

JAZMYNN TRIP



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Jazmynn Trip

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Chapter 1 (Pre-Flight)

From November 21 to December 13, 2008 we took the 1st long trip in N819PR, the Puerto Rico Flyer. We flew it from San Salvador to Brunswick Georgia and back to see Jazmynn, my 1st grandchild. The round trip took a total of 28.5 flight hours over 3 weeks and covered over 3,500NM. Places we stopped included Cozumel and Cancun, Mexico; as well as Key West, Marathon Key, Clearwater and Leesburg Florida. We flew through the airspace of 7 countries. These were El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Belize, Mexico, Cuba and the USA.

I had been preparing to fly my airplane (KIS4 – N819PR) from San Salvador, El Salvador to Brunswick, Georgia for my granddaughters birth scheduled for November 29, 2008. My plan was to depart El Salvador around November 26 in order to be there before the actual birth. My wife, Millie, had already left to be with her mother since November 8th and would meet up with me in Brunswick when I arrived. It was the perfect plan.

My aircraft had been repaired and completely upgraded by the PULSAR factory a few months before and I was working out kinks that always accompany major maintenance. Most kinks had been corrected and a few upgrades had been



N819PR - The Puerto Rico Flyer

started that would be completed well before my November 26 departure date. The upgrades included installing a second communications radio (Icom A-200), connecting a second GPS (Garmin 496) to the autopilot, installing a Kuntzelman red LED aircraft beacon, installing a new cruise propeller (Sensenich Aluminum) and a complete paint job (2003 Harley-Davidson White Pearl Gold).

The GPS wiring had been installed and I was waiting for the GPS to arrive in the mail. The radio had been installed and just needed side-tone adjustments. The aircraft beacon hole had been cut into the fuselage and it was going to be installed as soon as the aircraft paint job had been completed. The paint job was almost finished with final polishing needed before reassembling the aircraft. Everything was going according to plan when on November 18th, my daughter went into labor and Jazmynn Milagros Spires was born.

Now I wanted to head out, but the airplane was in no shape to fly. I talked to the painter and he assured me the paint job would be completed, the airplane reassembled and ready to fly by the 20th. I talked to the electrician and he assured me the beacon would be installed on the 19th. Neither the GPS nor the cruise prop had arrived. The airplane had a loaner propeller on it and I had an older GPS available so, trusting them, I started packing my bags planning the flight.

This would be a 3,000 Nm trip in international airspace with significant over water flying. This also meant learning what was needed for over flight of seven different national airspaces and any landing requirements. On a trip of this distance fuel management is critical so landing within the aircraft's range where reasonably priced fuel is available becomes a big part of the planning. I knew it would take at least 2 days from El Salvador to Georgia so a rest stop had to be planned.

N819PR is certified full IFR to include an autopilot with altitude hold and I am instrument rated, but my instrument currency had long expired. So, to further complicate the planning I have to fly under VFR conditions over a long distance, outside the US where reliable weather information is not easily available. Up to this point the planning had been theoretical but now I had to make actual final decisions and implement them.

Taking into account N819PR's range I decided to make a fuel/rest stop somewhere in the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico. The next day I would fly along the Cuban north coast to the Florida Keys. From there I could fly to Georgia. The one way trip would take about 12 flight hours.



Here is where the INTERNET was so valuable. I had been on the AOPA web page forums for months reading about international flying. A lot more is needed to fly international than to stay within the US. So, months before, I started getting the requirements in order.

If you fly into the US, you have to land at the 1st Customs port of entry you encounter on your flight plan. You have to provide at least 1hr advanced notice of arrival and a Customs aircraft decal (\$27.50) is required. This had to be placed on a specific place on the aircraft. I bought it but since the airplane was being painted, I had it in my airplane Pilot Operating Handbook (POH). A Federal Communications Commission (FCC) radiotelephone permit for me and the airplane is required for any international flight and I had gotten them several months before. All original documents (Airworthiness, Registration, Radio

telephone license, Operating Limitations and Weight/Balance) were in a front pocket in the airplane. Copies of all the documents were also in the airplane POH.

In order to land in Mexico from anywhere outside of Mexico, the airplane needs a Mexican Entry Permit. This costs \$67.00US and was valid for one calendar year. I had to get the permit for 2008. I also needed proof of insurance coverage while within

Mexico. A 406MHz Satellite ELT is required but this was installed in my airplane during the upgrade.

If you fly into Mexico from the US, you have to land at the 1st international airport you encounter on your flight plan. If you fly into Mexico from anywhere in Central America (to include El Salvador) your 1st landing must be in either Tapachula or Cozumel. This meant that Cozumel was the only option I had as a rest/refuel stop in Mexico. So I needed a place to sleep for the night in Cozumel.

One of the persons on the AOPA forum is Rick Gardner from Caribbean Sky Tours and several persons had recommended him for flying into Mexico. I e-mailed him, his wife Pia recommended several hotels in Cancun. I looked up her recommendations on-line, decided on "Hacienda San Miguel" and made reservations.

I wanted to fly just off shore Cuba but in order for a US registered airplane to fly in Cuban sovereign airspace, a special permit is required from the US State Department. I was told this permit is not easy to obtain and everyone recommended I stay at least 15 miles off their coast. This would keep me outside Cuban sovereign airspace so a permit would not be required. This meant I had to be further off shore than I had expected.

Taking these requirements into account and using the AOPA on-line flight planner I chose the following route:

San Salvador (MSSS) to Cozumel, Mexico (MMCZ) – 3.8hrs
Refuel and spend the night.
Cozumel, Mexico (MMCZ) to Key West, Florida (KEYW) – 3.2hrs
Clear Customs and add 15 gallons of fuel.
Key West, Florida (KEYW) to Leesburg, Florida (KLEE) – 2.2hrs
Fuel up.
Leesburg, Florida (KLEE) to St Simons Island, Georgia (KSSI) – 1.2hrs
Arrive in Brunswick, Georgia.

On December 20th, I got notified that the GPS had arrived but I had to get it released from El Salvador Customs. Now that was an experience. I had to pay a total of \$17.00 of taxes to get it out but it took all day (9hrs). So I arrived at Ilopango airport to check the airplane around 5:00pm. I had asked a local aircraft mechanic (Miguel) and one of the PULSAR factory employees (David) to meet me there to check the airplane out. The airplane looked real good with the completed paint job and the new aircraft beacon. So while Miguel and David checked the airplane, I checked the GPS installation and it talked to the autopilot as advertised.

Miguel immediately noticed that the carburetor air inlet filter had not been covered correctly during the painting and was clogged with paint. Luckily for me a friend of mine here had a spare filter and offered it to me. To replace the air filter, the entire cowling has to be removed. This takes 2 persons and it takes a while. I went to get the new filter while they took the cowling off. This was actually a good thing since now he could give the entire firewall forward a better check than if the cowling was still on. When I got back with the filter, Miguel informed me that the left wing fuel vent was clogged. While he replaced the air filter, David worked on the clogged vent.

The left wing fuel drain had a small leak so I decided to replace the drain. We defueled the left wing, which took a while, and replaced the drain. To make sure it would not be a problem, I used a special fuel resistant sealant around the thread. This would take 4hrs to cure.



Ilopango International Airport (MSSS)

By now it was getting dark. When I went to turn the light of the hangar on, nothing happened. It turns out the power company was replacing cables in the area and the hangar would be without power for the next two days. This took a while to finally figure out. So we faced our cars towards the hangar, turned the lights on and continued working.

After the filter was properly installed, Miguel and I closed the cowling but David was still working. David rigged

up some safety wire to a cordless drill then, using it as a drill bit, worked the safety wire up the line. When Miguel blew into the vent hole at the fuel cap, pieces of a small bug flew out. By this time, it was almost 10:00pm. I was tired and ready to go. Miguel told me he would be at the airplane at 7:00am to finish the inspection in daylight. I went home to pack and enter the flight plan into the GPS.

The next day I arrived to Ilopango around 10:00am and Miguel had finished the inspection. I did the most extensive pre-flight in my life. Then I filled up both tanks, did taxi tests and, since everything looked good, I took off to do a complete system check. The flight check went without incident so I landed back at Ilopango to start the trip.



Fueled up and ready to go.

I loaded my baggage, topped up the fuel tank and filed an international flight plan. Then I got a bottle of water, a bag of almonds, a sandwich, two Diet Cokes and put them into a small cooler in the airplane. I sent Mexican authorities in Cozumel my notice of pending arrival and got ready to depart. A friend of mine who was fueling his Apache took a picture of me sitting on the wing just before leaving. I put on my new Revere's Comfort Max life vest with an attached Kannad 406 XS-3 personal locator satellite ELT and closed the door. Then, after calling

ground control, I taxied to Ilopango runway 33 and started the trip. It was 12:10pm, November 21st.

Chapter 2 (Off I go, to Cozumel)

Just as Ilopango tower controller authorized me to enter runway 33 and take off, I realized the months of preparations and planning were over. I took a deep breath, took the runway and aligned myself on the centerline. Pushing the throttle to full power I



Runway 33 - Ilopango

I started rolling down the runway quickly picking up speed. When I reached 65KIAS, I pulled the nose up. A few seconds later “Cruiser N819PR” was airborne and the trip was on.

The climb to 7,500ft was uneventful. Soon I arrived at the 1st international checkpoint (SULMA) of the trip, joined airway B500 and El Salvador Control handed me off to Honduras Control. Even though I was on a VFR flight plan, they treated me as

if I was IFR. The skies were severe clear and beautiful. Between waypoints NAGEL and TIRNA mountains reach 12,000ft so I climbed to 11,500ft and flew on.

