

So there I was ...
by Dave Courtney

on the road from Harnett County airport to home in Cary, NC. It was the end of a five day odyssey from HRJ to SLR in Sulphur Springs, TX and back. During the Fall, Bob Parker convinced me that I needed a little cross country practice. His idea was that we would fly his Citabria to Texas and pick up his new Legend Cub when it was done. In a moment of weakness, I agreed and starting arranging my work schedule so I could make the trip. Eventually the trip coincided with the week between Christmas and New Year's when my company was closed for the Christmas vacation.

During November and December, I assembled the collection of current sectionals that we would need to get there and back. Usually I fly only in the region defined by the Charlotte chart, so I had to add Atlanta, Memphis and Dallas charts to my collection. Evenings after work, I would plot various courses keeping in mind the range of the Citabria and the Legend Cub. One weekend I flew into Sanford and was surprised to find they had no fuel for sale. This could be a real problem on a long trip so I had another factor to consider in addition to distance and terrain.

Bob and I talked back and forth about the choices. In the end we agreed on a plan that included flying over or near airports all along our route. I used DUATS to put together the different legs and picked 2 hours as the leg length in no-wind conditions. This turned out to be just conservative enough. Our launch point was Harnett County and our launch date and time was sunup on the day after Christmas. While many people would be heading to stores looking for bargains, I was going to be heading to Texas.

It was dark when Mary Lynne and I left the house in Cary to head to the Harnett County airport. We arrived just before sunrise to find that Bob and 112SC had also just arrived. The weather was clear, cold and blowing strongly from the Southwest. We took off as the sun came over the trees at the end of the runway. We immediately found that we were going to be flying a lot lower than the 4500 feet we had planned on. At 3000 feet, we were feeling the effects of a 25 knot headwind. We dropped down to 2500 feet kept the rpm's up to do the best that we could. The countryside crawled beneath our wings as we headed toward our first stop in Laurens, SC.

The 2 hour flight to Laurens took us 2.5 hours even at our higher power setting. We took advantage of the 8-26 runway at Laurens to eliminate most of the cross wind component. Laurens is a very friendly airport. The agent on duty pumped the gas and took pictures of Bob and me with the plane for Bob's scrapbook of the trip. We stayed just long enough to fill the tanks, drink a soda and check weather for the next leg. The wind was not dying down at all and the forecast talked about the ceilings starting to lower as we approached the mountains in Georgia.

The second leg was to Anniston, AL by way of Electric City, SC, Gainesville, GA, Cartersville, GA and Polk County, GA. This leg was a little longer and in no-wind conditions was supposed to take 2.2 hours. Up to Laurens, the trip had been fairly smooth. As we got closer to Gainesville, we picked up an overcast and light choppiness. I found it was difficult to re-fold a sectional when you are going up and down under the clouds. Visibility was about 15 miles but the overcast was ragged on the bottom, not a smooth layer. From Gainesville to Cartersville we felt the ceiling pressing down a little lower while the ridges seemed to be getting higher. The GPS in the Citabria helped us keep on course when we could not read the sectional due to bumpiness.

From Cartersville to Anniston was more stressful. Although visibility was good, it took concentration to pick out our course and to stay away from ridges and hills. The course took us down a valley so we knew we had the ridgeline to the West to consider. We lost the cloud cover about 8 miles from Anniston and the sun came back. Our radio calls to Anniston Unicom were unanswered so we decided to push on another 10 miles to Talladega. Our radio call was answered with the information that they had fuel and coffee. Our 2.2 hour leg lasted 2.8 hours. The Talladega airport is built on the side of the race track. The old runways are in the infield of the oval. We had a moderate crosswind but the runway was wide.

One and a half hours from Talladega is Philadelphia, MS. This was our next goal. We were in sunshine but we still had ridges to contend with since we were still staying low to keep out of the strongest winds. South of Birmingham we went over Bessemer, AL. I was able to pick out the minor league ballpark where Michael Jordan tried to become a baseball player. I also saw the warehouse of one of our early customers, Big B Drugstores. Big B is now part of CVS. A very interesting sight was the top of two ridges that had huge houses on very small lots running along the ridgeline. There were even condo developments up on the top. You could see a long way from either side of your house since there was one row of houses and a street.

