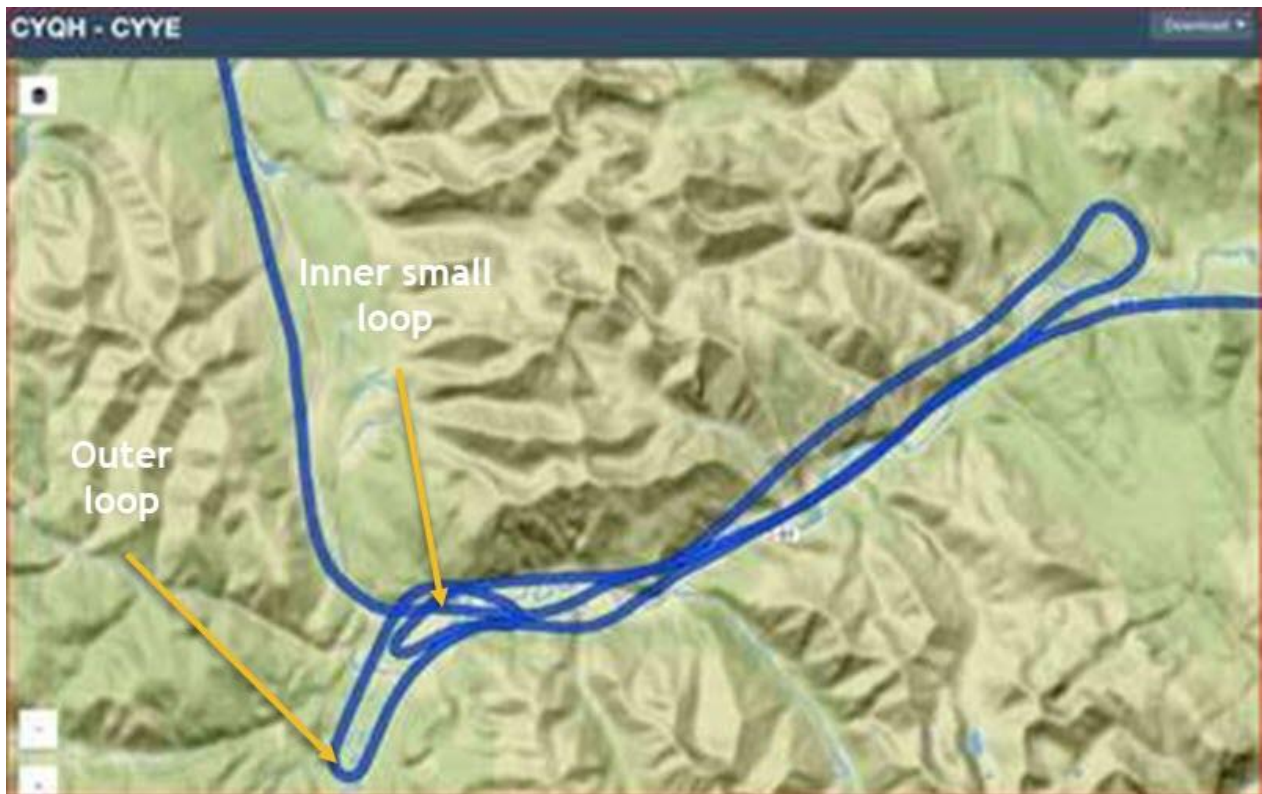
Driving back to Fairbanks, we stopped at Talkeetna & watched planes taking tourists to Denali Park. The mountains were still smoked and fogged in.

On July 16, we fueled our planes and off we went to Tok for fuel (195 nm) & Whitehorse (342 nm) for Customs and to spend the night. Next stop on the following day was Watson Lake for fuel (248 nm) and diagnosing a mechanical problem on one of the airplanes and then on to Fort Nelson (318nm).

We flew through some crazy weather as we followed the Peace River. Visibility became reduced to less than a mile and a decision was made: #1 (Glastar) would continue to follow the river on to Fort Nelson because of the plane's smaller fuel capacity. #2 (Swift) and #3 (RV9-A) would loiter in the valley, reversing their course, and await a report from #1. However, at that point, radio communication with #1 was lost. Staying on course, #3 agreed to follow #2, keeping the Swift in sight, until a cloud came between the two planes and visual sight was lost. The minutes seemed like hours until visual between #2 and #3 and radio communication with #1 was restored.



We all took a breath and continued on to Fort Nelson (318 nm). Then the rains came.



The path taken by #3 (RV 9A) as we loitered in the valley, waiting for the clouds to lift and the ALL CLEAR given.

Because of continuing bad weather, we ended up staying two days in Fort Nelson, doing a walking tour of the town, the Visitor Center and the Fort Nelson Museum.



After breakfast on the third day, there was a gap in the weather but we needed to leave immediately. We fueled the planes, heading to Fort St. John. Landing at Fort St. John (229 nm), the RV-9A had a braking problem. After successfully maneuvering to the transient parking and diagnosing the braking issue, Ken asked a pilot (a local EAA member working on a plane in his hangar) where he could obtain a quart of brake fluid.