With the Garmin GPS and the autopilot taking me to Cozumel, I got bored. Luckily I brought a small MP3 player with 3hrs of music to be my in flight entertainment system. I plugged it into my Lightspeed headset and this helped break up the boredom. After passing NAGEL I came back down to 7,500ft until the La Mesa VOR (LMS). Here the Garmin 496 had the autopilot make a beautiful left turn and I was on my way to Belize via airway G521. That was so cool to just sit there and let the airplane navigate for me. Checking my progress I realized I had about 20kts of headwind. The flight was going to take longer than I had anticipated. A quick endurance calculation confirmed I had plenty of fuel, even with the headwind, to make the flight.

After a few miles I encountered some ugly clouds in my path so I deviated to the left and descended to 4500ft for avoidance. The Honduran controller saw this and asked “Cruiser N819PR, do you want to deviate”? Not wanting to sound arrogant by reminding him I was VFR I said yes to which he “authorized” the deviation. All this time the controllers talked in perfect English which really impressed me. When about 55 miles NW of the LMS VOR, Honduran control told me contact Belize Control on 125.5. I changed frequency and tried to call but no answer. After about 10 minutes I still could not get Belize Control so I tried to call Honduras with no luck. I realized I had no communications with Belize Control and was too far from Honduras to talk with them. I was also at the furthest point from land during this flight, about 35Nm. Not wanting to be in foreign airspace without talking to somebody, I made a 180 degree turn and headed back to Honduras.

It took about 10 minutes before I got them on the frequency. When I told them I had no contact with Belize, they realized they had given me the wrong frequency. It should

have been 124.5 not 125.5. I headed back to Belize with the new frequency and soon had radio contact with them. This took an additional 25 minutes of flying I had not planned on. The headwinds had not subsided so I did another endurance check. This confirmed I still had plenty of fuel available. But just to be sure I throttled back to 65% power (max range) knowing it would take a little longer before arriving.

Belize is an English speaking country but the controller had a heavy Caribbean accent. He was hard to understand. I flew with Belize Control without further incident. Upon approaching waypoint AMIDA, Belize Control handed me off to Merida Center and I was in Mexican airspace.

This controller was very busy with lots of traffic which amazed me. I did not think there would be so many aircraft on the radio at the same time. I had been flying for almost 3hrs and still had over one hour left. I trucked along doing about 120KIAS and 108Kts Ground speed.

This too was uneventful until I was about 50 miles from Cozumel where I was handed off to Cozumel approach. I started a slow descent until about 15 miles from Cozumel. There I was handed off to Cozumel tower and was authorized to land behind an American Airlines B757. The approach is off the shoreline with a beautiful view of the island and the city. There were several cruise ships docked there as I made the right turn and made a smooth landing on runway 11.



Cozumel ground control told me to taxi to the general aviation ramp which I easily found. I was the only aircraft on the ramp. It looked like the entire area was either new or very well maintained. The ramp person guided me to my parking spot and the flight was over. Quite a reception committee was waiting for me. It took 4.3hrs of flying to arrive at Cozumel at an average ground speed of 110Kts. Cruiser N819PR was on the ground in Mexico. I was tired but elated.

As soon as I opened the door and stepped out I was met by an armed Mexican official. He identified himself as a police officer, asked where I departed from and how long I was going to stay in Cozumel. He wrote the information on a note pad and welcomed me to Mexico. A female official then came up and asked if I had any foodstuff. I had totally forgotten about the drinks and food in the cooler up to then. I told her what I had and she told me the drinks and sealed bag of almonds were ok, but not the sandwich.

She told me I could eat it right there or give it to her for disposal. At that point I didn't want the sandwich anyways so I gave it to her and she walked off.

As soon as she walked away two armed soldiers walked up to me. One of them had a medium size dog with him. The 1st soldier asked the same questions as the police officer and he also wrote the answers on a note pad. The soldier with the dog asked me to take out whatever luggage I was going to take with me to the hotel and lay it on the tarmac. I did so and he had the dog go over it. He then told me the dog was going to go into the airplane and to take out anything that the dog might damage. There was nothing that could be damaged, so the dog jumped onto the wing and into the airplane. He sniffed around a bit then jumped back out. This dog was quite a nimble gymnast. Then they welcomed me to Mexico and walked away.

I thought I was over, but no. Another officer came up to me and asked for my passport. This was the Immigration officer and was doing a pre-check of my documents. After a few minutes he told me to make sure to cross Immigration before leaving the airport, a request I thought was odd.

The ramp person loaded my baggage into a van and waited while I secured the airplane for the night. I took anything of value with me just in case. He drove me a short distance to the GA terminal, unloaded my luggage onto an X-ray belt for another check. After that I filled out a Customs Declaration, the officer stamped it and was told to go to a nearby small window. He welcomed me to Mexico. At the small window the Immigration officer who checked my passport on the ramp was waiting. He had me fill out the Immigration form and stamped my passport. When he finished he welcomed me to Mexico and told me I was officially in the country.

The ramp person placed my luggage aside and told me I had to go to a nearby desk to close my flight plan. Here the Dirección General de Aviación Civil (DGAC) the Mexican equivalent to our Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) representative had me fill another form and told me to go back to Customs and Immigration to have them stamp it. Once this was done, I went to another nearby desk which was airport operations. There they checked my paperwork and told me to go to the DGAC Comandancia office on the 2nd floor for the rest of the processing.

At the DGAC Comandancia office they asked me for the Aircraft Mexican Entry Permit, which I did not have. They told me I had to pay for one, which I already knew, so they had me fill out another form for the permit. I paid the \$67.00US for the permit and waited. This took about 1hr until they had the permit completed. It was a good thing I had copies of all my paperwork in the POH and I had it with me. If not, I would have had to go back to the airplane for the documents. Their copy machine was not working so I told them to keep the copies I had. I had heard this was common and that if I didn't have copies they would go to a local store to make copies and this could take an additional 30 minutes to 1hr.

The DGAC Comandancia gave me my 2008 Aircraft Mexican Entry Permit, stamped my paperwork and welcomed me to Mexico. I went back to the original DGAC desk where all the paperwork was checked. Since everything was now in order, they welcomed me to Mexico and said I was cleared to go. The entire process took almost 3hrs. The

general aviation facilities at Cozumel are excellent. They are either new or they maintain them extremely well.

The ramp guy, still with my luggage, showed me where to get a taxi to “Hacienda San Miguel”. He knew exactly where it was and told me the taxi would cost about 45 pesos (\$5.00). When the taxi pulled up, he loaded my bags into the taxi for me. I gave him a \$2.00 tip and he thanked me about 100 times.

The taxi ride was short and I arrived at “Hacienda San Miguel” just after 7:00pm. The girl at the front counter was waiting for me, checked me in quickly and led me to my hotel room. The hotel is quaint and the kind of off the beaten path hotel you see in movies. It only has 10 rooms and a certain Mexican charm to it that I really liked. I will be staying there again and want to bring my wife next time. She would love it.

Once I had taken a shower and changed clothes I realized, I was hungry! It dawned on me that I had not eaten anything since breakfast in San Salvador over 11 hours ago. The front counter attendant recommended a local restaurant called “La Misión” which was a short walk away.



The patio of Hacienda San Miguel

Cozumel at night is alive with activity. People were walking everywhere but it was not crowded. The cruise ships had departed, but stores were still open. Since I was so hungry, the walk felt longer than I wanted. I arrived at “La Misión” and sat down to order. I had red snapper fish made a la Mexican, which was very good. It was also a fairly large serving, which was perfect for my hunger. The best part was the dessert. I had the home made coconut ice cream which was excellent. You could really tell this was not store bought ice cream and probably hand made. I paid the bill, which was about \$12.00USD, walked back to the hotel and went straight to sleep.

Chapter 3 (Cozumel to Key West)

The next day I awoke about 6:30am to the sounds of a far away rooster crowing. With the sounds, the room decoration and the smell of something cooking it felt like I was in a Mexican Hacienda. I got dressed, walked down to the patio and sat down for the included continental breakfast. At the patio you can receive the hotel's wireless internet so I checked the weather and double checked my planned flight as I ate. After breakfast I packed my bags, took them to the front counter and asked them to call a taxi for me. The hotel cost me \$71.00USD and was worth it. I could have spent a lot more for a lot less.



KIS Cruiser N819PR

The taxi arrived quickly and I was back at the Cozumel airport GA terminal around 8:45am. As soon as I walked in I noticed the ramp guy who had helped me the night before was there. He told me his shift is from 10:00am to 10:00pm but he arrived early since he loves working around airplanes. He took my luggage, we went through airport security and I started loading the airplane. There were many different airplanes on the ramp and it was obvious they were quite busy. My KIS cruiser was the talk of the ramp. It seemed like every

pilot there asked what it was and had a comment on the paint job. In the bright Cozumel sun the white pearl gold paint looked incredible. Most persons thought it was a type of Cirrus. After I finished loading the airplane, the ramp guy told me to go back to the DGAC (Mexican FAA) to file my flight plan and they would tell me what steps to take.

At the DGAC desk they had me fill out an international VFR flight plan for "KIS4 Cruiser N819PR". It was just like the one I filled out in El Salvador the day before. Since I kept the old one, I just changed the dates, times and route. I filed:

Type AC: KIS4
Identifier: N819PR

Route:
Cozumel via B879 to NOSAT
NOSAT to VINKA
VINKA via B646 to CANOA
CANOA to FISHOOK
FISHOOK to Key West (KEYW)

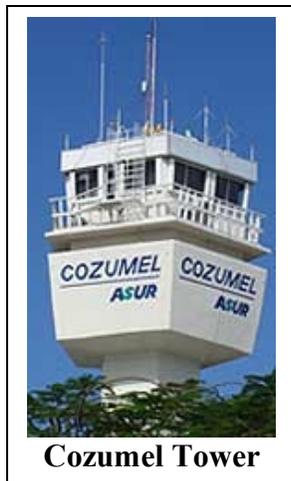
The flight should take 3.5hrs with no wind. However, there was a low pressure off the east coast of Florida that was creating strong winds from the north east. Great, this meant another day with strong headwinds slowing me down. With this updated information I planned for a 4hr flight.