From Bessemer it was a straight course to Philadelphia. Except for the large cities we passed, there are a lot of pine trees out there in the Southeastern US. We continued hopping from airport to airport on our plan although most of the airports were unattended. They were there but not really if we needed something other than a runway. The crosswinds were getting stronger and local traffic at the airports seemed to be lessening as the day progressed. We decided to over-fly Philadelphia's 18-36 runway with a 90 degree crosswind in favor of making it to Jackson, MS.

Hawkins Field in Jackson used to be the main airport until they built the Jackson International airport. The control tower remains at Hawkins and it is a very nice reliever airport. After 2.5 hours we touched down and decided to call it a day. The people at AeroJackson were welcoming and helped us tie down for the

night. The temptation to keep going was strong but we had been flying into a strong headwind with light chop all day long. There was another 90 minutes of daylight left but we would have been flying right into the sun. We asked the FBO to call us a taxi and we headed to a hotel.

The first day saw us put 7.8 hours on the Hobbs meter. We were both tired and ready to rest. The weather on Tuesday was not going to be much better but we felt that we had made a good start on our journey. The Citabria is a fun plane to fly but not necessarily to fly cross country. It is very responsive which means that it is affected by winds and turbulence as you fly along. This is a plane that you need to fly, not ride.

The second day was clear and cold. The Citabria turned over a little slowly but we thought it was because of the cold. We were off at daybreak and heading West along Interstate 20 toward Shreveport, LA. Our plan was to fly to Minden, LA just to the Northeast of Shreveport and then to turn northwest to Sulphur Springs. The plan said that it would take 3.5 hours in total. As we got up to 3000 feet we were seeing from 35 to 45 knots of headwind. We were indicating 110 knots on the airspeed indicator while the GPS showed us between 65 and 70 knots across the ground. Semi trucks on I-20 were passing us. We dropped down lower again but the wind stayed with us down to 2000 feet.

We slogged along bouncing in gusts and thermals. A layer of clouds was trying to form above us but was not thickening up yet. We passed over Monroe, LA and kept heading west. After Ruston, LA we were supposedly only a half hour from Minden. The ceiling finally formed and dropped us down to 1500 feet. We did not want to go lower because of the towers along the Interstate. We were safely above them but we wanted to make sure that a downdraft did not surprise us at the wrong time. The turbulence went from light to moderate. Visibility was still over 10 miles as we tracked into Minden.

By the time we arrived at Minden, it was nearly 10 in the morning. The crosswind was back and Minden only offered a 1-19 runway. I landed safely and stayed on the runway although the wind was strong enough to let us know that it was ready to push us off the runway if we relaxed. The 2 hour plan took 2.6 hours to finish. We tanked up with fuel and checked the weather again.

Since we were swinging more to the Northwest, we were going to see stronger head winds. The forecast for Sulphur Springs was not encouraging. They were reporting a 15 knot crosswind with gusts to 23 knots. So I gave up the front seat to Bob. I had been getting valuable experience so far but this was beyond even my most optimistic limits. We had a 1 hour flight plan to Sulphur Springs which would give me time to find alternates from the back seat if we needed them.

As soon as Bob lifted off and swung to the Northwest, the ceiling started to lift. In about 5 minutes we were back in sunshine. The head wind was still there and

the bumps but the visibility went to 20+ miles and the ceiling to blue skies. I don't know how he arranged that to happen. It took us 1.6 hours to get to Sulphur Springs. The runway at Sulphur Springs is 18-36 and the approach from the north is over the lake. It looks just like a carrier landing. The winds were as forecasted earlier. Bob landed us on the runway and kept us there. It was challenging with the gustiness. We pulled into the North ramp by mistake since we wanted to be near the terminal. As we tried to turn the Citabria back around, Bob yelled at me to stay off the stick. Since I was not on it, I couldn't help him. The wind was so strong that it felt like someone else was on the controls. We gingerly taxied to the South ramp and secured the airplane with extra tie-downs.

While we arranged for fueling the Citabria, I went back over our logs. We had put 12 hours on the Hobbs meter since leaving Harnett County airport. The original plan in no-wind was a 10 hour trip for 900 nautical miles. We had to run at full power to make up for the head winds.

So half the odyssey was over and we were safely on the ground. The airport was empty except for the temporary agent who was filling in because of the holiday week. Bob made a call to the people at Legend Aircraft and they said they would be right over to see us.

