

Grand Canyon Trip Adventure

The following story is a post to the New Mexico Trikers board. Becky also has a follow up post so I have included it too.

It was a great fly-in. We had problems with the RV and had to stop in Albuquerque to fix the fridge so we did not get to the canyon till Friday afternoon. Friday evening I took a solo flight to see the area and check temps. Everything looked good. EGTs and CHTs were perfect.



The bridges at Marble Canyon one mile from our camp.

Saturday morning Becky and I flew about an hour and a half up to Page, over the lake, around the horseshoe a couple times, and down the canyon to Cliff Dwellers. The trike climbed well and temps looked good then too.



Glen Canyon Dam at the southern end of Lake Powell.

Saturday evening Elijah joined us flying South to the Grand Canyon to see the big hole in the ground. The trike climbed poorly. I wrote it off to high density altitude due to temperature and humidity. The engine sounded fine and the temps looked great. We made 10,000 msl for the canyon overflight and flew from the North rim to the South rim with a ground speed of 80 mph. It was cold as \$#*& up there!



Eastern edge of Grand Canyon National Park.

We crossed back to the North rim in a descending glide at a ground speed of 38 mph. It was getting colder and darker and we wanted to make good time getting back before it got too dark so to get below the wind gradient, we were descending fast. I was aware of shock cooling so every 30 seconds or so I brought the revs back up to 4000 for a 5 to 10 second burst to keep the engine warm.



Headed back towards Marble Canyon and our camp.

We met up with Elijah at 6500 and were flying level taking pictures of each other when I heard a pop and the engine started running ragged. Something was out of sync, the vibration was rough but not severe enough for me to cut the mags so I let it run and even though I had partial power it was not enough to maintain altitude.

I radioed to Elijah that I was going down and started looking for the flattest, least bushy, area to set it down in. I circled one and a half times according to my GPS (funny that I couldn't have told you that without seeing my track) and kept the front end high while scrubbing off as much speed as possible before we hit the brush.

Shortest ground roll ever.

With the engine still running I looked back and saw the spurting of gas from the head. A spark plug was dangling in its wire on top of the engine, still sparking in vain.



Another shot of the Canyon.

Elijah circled overhead and then flew to a house he saw off in the distance. He radioed back that it was not too far to the East of us and we could probably walk to it. I dropped the wing on the trike and we started out on foot. A sliver of a moon came up and then immediately went down again. It was black and cold and we were 12.8 miles from the nearest road according to my GPS which only had a 30 minute battery life. The cell phone was practically useless. We would never find an unlit house in the dark.

Now we decided to head back to the trike. Becky and I held hands as we walked and when she tripped I would catch her and when I tripped she would catch me.

You couldn't even see the bush that you were walking into, it was that dark. 1.2 miles back to the trike took us about 40 minutes. Every 5 minutes I would turn the GPS on and get a heading and we would pick out a star to follow.



Some of the activities included rolling rocks. Here Becky picks one a little too big.

Elijah knew the general area that we were in but as dark as it was I didn't think he would be able to find us. I radioed on 121.5 to see if anyone was listening. A united flight heard the call and I gave him my coordinates. The pilot said that he would relay them to Denver Center and that help would be on the way.

We sat and waited. After a while another plane flew overhead low and slow. I turned the radio back on and heard him talking on 121.5 so I flashed my strobes for a minute. He radioed that he was with civil air patrol and had our position and then left.

We sat and waited some more. Becky's toes were getting cold. I was considering how we were going to stay warm enough till the sun came up again. I poured some gas onto a pile of wet brush and held a gas covered stick up to the spark plug still dangling in the wire boot. Several attempts over several minutes could not generate fire and only weakened the battery trying to start the engine. I gave up and decided that strobes and radio were more important than fire for now.



Becky's boot and my elbow ruined this picture.

We sat and waited and looked at the stars. Becky spotted a vehicle's lights off in the distance. We turned the strobes on. The lights disappeared. We were wearing our headsets and helmets to keep our heads warm and Becky said that she thought she heard a car horn. We took them off and could not hear anything. It was a car horn we found out later from our rescuers.

We were facing North sitting in the trike and Becky's back was hurting her so she got out to stand for awhile. That's when she saw flashing lights from the South. It looked like someone was in a canyon waving a flashlight around. We could not see the light itself just the beams waving across the dark sky. Then we heard an engine and a truck popped over the ridge. I turned the strobes on and left them on until the truck's headlights were illuminating the trike.



Confluence of the Paria river (muddy one) and the Colorado river.

The rescue crew was Elijah, Dave, and Mark. They brought food and water too. The waving lights were his bouncing headlights as his truck crashed through the brush making roads where there were none. Mark's i-pad had a topo and gps program on it and mapped the track in and out so on Sunday he, Elijah, and I went back to get the trike.