The DGAC officer told me to clear Customs at their window. The Customs officer asked me for my paperwork and he stamped it about 5 times. I then went to the Immigration window. After 5 or 6 more stamps between my paperwork and passport, I had cleared Immigration. Now back to the DGAC officer.

The DGAC officer had a copy of the en-route weather for me with the METAR for Havana and Key West. That was something I had not expected. I asked for a fuel truck and he made a radio call. He told me that the truck would take about 20 minutes so I went into the terminal and bought a sandwich. Remembering what happened to the last sandwich, I quickly ate that one.

After about 30 minutes, the fuel truck showed up and it took 33.6 gallons to fill the tanks. The total cost for the fuel was \$104.17USD but they added \$8.31USD as airspace and airport tax. This meant I paid a total of \$3.35USD per gallon of fuel. Since most of the flight had been at 65% power my fuel burn had been 7.8GPH. This would be my power setting for all overwater portions of the trip. Now at 9:30am I was almost ready to take off, or so I thought.

When I drained fuel from the left wing, it was full of water. I use the GATS jar and ½ of the jar was water. When I drained fuel from the right tank, I got the same results. Not good for any flight none the less for such a long overwater flight. This is why I always check the fuel after fueling up. I decided to wait a while to let any more water go to the drain before continuing to take fuel samples. While waiting I informed the DGAC officer of the problem and he immediately called the fuel company. They came back and told



Cozumel Tower

me they had drained and checked the fuel earlier and that everything was ok. I showed them the GATS jar and they could not explain why it had so much water. I kept taking fuel samples and the amount of water slowly came down. It was about 11:00am when I was finally convinced there was no water in my fuel tanks. Now I could finally depart Cozumel to Key West.

Since it was going to be a long flight, I decided to check my in-flight entertainment system the MP3 Player. The battery was almost completely dead. I asked the ramp guy if they had AAA batteries at the terminal and he said no. But he also said he could go to a small store just outside the airport and buy some. I gave him \$10.00 and he raced away. I finished the pre-flight and waited for the batteries. A few minutes later he shows up with a 3 pack of

Duracell AAA batteries. He showed me the receipt for \$5.00 and I told him to keep the change. I put on my life vest and closed the airplane door. Calling Cozumel ground, they cleared me to runway 11 and I taxied away. The ramp guy waved goodbye and I realized I never got his name. It was already 11:30AM.

With power checks completed, I taxied to runway 11 and took off. The airplane took off quickly and I took a left turn to intercept airway B879. As I climbed I got a good look at Cozumel during the day. The island is beautiful, with crystal clear water surrounding it. Almost as if I was looking at a tourism advertisement. I will be back to Cozumel, but with more time to spend.

After about 25 minutes "Cruiser N819PR" was level at 7,500ft. Soon Cozumel handed me off to Merida and "George the Autopilot" took over the flight. The MP3 player was singing in my ear as I flew further and further away from land. This flight would take me further away from land than any time during the trip. There are 106 NM between Cozumel and the west coast of Cuba. That meant that at one point I would be 53 miles from any point of land. That is a lot of water to cross. Having flown many years over water with the US Customs Air Program and with the Civil Air Patrol, I knew it wasn't a big deal. But, you still keep it on the back of your mind so you can react immediately if a situation happens and not waste time deciding the best course of action. I also knew the water temperature was probably in the low 80's so I was not worried about having to spend an extended period of time in the water.

If anybody is contemplating extended overwater flying, I recommend taking some kind of survival training. With Customs I took mandatory survival training every year. They concentrated on water survival so I have a good idea of what to expect. There were a few things I learned about water survival that opened my eyes. The 1st thing is that if you have to ditch, you will probably want to get out of the airplane as soon as possible. That means that if the survival gear isn't strapped to your body you probably won't have it when you leave the airplane. I doubt I will want to go back into a possibly sinking airplane to remove anything once I am out. So if the airplane sinks, that mandatory expensive ELT installed in the airplane will go down with it and the signal will not be picked up by anybody. That is why I carry the personal ELT with GPS capabilities strapped to my life vest.

Another thing is that it is extremely difficult to climb into a life raft in open waters. If you do not continuously practice this, you will probably run out of energy trying to get in and not be able to stay afloat. If you don't believe me, try getting into a play raft in the deep end of a swimming pool. It will open your eyes. Now add wind, waves, adrenaline, passengers and maybe an injury or two and you will see why I fly with my life vest on whenever I will be over water for a significant period of time.

Once close to NOSAT, Merida Center handed me over to Havana Center. The controller was busy with lots of air traffic. He cleared me to waypoint VINKA and I chugged along. Just as I expected I had about 20kts of headwind. The GPS showed I had a ground speed of only 105Kts. It was a good thing I had fresh batteries in my MP3 player. As I flew along I kept checking to see if I could shorten the flight without entering Cuban sovereign air space. At a point between NOSAT and VINKA the GPS showed I could turn right, go to waypoint MAXIM instead of CANOA and still stay outside of Cuban sovereign airspace. So I asked Havana Center for present position direct MAXIM then direct FISHOOK. After a few minutes of waiting he cleared me direct MAXIM, with a warning to remain outside of Cuban sovereign airspace. This meant I could stay about 25 NM off the Cuban coast all the way to just south of Key West. Much better than 50 NM off shore.

As I flew along, the clouds started to build up. I flew around them, then up and down to stay VFR. A light rain started as I maneuvered around the weather. I had to keep descending as the weather closed in. Havana Center told me the weather at Varadero and Havana was VFR while Key West was reporting clear skies. Since I had seen the weather satellite picture before taking off, I knew these were isolated clouds with showers. Even though, I was soon flying at 2,500ft in order to stay VFR. I now wished I had maintained my IFR currency. Oh well. This weather stayed with me for about 45 minutes until I was approaching MAXIM. Just before the waypoint I was in severe clear skies. I climbed to 5,500ft and leveled off just as Havana Center handed me off to Miami Center. Except for the weather and a ground speed of just over 108Kts, "Cruiser 9PR" was doing just fine.



Cumulus clouds along the way



Approaching Key West Runway 9

At about 50 NM from Key West, Miami Center handed me off to Key West approach. After a while they handed me off to Key West tower and I was cleared to land. As I approached Key West, I looked and my ground speed was only 75Kts. A Cirrus was approaching from the east and he was reporting a 212Kt ground speed. The winds were howling at about 40kts right on my nose. This made for a slow straight in but my touchdown was silky smooth. I taxied to US Customs and parked next to the building. I took 3.7 hours from Cozumel to Key West and I was happy to be back in the good old USA. With the

time change, it was now almost 4:30pm.

Clearing Customs in the US is so easy compared to Mexico. After about 30 minutes I had cleared and was calling for a fuel truck. I only took 15 gallons of fuel at Key West since it was \$5.91/gal and this was all I needed to get to Leesburg, Florida (KLEE) where fuel is inexpensive. A quick call to US Flight Service and I had filed my flight plan. I was airborne and on my way after just over one hour on the ground.

Chapter 4 (Cheap Fuel and Grumpy ATC)

As the sun started setting in the west, sounds like a spaghetti western, I flew along the Florida Keys in beautiful weather except for the darned head wind until I took a left turn at Marathon Key. I had "George" the autopilot fly to Marathon Key before heading north so as to stay inside US Sovereign airspace and not penetrate the Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ). This way I would not be intercepted by a couple of angry US Air Force Fighters that would ruin my day. This was another reason I made sure I had ATC radar advisories and was on a specific squawk.

As I flew north, I was handed off from controller to controller without incident for about 45 minutes. That was until I got close to Fort Myers, Florida. When I was handed off to a particular controller, he seemed to be upset at me. He sternly asked what my type of aircraft was. I told him the designation was KIS4. Now, KIS4 is the official FAA/ICAO designator for my airplane. He asked me again to say type so I answered "Home Built Experimental KIS4". I guess he didn't like that because he proceeded to chastise me for not using HBX as my type designator. I politely told him that KIS4 was the official FAA/ICAO designator but I would use HBX if he wanted.

I had flown through 7 different international airspaces, talking to many different controllers without an issue. I had filed all my flight plans as KIS4 and everyone had accepted it, including the US Flight Service Station back in Key West. I know that the official FAA and ICAO designator for my airplane is KIS4. But he did not want me to use it. So, from that point on he called me "Experimental 9PR" which was fine by me. After a while he handed me off to another controller. As soon as I checked in with him he immediately asked me for my type designator, again.

Now, I worked as an Air Traffic Controller with the Puerto Rico Air National Guard for many years. During this time I often worked at the FAA's San Juan Combined En-route Approach (CERAP) facility. I know controllers sit next to each other and overhear radio transmissions, especially if the transmission is out of the ordinary. I was expecting to be chastised again so I answered:

"N819PR is an experimental homebuilt with a designation of KIS4".

He then said: "N819PR, I have reset your designator in the system to KIS4. What would you LIKE to be called?"

Holding back a chuckle, I said: "Either Cruiser 9PR or Experimental 9PR is fine with me."

Then, as if making sure he was being heard, he answered "Roger, CRUISER 9PR maintain VFR. I show no traffic on your route at this time."

I did not have any problems with my call sign after that.

By now it was starting to get dark so I turned on my instrument light. The Instrument lights on the co-pilot side worked perfect but not the pilot's side. I had no lights for any of my primary instruments. Checking everything I could tell there had to be a broken wire to the pilot side of the instrument panel lights. Luckily, not just by regulation, I always carry several flashlights with me. I pulled one out and lit up my panel. Then I remembered, I had bought an LED Head Beam Flashlight that straps around your head and it was in my flight bag. I put it on and it was wonderful. I had white or red lighting wherever I looked. I used the red light so I wouldn't lose any night vision while seeing all my instruments perfectly. The best part was if I looked down to write something down, it would illuminate the pad so I could read the information when I needed it. I am sold on this tiny miracle and will never fly without one in my flight bag.