We were given the grand tour of the factory. Legend Aircraft has been producing one Legend Cub per week. They are about to double their production. If you order today you can see your airplane next September. It is worth the wait. We went out to the hanger to see Bob's new plane, N122LC in school bus yellow. It was one of four airplanes waiting for delivery.

After lunch, Bob finished the paperwork and then got his orientation. He was taken through the POH line by line. After the walk-around was completed, he was offered the chance to fly with the Legend Aircraft test pilot. The conditions were not much better than when we landed, but the test pilot made the difference since he was familiar with the plane and the local conditions. Bob was gone for a little over an hour. You need to ask him about his flight. I will say that he seemed awfully pleased with the performance and stability of his new plane. It was getting late so we decided to stay the night and let conditions moderate.

At the hotel, I was looking at the weather channel and DUATS. We were going to be one day behind one front and one day in front of another. We did not want to go too fast or too slow. The plan that evening was to make it at least to Philadelphia, MS on Wednesday. It is funny how plans never seemed to work the way you think that they will when you put them down on paper. Reality has a way of making changes to your best plans.

Sulphur Springs, TX is about 100 miles east of Dallas, TX on Interstate 30. From the air, it is a small city surrounded by miles and miles of pine trees, scrub, fields, roads and railroad tracks. It is the perfect place for an airplane factory.

Wednesday is the day we start for home. We got to the airport so early that it was closed. The wind had died down somewhat. The weather ahead was clear but turbulent. Instead of a head wind, we might see a tail wind. We were going to see gusty surface winds wherever we landed. So we waited to see if conditions would improve. We checked out both aircraft since we would be flying both the Citabria and the Legend Cub in loose formation. We were loaded and ready to go at 10 am.

I took off first in the Citabria. Bob took off as soon as I cleared the runway. We climbed up to 3500 feet and headed southeasterly toward Minden and Monroe. The tail wind developed as forecasted as did the surface cross winds. We decided to bypass Minden and go directly to Monroe, LA. The airport at Monroe has a tower but also has a choice of three runways. The trip to Monroe only took us 2 hours. The winds were from 290 at 13 knots with gusts to 18 knots. Runway 32 was selected and successfully used. We went to the FBO to plot our next leg.

Over lunch, it became apparent that the next leg would be short, just over an hour. We were in the mode of making sure that we could find airports that had a fuel supply and a reasonable runway layout. We decided that we needed to go back to Jackson's Hawkins Field as the next step. So we did. Clear skies, a nice tail wind and in 1.2 hours we were shutting down at AeroJackson again. It was already 3:15 in the afternoon by the time we arrived. I was too tired to continue flying so I talked Bob into staying overnight in Jackson. On the way to the hotel, he said that it was a good decision because he was feeling tired as well.

Wednesday night we looked at the weather and came up with Plan A and Plan B. Plan A was to reverse our original route up and over the north side of the Atlanta area. Plan B was to head due east from Jackson and go south of Atlanta. The plans were within minutes and miles of each other. We favored Plan A since we had already been on the route.

Thursday morning was crisp. The weather was better using Plan B. So Plan B it was. The Citabria was slow to start again. Again we chalked it up to the cold in the morning. We launched just after sunrise and headed east. It was interesting to get flight following for a flight of two. Bob could listen on his hand held radio but did not have enough power or battery to be able to transmit. So I made sure that my read backs and requests were slow and distinct to give Bob the chance to get the information. A rocking wing on the Legend Cub meant that he had the information and was on the new frequency with me. Several times I would verify visual checkpoints with flight following to let Bob know where we were on the route. We had a tail wind component all the way to Craig Field in Selma, AL.

Craig Field appeared to be an old training base. The tie down area was huge. It was acres of old concrete. Unfortunately, the FBO was well hidden at one end of the field. I had to shutdown at the fire station and ask where it was. We arrived

at our fuel stop after 1.9 hours. Today was different since the winds were lighter. I had the Citabria throttled back to 2200 rpm to allow the Legend Cub to keep up. Bob had to be at full power on the 100 hp engine to match the reduced power on the Citabria. Up to this point, the sky had been clear. We had picked Craig Field because it offered a 15-33 runway that matched up with the reported surface winds. Cross winds were going to be a consideration again today.

