

TWINBEECH ACROSS THE BIG POND

Nick and Joe Quint at Blackhawk gave C45H N480P the finishing touches when I arrived at their shop in Janesville, WI. I immediately noticed their competency and felt rather relaxed knowing that when they say "go" it really means "she's ready!"

Everything has been looked after except for the notorious HF radio, which is still a requirement at low altitudes within the oceanic airspace- no matter what the airport buffs say, if you don't have one, your clearance may be subject to denial.

At any rate, the unit came brand spanking new right from the dealer on Friday afternoon, plug in and play. Now, we all know that there is no such thing as Blackhawk and their avionics master craftsman made the miracle come true and had it working Monday noon. Great guys, really!

Monday early afternoon, Stephan Gottwald, a friend for whom I did a pre-buy inspection on a 1952 Bonanza during the weekend down at Tucson, and I climbed on board for the first -and only- VFR leg across the lake to the Michigan Regional Airport. Only a short hop but enough to build my confidence in the airplane and to begin to learn her language. Every airplane talks and all the dumb pilot needs to do is learn it and listen..!

We ended the day at the Toronto City Airport, not the cheapest but worth the sight of the beautiful and nearby skyline. Excellent ATC service, too!

From now on it was time to leave early every day as we moved "against" the clock, losing two or more hours local time between takeoff and landing.

After a quick refuel stop in Baie-Commeau (French speaking only, please!) we pressed on to Goose Bay, which always feels somewhat like coming home to me after spending oh so many weeks during military flying exercises.

What was new to me since I last came through last year is that the whole area is booming with hydro plant and oil rigging construction sites nearby, so all the hotels were booked except for the ex-Air Force BOQs. As I said: home..!

The next day brought us to Narsarssuak on the south tip of Greenland. I always love the sight of the spectacular coastline and the towering glaciers in the distance. Even though the plan would have been to turn the airplane around and continue to Keflavik on Iceland the same day, headwinds plus a Sigmet concerning heavy icing on the flightpath told me to better stay and sit it out. This could easily lead to one, two or even more days of delay, but especially on the Atlantic a pilot should better not count on luck!

So, we gave the airplane a thorough look through. We discovered little things which we didn't like (like the warped air intake cuffs, which we simply cut away to prevent them from coming completely loose and choke the engine).

Stephan, who is a VFR private pilot now having big round eyes from all the things that were new to him, was a great companion to have on a trip like this in this kind of airplane: topping off oil, pulling props through and pampering the plane while the captain does the all-important paper work and his planning and even more importantly his paying duties at the terminal.

The weather gods meant it good with us and we were able to depart through a cloud layer with tops only at 2,100ft, so we could enjoy the spectacular scenery until not long thereafter climbing through another thin layer up to 14,000ft, the minimum IFR cruising level over the icecap. "Never touch a cloud from above, it may be solid ice" was one of the first rules I've been told when I started ferrying airplanes almost 30 years ago. Why? Because the cloud tops may look exactly the same as the smooth icecap does!

When we approached the Keflavik area on Iceland bad news was on the ATIS: Runway 11 in use (the other being closed, read the NOTAMs!), wind 200/30 gust 45.

With a heavy crab angle I managed to stay within the indication range left and right of the localizer. Breaking out at maybe 1,000ft GND I had to check the runway approach lights through the side window. This is going to be interesting, I thought.

The Airbus 320 guys holding short of the runway transmitted "hey, is this a Lockheed or what?" "It's a Twinbee!" I howled back and even though I was somewhat fighting with the elements I thought to myself 'better have a solid yoke to wrestle with than their rather kinky tiny little side stick..!' When I just had her on the ground the tower lady asked to 'expedite leaving the runway at the end' but this time I spared any comment as the landing is only completed when the clocks are set! Sorry you airline boys, you'll have to wait for a minute!

The next morning was like this: heavy headwinds all the way to Scotland. 35 knots average! Even with my extremely nice 100USG extra fuel on board I couldn't do it with legal reserves. Only one alternate airport about 70 or so Nautical Miles offset to the planned track on the Faroer Islands with a VFR approach only. Not good to fit into my personal safety requirements!

This lead me to plan to fly to Eglistadir, a little airfield on the east side of Iceland with Avgas available. From there it would only be 550 NM to Wick in Scotland, my next destination, a solid 100NM shorter than the direct route.

What the weather frogs did not tell me is that there was quite some mixed icing on climb out, but flying eastbound for an hour and a half the sun melted it quickly away once coming on top. A little later we had ground sight flying at 11,000ft, but I had to use more and more power in order to stay airborne. Mountain waves! Maximum continuous power at 85 KIAS and still slightly descending! I requested "block level 9-11,000ft (it is FL90-110 in Europe) and filed a Pirep. It was shortly thereafter given to another aircraft on the same route. But in Sigmet-form!

Refueling at Eglstadir was quickly accomplished and we were off heading towards Scotland, where we made landfall at around sunset.

That was too much!

Next day's journey to the final destination Eisenach, Germany, was a home run except for the European ATC, who tends to create new waypoints every 5 minutes. The final landing in marginal VFR conditions at the small destination brought smiling faces to all of us!

The airplane performed well throughout the trip, never missed a beat during 33 hours and despite the fact that there is no heading bug, no HSI, no RMI and yes! no autopilot either the Twinbeechee is such a harmonized and stable platform to fly that it brings pure joy to all of us who love a little challenge!

Klaus Plasa,
Ferry Pilot

Stephan Gottwald and Klaus Plasa