Just before 7:00pm I approached Leesburg, Florida (KLEE) for landing and refueling. The tower was just about to close when I called in. As soon as I landed, the tower closed and I was on my own. I needed to taxi to the self service fuel pumps but had no idea where they were or how to get to them. Luckily another pilot was taxiing out after getting fuel and he told me the pumps were next to the tower. That was great but I had never been to Leesburg before and had no idea of how to get to the tower, especially at night. Just before I went to pull out the airport diagram I had in my flight bag, I remembered the Safe Taxi function of my newly installed Garmin 496. I zoomed in and could see where I was on the taxiway and how to get to the tower. I let the GPS guide me and easily found the fuel pumps.

If you ever fly anywhere near Leesburg, you need to get fuel there. On November 22, 2008, I bought 38.6 gallons of 100LL and paid \$2.40 a gallon. That was the same price I had paid for gas in my car just a few weeks before. As soon as I pulled away, another airplane was landing and asked where the fuel pumps were. Now I returned the favor to the arriving pilot. Once again the Garmin 496 SafeTaxi feature assisted me greatly in getting to the runway at an airport I had never been before. It is a great method of confirming your position on the airport as I taxied to the runway for takeoff.

The final leg to St Simons Island (KSSI) was in severe clear and smooth air. When I left Cozumel, the temperature was about 81 degrees. Now as I headed towards Jacksonville Florida the air temperature was around 20 degrees. It was COLD. With "George" flying the airplane, I put on a jacket and flight gloves. There was nobody talking on the radio and I could tell traffic was light. Just south of Jacksonville the controller told me all the airspaces were cold and at my altitude I could go direct to St. Simons if I wanted. I immediately turned and headed that way. The only other aircraft I encountered during this leg was a US Navy P3 practicing night approaches into Jacksonville. It was neat to see him below me do a touch n go as I overflew KJAX at 7,500ft. About this time it dawned on me, I had not eaten anything since breakfast. I looked into the cooler and found the



Jacksonville International Airport

almonds and the Diet Cokes that had been there since leaving El Salvador the day before. So, I had an in-flight snack between KJAX and KSSI just like flying the big airlines.

Finally, around 9:00pm on Saturday November 22, 2008 I landed on runway 4 at St. Simons Island, Georgia. The entire trip had taken more than 12 flight hours over two days. The funny thing was that as soon as I taxied off runway 4 at KSSI, the engine felt like it was running a little rough. Oh well, I'll get a mechanic to look at it on Monday. I taxied to the tie down area of Golden Isles Aviation (GIA) and shut the airplane down. Stepping out, N819PR never looked better to me.



Golden Isles Aviation FBO

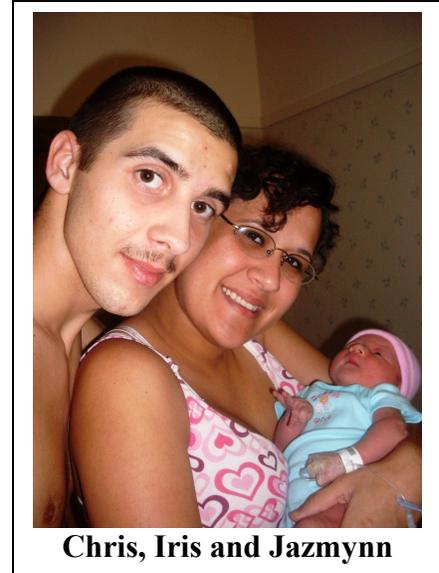
I called my wife to let her know I had arrived and she told me she was on her way. I took my time to tie the airplane down and get most of my "junk" out of it. Then I went to GIA, opened the door and got in out of the cold. Even though GIA closes at 8:00pm they were still open until one last airplane, a Gulfstream G4, was gone. The G4 left a few minutes after I walked in but they let me stay inside their facilities and told me just to make sure the door was locked when I left. Little things like this are what make Golden Isle Aviation my favorite FBO. My wife

arrived about 10 minutes later. Tired but happy, I loaded the car, headed out to see my granddaughter and get a full meal. The 1st part of the trip was over.

Chapter 5 (Family, Friends, Fixing and Flying)

While we drove away from St. Simons Island to get something to eat, it dawned on us that it was 10:30 at night. It was a little late to start looking for a place to eat. We pulled up to several restaurants we enjoyed and all of them were closing down for the night. We were to stay at a cousin's (Maria) house so we called them and they were going to have pizza delivered. Pizza is one of my favorite foods so we drove straight there.

Once we got there the house was full. As soon as I walked in my eldest daughter Iris and Son-in-Law Chris proudly showed me my beautiful granddaughter, Jazmynn Milagros Spires. That day I held Jazmynn for the 1st time. Only those that have grandchildren understand how I felt holding her. But being a guy, the feeling soon wore off and was replaced by my hunger. I hugged and kissed everyone there and proceeded to pig out on pepperoni pizza. Life was good.



After a while everybody wanted to know about the flight, the airplane, the places I landed and a million other things. We talked about everything while Jazmynn slept, I admired her and time flew by. I finally made it to bed about 4:00am.

The next day Millie and I went to the airplane to get the rest of my "stuff" out of it. Golden Isle Aviation (GIA) had moved the airplane and parked it right in front of the EAA Chapter 905 building. As soon as we got to the airplane several of the chapter members came over to talk. I

spent the next hour proudly showing the airplane off and talking about the trip. One of the members was looking into building a KIS4. He told me the only other KIS4 he had seen was one that had a door incident there the previous year causing it to land hard on the nose wheel severely bending the propeller. It had sat there for over 1 month before being trucked away. I just smiled and told him I was the pilot that had the incident and this was the exact same airplane. When I said this everyone was totally amazed. Nobody had recognized it as the same airplane, even though they had gone over it with a fine toothed comb.

I went over the upgrades and modifications done to the airplane. They were especially impressed with the paint job. From far away the airplane is white. But when you get up

close you realize it is a gold pearl white, the same gold pearl white used on 2003 Harley-Davidson motorcycles. In direct sunlight it shines and glimmers different than any airplane you have ever seen. A lot of questions also came up with the wing tips, especially how it affected performance. I can honestly say I have not seen much of a difference in performance with the wing tips. But with the paint job and the wing tips, the airplane attracts a lot of attention.

The rest of the day was spent resting and recovering from the “jet lag” inherent with long distance travel. I also called a few friends there to let them know I was in town with the airplane. Then back to be with my family and friends.

The next few days were spent enjoying my family and we even took our 2008 family Christmas picture. I also worked on small maintenance issues I ran into on the way up.



2008 Family Christmas Picture

This included coordinating with Kirk Ramsey from Palmetto Aircraft Repair to check on the roughness in the engine when I landed. I also wanted him to do one last oil change with straight mineral oil and install the cruise propeller once it arrived. When I took it in on Wednesday he cleaned and checked the spark plug gaps, changed the oil and ran the engine. He told me there was nothing wrong with the engine and it was running smoothly.

After he finished, I started the airplane up for a quick test flight. While doing the run up, my radio went to stuck mike mode. I tried everything I could but nothing worked. I tried using my newly installed radio #2 with the same results. I had no radio communications. I had to fly back to El Salvador through several international airspaces and over significant amount of ocean. I was not about to do it without communications. Since the problem affected both radios I knew it had to be either the audio selector panel or the wiring. This was totally unacceptable. Now, there is no avionics shop or person at KSSI and the closest recommended place I could get the communications checked is at St. Augustine (KSGJ), Florida. I made plans to fly there the next day with my old trusty Icom A-22 handheld radio.

The next day I arrived at the airport about 6:30am for the flight to St. Augustine. A very cold front had just passed through the night before and the temperature was hovering around 27degrees. I was so happy the original builder (Dave Tate) had installed an electric oil heater so I plugged it in as I did my pre-flight. I nearly froze doing the pre-flight. When I went to start the engine, it turned over very slowly then the battery went dead. When it isn't one thing it is the other. The ramp guys from GIA brought over a battery charger and I went in, out of the cold. After about 1hr, the battery was fully charged and I was ready to go. This time the engine turned over and started quickly. Just before I taxied out, I decided to try the radio one more time. The radios worked perfectly. No stuck mike, no squeal, no nothing.

I tried everything I could to get the radios to fail but they worked fine. I remembered I had done a lot of electrical work to include replacing a burnt out taxi light running the battery down. With the cold temperature and a low battery to start with, it probably caused the audio panel to act up. Once the battery was fully charged, the problem went away. Just to be sure, I took off, flew around the pattern a while, did a few touch n go's and verified that everything was working properly. Good thing Millie had waited for me so I got back in the car and headed back home. Now the only maintenance thing left was to install and balance the new cruise propeller when it arrived. Sensenich propellers told me it would be ready to ship by that Friday so we made plans to install it on Monday.

While waiting for the propeller to arrive I called a good friend of mine who wanted to fly the airplane. Emilio is also a CFI/CFII and an excellent pilot. We decided to do some flying together and I could get my BFR out of the way. So for the next few days I reviewed flight rules, regulations and everything needed for my BFR. I know Emilio will not give me any slack just because we are friends. He has a reputation of giving very thorough check rides, which I like.

On the afternoon of Thursday, December 4th we took off to fly around the Golden Isles of Georgia and do my BFR. After doing steep turns and stalls, we headed to Brunswick Golden Isles airport (KBQK) for some landings. I did the ILS to a normal landing on runway 7 which came out quite nice. I took off was climbing through 2,500ft when Emilio pulled the throttle on me for a simulated engine failure.