Checking the weather over Montgomery, AL, about 20 miles to the east, we had a reported ceiling of 2000 feet. So we revised our course to pass north of the TRSA instead of negotiating our way through it. We never did see a cloud layer at 2000 feet. Our tail wind dropped off, the light chop returned and we headed to the northeast at 2500 feet gradually climbing to 3500 feet. Our intended stop was Upson County in GA. We had a target stop that was farther on if we made good time. When we arrived at Upson County, we decided to press on to the next airport, Baldwin County, GA. We had a light tail wind, good visibility, a few ridges and towers to cross and light chop and thermals as the day warmed up.

We arrived at Baldwin County in Milledgeville, GA expecting to find 7 knot winds straight down the 10-28 runway. Surprise!! It was more like 15 gusty knots. The approach is another carrier style arrival coming in over water. The runway had tall pines on both sides which gave a nice wind tunnel effect. Bob landed first and made the mid-field turn off. My arrival was not as pretty and I used the entire runway. This leg of the journey had taken 2.2 hours. With the switch to the Eastern Time zone, it was now about 1:30 in the afternoon.

Baldwin County is a great little airport with pilots that hang around and critique the landings and arrivals. They were extremely interested in the Legend Cub. So after we refueled, we tied down the Legend Cub and Citabria so we could go to lunch. When we got back, we found that they had brought out a Kit Fox and a J-3 Cub and tied them down next to our planes to make a tail dragger line. It was a nice touch and yielded some photo opportunities.

We checked the weather and found that we had caught up to the front and that the winds were going to be higher than we would like. So we called it a day. We needed to rethink our flying strategy since the Legend Cub was using more fuel than the Citabria in order to stay up with it. A maximum leg length of 2 hours was imposed which made for some interesting decisions on airports. The best choice was a flight to Fairfield County, but until the winds dropped, it would be tricky. We needed to wait until the morning to see what our first leg would look like. It would be either Columbia, SC or Fairfield County, SC depending on the wind. We headed to the hotel in the courtesy car.

Friday, the wind was calm just before sunrise. It was also cold. Temperature was only 34 degrees. When we got to the planes it was just getting light in the east. Both planes had heavy frost on the wings and tail surfaces. We would not be leaving as early as we thought. Shortly thereafter the airport began to come

alive as other pilots and the FBO operator arrived. The airplanes were starting to drip a little but it was clear we needed the power of the sun. While we waited, the coffee brewed and we checked weather again. The forecast was for light winds at altitude and on the surface, no tail wind to speak of and good visibility. As the sun came over the trees, we maneuvered the planes so the wings would get maximum exposure to the sun. We waited.

Finally about 9 am we were frost free and ready to go. The Citabria refused to start. The battery had died. The FBO brought out his portable battery charger. Bob disappeared into the baggage compartment and the battery was jumped. I managed to flood the engine so it took awhile to get it started. It seemed to run normally and smoothly once it decided to run. The amp meter showed that we were pushing electricity back into the battery. The FBO was so efficient that we were launched at 9:35 am on our way to Fairfield County.

In the next 1.6 hours we crossed from GA to SC. It was a pretty morning. There were very light winds at altitude and the visibility was excellent. We were about a third of the way on the leg when we started picking up radio transmissions from Fairfield County. We knew they were open for business and runway 22 was in use. We negotiated with the local traffic and our flight of two arrived at a lull in the pattern. Bob landed first so he did not see my first wheel landing of the trip. It was excellent. We met at the fuel pump and tanked up for the last time before getting home.

We agreed on the route from Fairfield County to Johnston County. Except that the Citabria refused to start again. We needed the aid of the FBO's mechanic to get us cranked up with a portable battery. We amended our plans and made our target Harnett County. The winds stayed calm. Visibility was excellent. We took 1.7 hours to reach Harnett County. Winds at Harnett County were calm. Hard to believe that we could get back and have a no-wind situation. It certainly seemed to be an anti-climatic end to our journey.

We tied down the Citabria until Bob could get the battery replaced. He refueled the Legend Cub one more time for the flight to his home airport. At this point we had taken 10.4 hours to cover the 900 miles on the homeward trip. Our total time to and from Harnett County to Sulphur Springs had been 21 hours. It was the trip of a lifetime. It was challenging. It was educational. Everyone needs a trip like this sometime during their flying career.

Bob took off into the afternoon sun for the short flight to his home field. The sun reflected off the glossy school bus yellow paint. The Legend Cub had come home to North Carolina at last.

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