The friendly EAA member handed him a quart, refusing to accept any payment. We spent the night at Fort St. John before starting for home the next day, July 20th, the last day of our 3-week trip.

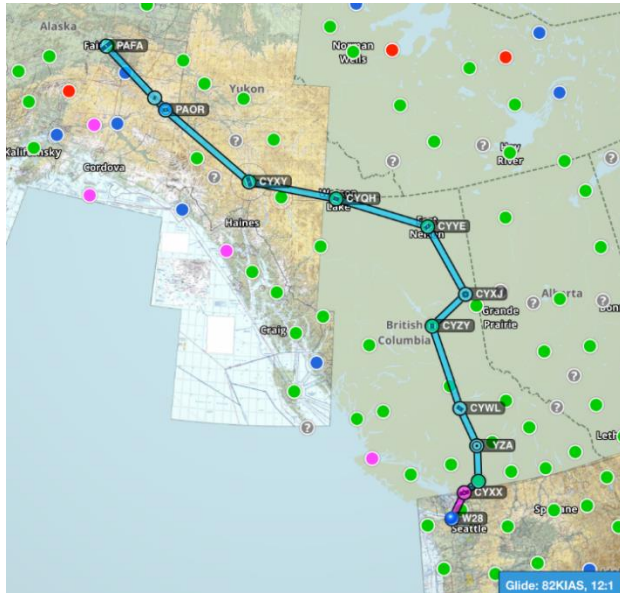
After breakfast we headed for Williams Lake (346 nm). The ever-hanging weather patterns forced us to climb to 9,000 feet above Prince George. This was the first time we used our oxygen. A hole allowed us to do an elevator descent on the other side of the pass.



After refueling at Williams Lake (346 nm), we filed our eAPIS and lifted off for customs clearance, landing two hours later at the Port of Anacortes 74S (278 nm) in Washington State.

Flying through the beautiful Fraser Valley with perfect weather was our last view of beautiful British Columbia.

Heading across the Strait of Juan de Fuca and still flying in formation, we waved good-bye to our fellow travelers.



We ended up where we started, having dinner with our fellow travelers to do a post trip evaluation and share the high and low points of the trip. We agreed there were no low points or days we would do over if we could. Every day was better than the day before. Even the week of land travel in the Ford 150 was fun. We saw and did things we would not have done if we had spent that week flying. We were fortunate on our trip to have a Travel Agent (Lisa), Cook, (Skip) A&P (Ernie), IT (Ken) and FAA interface (Ray). In two weeks we logged 28.7 hours of flying time and 3732.6 nautical miles. (1 nautical mile = 1.1508 statute mile) The maximum altitude we flew was 9850 feet. We spent 7 days on the road, driving 1450 miles in an F150.

Someone asked Ken what was the best part of the trip for him and he answered “Survival!” We all took away an impression of the trip. Some of the words we shared: awesome, amazing, fun, exciting, intense, exhilarating, once-in-a-lifetime and life-changing. Would we do it again? Collectively, our answer was ABSOLUTELY! With careful planning, attention to details, using electronics, making good decisions and sharing responsibilities, it worked for the five of us. It was a great learning process, discovering what a great country we live in and we got to know our northern neighbors a bit. We left as friends and returned as family. The old adage “where there’s a will, there’s a way” was true for us. If you have a bucket list, start checking off those items. “Expand your horizons and reach for the stars.”

THINGS TO CONSIDER:

1. There are two types of plans. Anticipated and the actual execution. Do not let the entire planning process dictate what the final course of action needs to be. Stay flexible. All the planning is very useful to the mission. (We learned this on this trip)
2. At all times be willing to receive advice and correction. It may appear or seem you have all the answers, but once in a while, others may know more. Listen, evaluate and accept their input.

3. Do not be macho. If it is beyond your limitations, say so. No one will be disappointed or upset. The goal is to have fun and be safe.
4. You can do more than you think you can. Rely on all the lessons learned and act accordingly. Speak up when it is your turn and state your intentions or limitations.
5. Envelopes (personal limits) are expandable if done safely.
6. Pick you team wisely. There is no “I” in teamwork.

One last point: eAPIS is not for wimps, nor are the U.S. Customs rules. No options but to comply. (Electronic Advanced Passenger Information System) Use an international calling plan to phone U.S. Customs before returning to the United States. **THIS IS REQUIRED.** Ask us what happens when you just show up.

Tips for flying in Canada: Get an international telephone plan before crossing into Canada. They only cost about \$10 a day, and we found out the costs are severe for telephone or data use without them.

Get familiar with Canadian aviation procedures before going. Canada requires VFR or IFR flight plans for every flight, and radio procedures are different—especially at non-towered airports.

Get old-school paper VFR sectionals Facility Guides for Canada. They show the preferred VFR routes that generally follow roads. Remember that most U.S. XM Weather subscriptions do not cover Canada.

The itinerant five