This airplane flies so well with the engine out and I had plenty of altitude for landing when he gave me the simulated engine failure. Actually I had so much altitude and airspeed (130KIAS) I extended my down wind in order to land slightly long on the 7,000ft runway. When I turned final Emilio said "You are too far out to make the runway." Knowing he has a lot of hours in Piper, Beech and Cessna's but had never been in an airplane like mine I told him "Do you want to bet a soda on it?" He was smart and said "No, but I think you are way too far anyways." I flew to the runway at 100KIAS maintaining altitude until I knew I had the runway made. I let the airspeed bleed off to 85KIAS and actually had to slip the airplane in order to land on the 1st 1/3 of the runway. The aircraft's performance totally impressed Emilio and he mentioned that would have never been possible in any airplane he had flown before. We KIS owners know this to be a fact. We just need to convince the rest of the aviation world how good an airframe the KIS4 really is.

After that we went to Jekyll Island Airport (09J) where he had me do a short field landing. Once again the landing was right on the money. Another take off and back to St Simons Island (KSSI) we went. As I was about to start the flare for landing on runway 4, Emilio said there were animals on the runway. So I added full power and N819PR climbed right back in the air on a go around. Once up to altitude, another steep turn and he had me landed on runway 16 with about 10Kts of crosswind. Once again the airplane handled like advertised and I made another smooth landing. With this he told me the BFR flight was over and we taxied back to the ramp. He gave me a very complete debriefing which shows his experience as an instructor. He jokingly commented that the airplane handles like a Corvette sports car but I fly it as if it was a Volkswagen sedan. That is an observation I am proud of and will remember for a long time

Now all I needed was for the propeller to arrive and to install it. Another call to Sensenich and they confirmed the propeller was ready to ship and they were waiting for payment. The propeller was the final part the PULSAR factory had to install to complete the repairs. So I now had to wait until the factory made payment for it to be shipped. While waiting for the propeller I made a few more flights in the area with other pilot friends. They all were impressed with the airplane's performance.

More calls to Sensenich and PULSAR seemed to get me nowhere. Finally, the propeller was paid for and shipped. Unfortunately it was now Friday and it takes 2 working days for delivery to Georgia from Pennsylvania. According to UPS, delivery was scheduled for Monday of the next week. Kirk told me as soon as the propeller arrived he would immediately install it so I could get going. Looking at the weather there was a strong cold front headed my way and it would arrive about the same time I had to leave.

On Sunday, Millie left Brunswick to Tampa Florida where we keep our car stored. I would fly there and pick her up on the way back to El Salvador. So, I stayed back waiting for the propeller to arrive.

About 10:30am on Monday December 8th, the UPS truck showed up with my new propeller. Kirk stopped everything he was doing and installed the propeller right there.



The whole family playing UNO

Later that afternoon, I did a test flight and the propeller ran as smooth as silk. The best part was that I now had 145 KIAS at 2,000ft and 65% power. I had gained almost 20 KIAS with 1,200 ft/min climb at sea level. Static RPM's were just over 2,250. The propeller was everything I expected. I still wanted to have the propeller dynamically balanced before I left but it was late in the day and too windy to do it. Another day awaited me. I took advantage and spent more time with my family.

Early the next day Kirk hooked up the equipment for the dynamic balance as I loaded up the airplane for the return trip.

Hooking up the equipment took longer than the actual balancing. The readings indicated that it was balanced so well it did not need any additional balancing. So with this final maintenance completed, Kirk filled out my logbooks and I paid him for his services.

If you are ever near KSSI and need any work done you need to look Kirk Ramsey up. I can do most of the work myself but having another set of eyes do certain things and at the same time check what I have done, gives me a sense of security that is priceless. His work is impeccable and his rates are super reasonable. Do yourself a favor and have Kirk check your airplane if you are in the area.

Now what was left was to have the weather clear up enough for me to take off. The FSS weather briefer reported the ceiling were low until south of Jacksonville Florida. After there, it was typical VFR weather. I had to get south of Jacksonville but KSSI was reporting 600 overcast and boy was it accurate. It was forecast to be 2,000 ft overcast in about 3 hours, but the severe weather was to arrive about the same time. This weather had already spawned tornadoes in Alabama, Mississippi and western Georgia. So I waited, and waited, and waited.

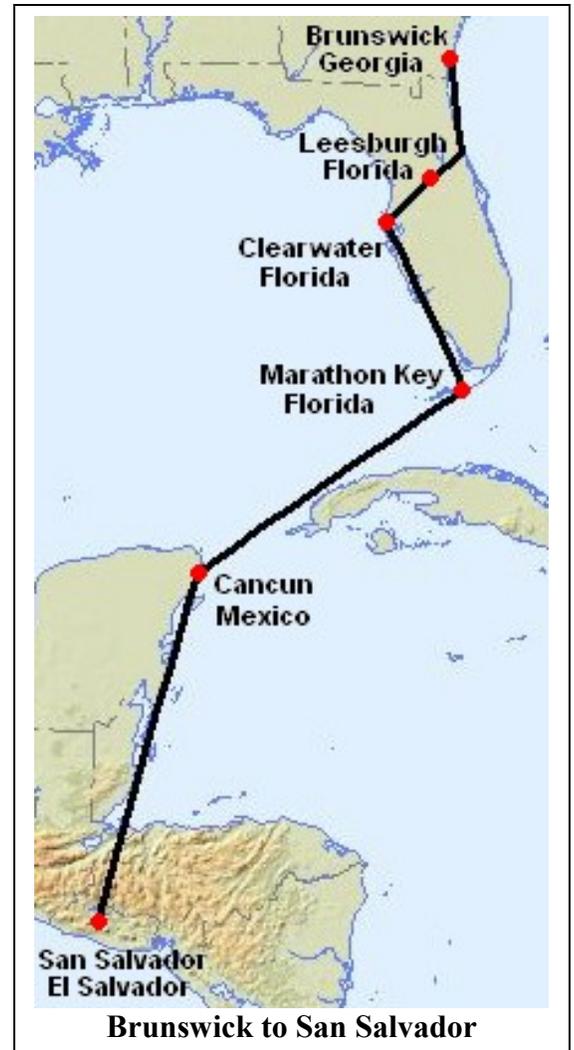
At about 1:00pm I could tell the ceilings were climbing but now the severe weather was getting close. A big line of nasty thunderstorms was headed my way and I could see on the radar image they would be arriving soon. Tornado warnings were being issued for counties to the west. If they arrived before I could leave, I would be stuck for at least another two days. The weather south of Jacksonville was typical VFR with ceiling around 6,000 to 8,000ft. At Leesburg (KLEE), where I was headed for inexpensive fuel, the weather was VFR and forecast to stay that way all day. Tampa Clearwater airpark (KCLW), where I would overnight and pick Millie up, was reporting the same. I had to leave and leave soon. I monitored KSSI's AWOS until it reported 1500 scattered, 2000 overcast. Good enough for me. It was about 2:00pm on Tuesday December 9th, 2008. I jumped into the airplane, taxied to runway 4 and started the return trip to El Salvador.

Chapter 6 (Bad Weather and Bad Comms)

As I climbed in altitude and turned south, I got a better look at the weather situation. The weather to the west looked dark and real bad. Over the ocean to the east it was clear and obviously VFR. To the south it was about halfway in between, not real bad but not real good. Now I was so glad I had subscribed to the XM Weather feature for my Garmin 496 GPS. It clearly showed bad weather about 50 miles to the west but nothing to the south. My plan was to fly along the coastline until I got to Ormond Beach. From there I would head west to Leesburg (KLEE) for inexpensive fuel and finish the day in Clearwater Florida (KCLW). The weather seemed to be good on my path, so I pressed on.

I leveled off at about 1,500ft and had some scattered clouds about 500ft above me. At about 3,000ft the cloud layer looked to be solid. So I flew along at 1,500ft about 5 miles off shore. Within a few minutes my airspeed was showing 150kts and I activated the autopilot. As soon as the autopilot servo kicked in, the airplane started a left hand turn. I deactivated the servo, put the aircraft back on course and tried again. Once again the airplane took an un-commanded left turn. Great, now the autopilot was not working. I would have to hand fly the entire trip back. At least the altitude hold worked.

After a while I was east of Jacksonville Florida (KJAX), still at 1,500ft and I could see the weather clearing up. As the clouds deck got higher I climbed in altitude. By the time I was east of St. Augustine (KSGJ) there were only scattered clouds with no broken or overcast layers. I climbed to 6,500ft and headed towards Ormond Beach (KOMN). By now the radio chatter had increased significantly, mostly with aircraft avoiding the bad weather to the west. Knowing there would be a lot of air traffic around the Ormond Beach VOR (OMN), Cruiser 9PR checked in with ATC for Radar Advisories.



The closer I got to the VOR the more aircraft I could hear on the frequency. At the VOR, I took a right turn and headed towards Leesburg. A few minutes after the turn I noticed the radio had gotten very quiet. A few quick checks and I realized my radio had a stuck mike. When I changed to radio #2, it went to stuck mike with no audio again. The same problem I had in Brunswick was back. Even worse I was flying in an area of fairly heavy air traffic.

I changed the primary radio to an unused frequency and the secondary radio to the last ATC frequency. I could hear the air traffic but as soon as I selected that radio to talk, it went to stuck mike. ATC was calling me but as soon as I selected the radio it again went to stuck mike with no audio. I deselected the radio so that I wouldn't block the frequency for everybody and ATC kept trying to call me.

Since I knew I couldn't respond, I set my transponder to 7700 then after a minute changed it to 7600. ATC came on the radio and asked, if I could hear them to squawk IDENT which I did. We then went through the entire procedure with him asking questions to which I would answer with the IDENT. He had me remain on the frequency as I headed to Leesburg. Suddenly I remembered I had my Icom A-22 handheld transceiver in my bag. I pulled it out, plugged my headphones in and tried calling ATC. Nothing happened. I tried a second time with the same results. On my third try another aircraft called ATC and told him I was trying to call. With that aircraft doing relay, I was able to establish communications with ATC. Apparently my handheld just didn't have enough power to reach ATC, but I could talk to the other aircraft just fine. I confirmed I wanted to continue to Leesburg and land there. About 15 miles out, he sent me to KLEE tower at 119.35. I called the tower on my handheld and got a response. My handheld was strong enough for full communications now that I was close. I got into the pattern and landed at about 4:00pm. The tower controller told me they had been advised by Orlando approach that I would be arriving under NORDO procedures and they had gotten ready to provide me light signals. They were pleasantly surprised when I was able to talk to them with my handheld radio. I have had my handheld radio for almost 15 yrs and had only used it to get weather and initial clearances. This was the 1st time I ever needed to use it in a real situation. I am so glad I have it and carry it with me.