It only took us 6 hours to get in and out with the trike. The forced landing location was 36.7 miles from our camp and 12.8 miles from the nearest road. I noticed on the way in for the retrieval that the power lines stopped a couple of miles in from the road. The houses that were scattered across the mesa had no power unless they ran generators. That's why when the sun went down and the moon disappeared we did not have any house lights to guide us to our target. The people living there were off the grid. Even with a heading from the GPS we could have walked right past the house in total darkness if we deviated 1 degree over the 5 or 6 miles between us and the house we were walking toward.

The trip was an adventure and this story is only a part of it. There was the Park Ranger, Arlene and her first flight, the broken transmission linkage, the National Geographic photographers, Charlie's injuries from a dog fight, the police and fire engine sirens that ran for hours, and more...



Our camp at Marble Canyon Arizona.

Ok everyone, this is Becky, giving you more exciting and funny details.

First, the flight to the Grand Canyon was awesome! Thanks to Elijah's good advice we had our flight suits on with our heavy foot gear, it was very cold at 10k feet!!!

Well, you know the details of the landing but what you don't know is that John did an amazing job landing that plane without a scratch one. I think that's because I told him last time he totaled his Airborne that if he totaled this plane he was done flying, he had incentive to make sure it survived!

So we're on the ground checking conditions, directions, etc., and he says we are headed east to the house Elijah spotted. I said we should stay with the plane. Oh, by the way, we didn't have a flash light, matches, water, food, anything. He took the emergency kit out a long time ago. Sure could use it now!

We are headed east on a two track dirt road, I'm still saying we should stay with the plane because it's getting dark. He said "We'll have the moonlight to light the way." "No" I tell him, "there's a full moon on the 21st of the month (I was a day off, it's the 22nd)." I know that because I write it in my day planner, weird I know, freaky stuff happens around the full moon, I think I'll stay home when it full this month.

I tell him I have to go pee before it gets dark or else I won't be able to see where I'm squatting. Here I am in a one piece flight suit that I have to take off to pee. No where to sit so I have to lean back to back with John, take it off and take care of business. John decides he better do the same, easy for guys, no fair.

So we are still walking for about 3 miles when it's so dark we can't see. John

realizes that we can't keep going and says "Now what?"

"Well, let's go back to the plane, where we should never have left to begin with dear!" Thank goodness he marked the trike as a way point on his GPS, cuz we'd really be in a world of hurt.

He had mentioned in his post that we were taking pictures so I had my Nikon with me and was using it as a flashlight when we really needed to pick our way back through the thick brush. Man was it work, holding each other up from falling when we tripped. My legs are sore and bruised and I needed to sit down but there was no where to sit,(if we were at the trike I'd be able to sit!).

John would get his bearings from the GPS and pick out a star for us to head towards but he kept drifting left, I'd pull him back towards the star. No wonder guys have to ask for directions.

We are really close when I make out of the trike and a flashing light over to the right about 50 feet. We get there and he makes his calls on the emergency flight channel and we wait. We try to get the fire going but nothing happens. So we wait.

I'm standing out there looking up at the sky and see so many stars it was awesome. I tell John, "Look up, when will you ever see this many stars again (no light pollution from the cities, etc.)." I point out the big dipper, the Eastern star, all the planes, satellites, and shooting stars. Amazing!

Finally, I see the lights of the rescue team Elijah, Dave, and Mark, thanks so much guys for everything!

Earlier in the day, Theresa was making her famous run cake, and I told John she better have saved me a piece (she did, in fact I got 3 little pieces {one was John's}, great cake Theresa.)

While we were standing around the trike, waiting and talking, I heard a horn, I thought who the @#! is honking? Maybe they're letting us know they are headed for us. John turns on the strobes again as this time they are coming from the south of us. I noticed that the strobe on the left of the wing is not working so John's turned the trike around and raised the wing so they could see that strobe.

Finally, our rescuers arrive with food and water and I hug Elijah. We secure the trike and get in the truck to drive 1.5 hours out to our campground.

Dave Dixon had mentioned earlier in the day, when everyone was sitting around at camp, that when you get married there are only two phrases a man needs to know, "Yes Dear and I'm sorry."

So, John, Yes Dear was appropriate for staying at the trike, and I'm sorry dear was appropriate for leaving the trike and not having an emergency kit.

All in all, I knew we would be fine, people knew where we were, we had on the best weather gear for spending the night, we got to see an amazing night sky, and I got my walking in for the day. We were in our bed by midnight as John promised me we'd spend the night in our bed.

John, you were amazing, and I was so glad we were together for this adventure. You're my hero and I'd do a forced landing with you anytime!

Footnote: We have an emergency kit now!