As I taxied, I asked if by any chance there was an avionics shop on the field. Luckily for me Central Florida Avionics & Instruments is at the Leesburg airport. The tower gave me directions to their ramp and as I arrived, a line person was waiting for me. Apparently the tower had called ahead and told them of my situation. Mike Noland from Central Florida Avionics came out and I explained my situation. He told me the problem was probably with the PTT switch and he would check it out for me so I could continue the flight to Clearwater. He told me to go ahead and wait inside the air conditioned office. I went in and looked around the shop. The amount of test equipment there was quite impressive. I could tell this shop does a lot of avionics work.

Before I could even sit down, Mike came back and told me I had a short circuit in the co-pilot PTT line. He could isolate the problem and fix it but it could take several hours. Or he could deactivate the co-pilot PTT line at the intercom panel and I could be on my way within an hour. The only thing that would be affected is that the co-pilot would not be able to transmit until the problem was corrected. I elected for the latter since I wanted to get to Clearwater before dark. He told me it would take a while to figure out which pin to deactivate since he did not have the diagram of my RST-564 intercom. I told him I had the intercom diagram on my laptop and could give it to him on a memory chip, to which he was amazed. That is a huge advantage of flying a homebuilt experimental. I have just about every piece of documentation pertaining to the airplane and have most of it digitized and on the laptop I carry with me. He quickly printed it out and walked off to the airplane while I checked the weather between KLEE and KCLW.

After a while he came back carrying the intercom with him. He told me that he would bench check the intercom just to be sure. It bench checked perfectly and he went back and re-installed the intercom. I walked out with him and he showed me the pin he had deactivated so I could tell whoever was to complete the work. We did a complete radio check with everything working properly. That is when he looked at the rear of the airplane's fuselage and saw the flag stickers I have. His eyes got real big and asked me why I had the Guatemalan, Honduran and Salvadoran flags on it. I told him I was based in El Salvador, had flown the airplane up from there and was on my way back. Slightly in shock, he then asked me if I was based at Ilopango.



Now I was in shock. He not only recognized the flags, he knew the GA airport in El Salvador was named Ilopango. When I said "yes" he told me he had just been there a few weeks before. He goes to Central America once every few months to do avionics work there and visits Ilopango on every trip. He even talked about the aero club restaurant at the airport and how good the food is there. I remembered there had been an American avionics guy at Ilopango a few days before I started the trip. Talk about coincidences. We chatted a little bit about flying in Central America, I paid the bill got back in the airplane and taxied to the fuel pump. After taking a full load of fuel (at \$2.23/gal) I then took off towards Clearwater airpark. Now there two reasons to visit Leesburg, inexpensive fuel and a good avionics shop.

After the communications problems, this part of the flight was completely uneventful, which was fine by me. I could see the bad weather far off to the west and knew it was just a matter of time before it would arrive. After a little over 30 minutes of flight, I aligned myself with runway 16 at KCLW. With a stiff headwind, the landing was short and soft. Over the radio the Clearwater Airpark FBO gave me a spot to park. It was about 6:00pm. I called my wife who was already in the area and she told me one of my good friends (Carlos Montalvo) would be there to pick me up. We have been friends for

over 20 yrs, our wives are super good friends and so are our kids. We would be staying at his house for the night.

While I waited for him to arrive, I pulled out my luggage, secured the airplane and walked into the terminal. The FBO told me there was a \$15.00 per night parking fee, but it would be waived if I took fuel even if I only took a few gallons. I agreed and they put a total of 6.4 gallons of fuel. I paid \$20.16 for the fuel so it was only \$5.16 more than what I would have paid if I had not fueled up. That meant I paid less than \$1.00/gallon there. Well, at least that is how I like to think of it.



Clearwater Florida (KCLW)

A little while later, Carlos showed up and we went to have dinner. Being in Clearwater, I had to have dinner at the original Hooters restaurant. Besides, I like their wings. Honest! By the time we finished dinner, talked about the things going on in our lives and got to the house it was almost 9:30pm. As we arrived to his house it started raining. I knew this was the beginning of the bad weather system I had been watching and running away from for the last few days. I was at a perfect place where I could wait out the weather. I was on the ground with my wife and very good friends.

Chapter 7 (Clearwater to Cancun via Marathon Key)

The next day I awoke to loud lightning strikes and heavy rain. As I expected the weather system had caught up with me. Tornados had touched down further north and east of Tampa causing some major damage. The good thing is that we were getting heavy rains and lightning, but no reports of tornados. All day on the 10th we sat together chit chatting, watching TV and generally enjoying each other's company. During the day, I kept checking the weather to see when we could plan on heading out. According to everything I could see it wouldn't be until at least the next day. So, that night we went to a local restaurant and since the kids didn't want to spend any more time with the "grown ups" Carlos, Zulma, Millie and I went alone. It felt kind of like when we were dating again.

On Thursday, December 11th we awoke to the weather being almost as bad. From Clearwater (KCLW) I was going to fly along Florida's Gulf Coast to Marathon Key (KMTX) in order to fuel up. Then I would fly direct to Cancun Mexico (MMCN) where we would spend the night. But until the weather cleared up a lot more, we were not going anywhere. Even if I had been IFR current I would not have flown, the weather was that bad. So we spent another day with our friends and watched the weather.

I had made arrangements with Pia Gardner (Caribbean Sky Tours) for reservations at a hotel in Cancun and for them to "handle" my arrival. After spending so much time clearing authorities in Cozumel, I didn't want the same hassle in Cancun. Everything was ready, just waiting for the weather to clear up enough to take off.

On Friday, December 12th we woke up to the weather being a little better. Not good enough to fly but much better than the severe thunderstorms of the past 3 days. It was forecast to start clearing up during the afternoon then getting progressively better as the day went on. So we packed our bags, said "good-bye" and headed out to the airport. At about 9am we arrived at the FBO, loaded the airplane and sat around waiting. A few other stranded pilots were there looking at the weather as well as local pilots just passing time. We took advantage of the free time to check e-Mail, make phone calls and watch TV. Everyone was watching the weather and getting updates.

By 11:00 am the 1st IFR pilot decided to take off. The ceilings were still low, but no thunderstorms were in the area. He took off in a Cessna 172 and with the clouds hovering at about 1000 ft, quickly disappeared into the clouds. We waited. I checked the weather again and the briefer told me the weather was VFR south of Sarasota (KSRQ) all the way to Marathon. But between Clearwater and Sarasota, the ceilings were reported low in some areas. So I waited some more.

Around 12:00 noon the weather started breaking up. I could see blue skies, especially to the west over the Gulf of Mexico. This was good since I planned to fly along the Gulf Coast all the way. Another call to FSS and the briefer told me there were spots of low clouds before Sarasota but clear the rest of the way down. Since the ceilings were now at about 2500ft I decided to take off. After a good pre-flight, we climbed in and took off on RWY 34.

I have flown a lot out of KCLW and it is a beautiful place to fly. A lot of air traffic but still beautiful. Since we were just under the Tampa Class B airspace, I flew westbound at 1500 ft until over the water then turned South West on course. The ceilings were about 3000 ft so I stayed at 1500 ft. At that altitude you can appreciate the speed of cruising at 145Kts. Everything flew past us. I have to admit it was quite cool. Just as the briefer had told me, as we approached Sarasota, the ceilings started to climb dramatically. Taking advantage of this I climbed until we were cruising along at 6,500ft. Remembering the grumpy ATC controller the last time I flew in this area, I hesitated to check in. But, I decided to do it anyway. The controller accepted my air file of KIS4 and Cruiser N819PR was headed to El Salvador via Marathon and Cancun.

As we flew along, Millie asked me some questions about the GPS and the radios. This was new because in the 23yrs we have been married and flying together she had never been interested in being anything other than a passenger. I explained a few things about the GPS and walked her through a few basic steps. Having both a Garmin 496 and 296 operating at the same time and with the autopilot not working, I told her the 296 was hers to play and experiment during the rest of the trip. She intently worked the GPS and once in a while asked questions about specific things. She was really interested in the estimated time of arrival (ETA) function. Now she had an idea how much longer the flight would be without having to ask. I also showed her how to enter a frequency into the King KX-155A communication radio. She was real interested in this part too.

Since we were heading southwest, we had a slight headwind but not bad. I knew as soon as we turned more westerly the head wind would pick up. After about 2hrs in the air I turned west south-west near the tip of Florida and closed in on Marathon. Sure enough the ground speed slowed down as we approached Marathon Key. Checking in on UNICOM we set up and landed on RWY 25. It was a short taxi to the fuel pumps to fill the tanks to max capacity.



Marathon Key (KMTH)

While I fueled the airplane, Mille went to the FBO to get something to eat. It was almost 3:00pm and we had not had lunch. When I finished fueling I went to the FBO (Marathon Jet Center) and Millie was not there. It turns out the FBO attendant told her there was a Pizza Hut within walking distance and she went there to get food. While waiting, I checked the weather between Marathon and Cancun. It was VFR with areas of light precipitation on the route. Winds were estimated from the 250 at 20kts. GREAT, another flight with strong headwinds. The briefer also told me that the published radio frequency for Merida Center was inoperative and they were on a different frequency until further notice. Just as I was finishing filing my international flight plan, Millie showed up with two personal pizzas and some chicken wings. We ate them and they tasted so good. She also brought some snacks and drinks to take with us on our way. I had brought some almonds and pistachios for the flight too.

By the time we finished eating and headed out to the airplane it was almost 4:00pm. This would be a long over water flight so I briefed Millie on how to use the life vest and helped her put it on. I made sure she knew how to use the Kannad 406 XS-3 GPS Personal Locator Beacon ELT strapped to her REVERE Comfort Max PFD. We climbed in and headed off towards Cancun. The climb to 8,500 ft was uneventful as we left Marathon. Key West departure soon handed us off to Miami Center as we headed south west leaving the good old USA behind. At check point MAXIM, Miami Center handed us off to Havana Center. The flight was going as planned. While cruising along, I remembered I had bought a new GPX 3847 MP3 player with 2 Gigabytes of memory, dual headset jacks and 15hrs of music. The other one only had about 3hrs of music and I had gotten tired of the same songs over and over again on my way up. I plugged it in and we were soon listening to music over our headsets as we flew along.

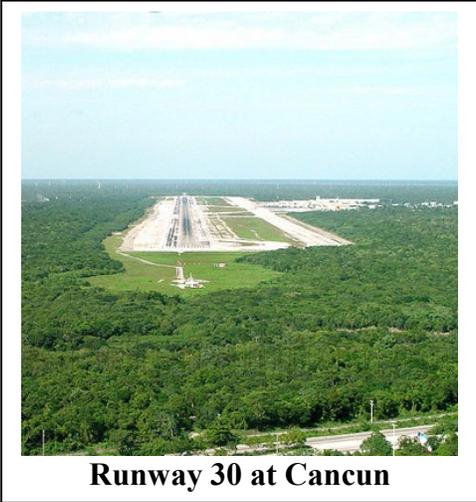
Having flown this route on my way up, I thought it would be no big deal to do it going back but I was real worried this time. When I came up, I was by myself. If something happened the only one in trouble would be me. I put myself into the situation and would have to get myself out. But now I was flying far from land with my wife in the airplane. The added responsibility of having her in the airplane with me made me extra vigilant of everything. It seemed like the airplane was making noises I had never heard before. But, everything was normal as we flew along. I can't explain it but I can tell you it is very different flying alone on a segment like this than flying with a loved one.

Everything was going along just fine. A few skirts around some clouds but nothing bad. After a while I asked Havana Center if I could fly present position direct to ANALI, and then to NOSAT staying closer to land just as I did on my way up. This time the controller declined my request and told me to continue on to VINKA as filed. I had heard that they treat November tail numbered aircraft different flying down to Mexico as they do flying up from Mexico. Oh well.

Flying along I had to descend and maneuver around clouds and some rain. I told the controller about this even though I was VFR just to be safe. He told me sometimes they loose radio contact with low flying aircraft in that area and if it happened to contact MERIDA when I was over NOSAT. I gave him an ETA to NOSAT and he gave me the published MERIDA Center frequency in case I lost contact with him. Millie looked at me and asked, "Isn't that the frequency you were told was not working?" I told her yes, but maybe it had been fixed since we took off. Either way we had the other frequency just in case.

Sure enough, after a while I lost radio contact with him as we flew further south west. With a 20kt headwind, we were only doing about 110Kt ground speed. We would take a little longer to arrive but I had plenty of fuel on board. Once again there was a lot of air traffic in the area, especially with overhead airliners. That made me feel better knowing I could always talk to somebody if needed. I also realized that when conversations came over the radio, my music did not cut off as it was supposed to. I asked Millie if hers cut off and she said yes. We have different versions of the Light Speed XL20 headsets and mine needs an external music adaptor while hers doesn't. I guess the adaptor doesn't cut the music out when a radio call comes in. Oh well, when we get to Cancun, I will swap the headsets and the cables to use the other one for flight safety.

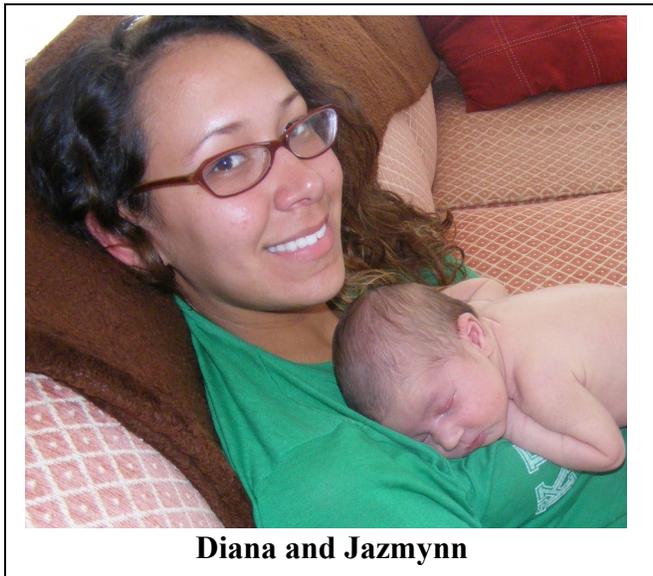
As I approached NOSAT, I called Havana with no luck. True to form I had no radio contact with them so I called MERIDA on the frequency Havana gave me. Nothing. I tried again and nothing. I also realized there was no radio traffic on that frequency. Millie asked if we should try the frequency we had been given before leaving Marathon and I said yes. She then dialed in the frequency for me. I selected it and the radio came alive with conversations. This was the correct frequency after all. I tried calling but MERIDA did not answer. After several attempts with no luck I heard another aircraft come on the radio and said "MERIDA center, you have a N819PR trying to contact you. Do you want us to relay?" Soon I was talking to MERIDA center with Call Sign "CACTUS" as a relay. I later found out this is the call sign for US Airways and this flight was inbound to Cancun.



Runway 30 at Cancun

After a while, we were close enough that I could talk to MERIDA Center directly and thanked CACTUS for the help. MERIDA handed me off to Cancun approach and I was cleared behind a Boeing 737, a Cessna Caravan and an ATR-42 into Cancun. Checking in with Cancun Tower we landed straight in to RWY 30 at about 6:30pm Mexico time. The long overwater portion of the flight was over and we were in Mexico. As I taxied to the FBO, ground control welcomed me to Cancun on behalf of Caribbean Flight Tours. We were marshaled in front of the ASUR FBO and met by several persons. One of them had all the paperwork ready and we cleared Immigration and Customs very quickly. In less than 1hr we were on the shuttle headed for the Courtyard Marriott Airport Hotel. We arrived at about 7:30pm and checked in to the hotel.

This is a typical Marriott which included a king size bed, but no INTERNET access unless you pay \$15.00 a day. After taking a shower we went to get something to eat. The hotel restaurant is good but expensive. Oh well, I guess it is Cancun for a reason. After dinner I went to the business center to check the weather forecast and look at



Diana and Jazmynn

satellite pictures for the flight the next day. Everything looked good with Ilopango forecasting clear skies all day. While I was doing that, Millie checked her e-Mail and our VONAGE telephone voice mail. I then overheard a disturbing voice mail message. Our younger daughter Diana had been in a bad car accident while we flew between Marathon and Cancun.

Diana had left 4 messages on our voicemail, all of them crying hysterically and pleading for us to call her. It sounded like she was ok but we did not know for sure. We immediately called her from the hotel room with no answer.

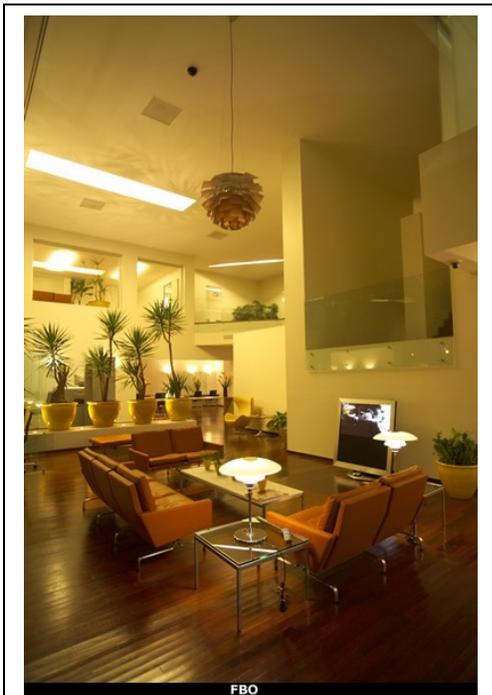
We kept trying until she finally answered her phone still crying. She was not injured, but her car was totaled. The other driver was not injured either. She explained it had been her fault since she had hit the other car. We calmed her down, explained that everything would work out and that the important thing was that she was not hurt. The car can be replaced.

After about ½ hr on the phone (What a bill this would be) we hung up and tried to go to sleep. After that it took me a while even though it was after 11:00pm. Who cared! My daughter was ok and I was spending the night with my wife in Cancun. I would just file for a later departure than I had originally planned and arrive in El Salvador a little later.

Chapter 8 (All the way home)

We woke up on Saturday the 13th fairly rested and looking forward to the final leg of our trip. We were still worried about Diana and the situation with her car so while having breakfast we called her. This time she was calm and had resigned herself to the fact her car was totaled. She got a little emotional and almost cried as we talked since her car had been in the family for almost 10yrs. She remembered when we first bought it and how she got her 1st driving lesson in it. But a car is a car and something that can be replaced. We were just relieved nothing happened to her. While Millie finished breakfast, I checked the weather and verified the flight plan. There were low ceilings in the area and some thunderstorms forecast for the afternoon. I knew we needed to be on our way before the storms moved in. Areas of low clouds were forecast along our planned route but satellite images showed these would be isolated and without much vertical height. The weather at Ilopango was forecast to be clear with visibility over 10 miles. Just your typical weather for Ilopango during December. On long cross country flight, you will encounter different weather along the route. You have to be prepared to deal with whatever you find along the way.

Around 9:00am we checked out of the hotel. Our bill was over \$300.00. The room was only \$75.00 but the dinner, breakfast and two long international telephone calls ran the total up a lot more than we had expected. At least we would not need to pay to get to the airport since the hotel had free airport shuttle. It was a quick ride to the airport and soon we were in the FBO area. They had all my paperwork ready which was quite nice. I told them I would need to fuel up and the FBO guy had to explain the procedure at Cancun to me.



Cancun, Mexico (MMCN) FBO

First you have to get a number from a machine that was on the ramp outside the FBO. This meant going through security. So I loaded our luggage on to the security belt and went through. Now, I had my right knee replaced several years ago due to an old basketball injury, so I set off every metal detector I try to cross. This means I get a personal search by security personnel everywhere. So, after being properly searched, I got to the machine and took a number. Next to the machine was a display telling what number was being serviced. I had number 27 and it was

on number 4. It would be a while before the fuel truck would show up. As I waited the FBO guy motioned for me to come back into the terminal. I had to file the paperwork for departure and he would walk me through the process. Back into the terminal I went. I had Millie go out, sit with our luggage and wait for the fuel truck to arrive.

Once again I got to enjoy the privilege of doing Mexican paperwork in order to depart. Multiple offices with many different forms are required in order to depart. The FBO guy had most of the documents ready for me but I still had to complete several of them. One of the forms I requested was the Mexican Multiple Entry permit for 2009. I know I will be flying through Mexico during 2009 so I decided to get it right there. Unfortunately the letter stated I can only enter Mexico from El Salvador. The officer told me I needed another letter if I wanted to enter from the US and each letter costs \$67.00. I showed him my existing letter that shows arrivals from both the US and El Salvador to which he told me that letter was in error. Not wanting to argue with him, I called Rich Gardner (Caribbean Sky Tours) to see what could be done, but only got a voice mail. I left him a message hoping he would get back to me before departing. After this I went back to the FBO area and the airplane. Once again I was searched as I tried to get to the ramp area. Millie was still waiting with the luggage and the number being served was still on 4. I asked if it was being used and they told me yes, but the AV Gas truck had broken down and they were waiting for a replacement to arrive. So, more waiting. At least the weather didn't look to be getting any worse while the ceilings looked to be about 6,000 ft.

As we waited I looked for our airplane but could not see it. The ramp was full. There were at least five big G4 Gulfstreams, several Citation jets, Beech jets and who knows how many King Airs but mine was no where to be seen. I figured they probably had it parked in the back so not to embarrass them, it being so out of place. When one of the ramp workers passed by, I asked about my airplane N819PR. He said "Oh yes, the one with the parrot on the tail. It is right there" He knew exactly which one it was and it was parked right in front of me between two big private jets. It was so small compared to the others I had not seen it. Laughing, I asked if I could go ahead and pre-flight it while waiting for fuel. He said they could bring it to me but I preferred doing it where it was. They brought our luggage so I loaded the airplane and did the pre-flight. After I finished I remembered the music and headset issue so I switched the headsets.

Now the intercom jacks on our airplane are below the seats between the legs. It is a little difficult to get to so I have some extender cables that make it a lot easier. Since the music adapter has a built in extender, the headset I had been using did not need one. But Millie's headset needs an extender cable, so I plugged my headset with the music adapter into the co-pilot seat and Millie's headset with our old extender into my side. Just about then the fuel truck showed up and I filled her up. It took 35 gallons of fuel which was about what I expected. After waiting about 10 minutes, I checked for water contamination and found none. Excellent! Millie and I pulled the plane out a little, climbed in and started her up.

A quick call to ground followed by a short taxi to runway 30 and we were off. It was about 11:30 am. As I climbed out keeping below the clouds Millie remembered about our digital camera which was in a small bag the back seat area. She quickly took it out and began taking pictures. I tease Millie and call her



Hotels in Cancun

“The Papparazzi” because she is always taking pictures of everything she sees. She just laughed and kept taking pictures. Cancun is beautiful but with the low clouds there wasn't much she could take pictures of. But she managed to take pictures of several huge hotels and incredible beaches as we climbed and headed south.

After about 1hr of flying the clouds were gone so I climbed to 8,500 ft and set up cruise flight. The music was playing and every time a radio call came through it cut out just as it was supposed to on my headset. I checked in with Belize Center noticing there was a lot of radio chatter. There were many airplanes flying up and down the Belize coast on this Saturday. We sat back and talked about Diana, the trip so far and things we needed to do once we got back home. While overflying Belize City in beautiful weather, we took turns taking pictures. I was impressed with an island off the coast of Belize that looked



“Pork Chop” Island

just like a pork chop, so that is what I called it “Pork Chop Island”. The winds were not as bad as I had expected with just about 5kts of headwind. At this rate we would be in El Salvador slightly ahead of schedule and with a larger fuel reserve. Millie pulled out the pistachios and almonds we had and we ate them while drinking Diet Coke and water. A regular in flight snack, just like when we fly back home on a commercial airline. On this day we were not mere tourists. We were international travelers. This is one reason I love flying and the adventure it brings.

Soon we were approaching Guatemalan airspace and Belize handed me off. Millie now had control of her GPS as well as setting in frequencies on the radios. My Garmin 496 kept telling me it was not receiving any XM signal but I was expecting that. I checked on the new frequency but no one answered. I tried a second time but still no answer. I then realized the radios were very quiet with absolutely no chatter. Oh, no! My radios had gone to stuck mike again.

Why this was happening was beyond me. I knew the co-pilot PTT was completely disconnected so that could not be the problem unless it had somehow connected itself. Knowing this to be impossible I started to troubleshoot the problem as I flew along. Since the autopilot was not working, it was a little difficult doing this while flying the airplane. I kept reminding myself “FLY THE AIRPLANE FIRST, figure out the problem second”.

The only thing I could think was that it was either the audio panel, one of the intercom jacks or one of the headsets was causing the problem. Central Florida Avionics had checked the audio panel back in Leesburg and it was working fine. Beside, if that was the problem I sure couldn't fix it 8,500 ft in the air as I flew along. If it was my intercom jack, maybe I could use the jack on Millie's side to communicate until we landed. I unplugged my headset from the adapter and asked Millie to plug it into the jack under her seat. She did it but nothing happened. So the intercom jacks seemed to be OK. All this time, I kept wandering off course as I did the troubleshooting while Millie stayed quiet. I was super busy and slightly concerned trying to do so many things while staying safe in the air. My next thought was that maybe a headset is causing the problem. I

decided to plug Millie's headset (my old one) back into the jack under my seat. Knowing I had to eliminate as many possible points of failure I decided to unplug the old extender cable on my side. As soon as I pulled, it came apart in my hand. Immediately the radios came out of stuck mike and I had full communications again. This made total sense.

The old extender cable was frayed and normal vibrations caused it to short out forcing any selected radio to transmit. It had not been a problem while plugged into the co-pilot side since the transmit capability was disconnected back at Leesburg. But when I moved the extender to the pilot side, I moved the problem over as well. I was so angry but at the same time happy to know I had found the actual problem and it was fixed for good. I showed Millie the cable and explained to her what I just did. She just said "I knew you were busy and working hard so I just shut up, and stayed out of your way". With that I had to laugh making me forget my initial anger.



Clouds and Mountains over Honduras



Millie the Co-Pilot

Once on the new frequency, we overflew Puerto Barrios, Guatemala and turned on our final heading to Ilopango. Here some of the mountains rise to over 12,000 ft so I started the slow climb to 12,500 ft. As we flew on I could see a scattered cloud deck just below us. I could see spots of ground below but to the right a solid layer of clouds covered the mountains. I have to admit it was an incredible sight. Some mountain peaks rose up through the cloud layer looking like islands on a vast white ocean. Millie took some spectacular shots of the

scenery as we flew along. Knowing she never gets to be in the pictures, I took a picture of her with her sunglasses and headset flying along in the co-pilot seat.

We flew along for about 35 minutes at this altitude seeing patches of ground below as we closed in on El Salvador. I noticed that the clouds ahead and below looked strange. We were approaching the border between Honduras and El Salvador when I realized all the clouds stopped right at the border. I had never seen anything like this before. There was almost a straight line where there were no clouds of any kind. This line seemed to exactly follow the border between the two countries. It was as if the clouds did not have ATC clearance to enter El Salvador. We took more pictures as we



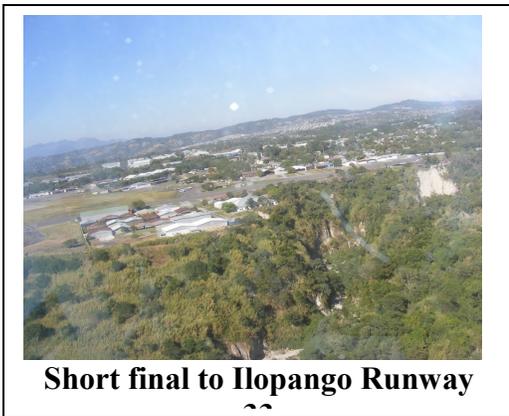
Straight line of clouds

flew over the area. As soon as we passed the cloud line, we were handed off to El Salvador control in completely clear weather.

We descended from 12,500 ft to 8,500 ft as I set up for landing. I had to maneuver a little in order to lose enough altitude without shock cooling the engine or gaining too much airspeed. With the "before landing" check list complete, I changed over to Ilopango tower and we were cleared to enter a left downwind for runway 33. While I set up for landing Millie took more pictures and even a short video of us turning base to final for runway 33 at Ilopango. At about 2:30pm on Saturday, December 13, 2008 we landed at Ilopango airport in San Salvador, El Salvador. The final flight leg of the trip was over.



Clouds stopping at the border



Short final to Ilopango Runway

I taxied and parked the airplane on the International ramp to clear Immigration and Customs. After Mexico, entering El Salvador was a breeze. After that, Millie went to the aero club to rest while I taxied the airplane to the hangar. I got to the hangar where our friend Tom Strezishar was waiting to drive us home. We parked the airplane in the hangar, moved the luggage from the plane to his car and drove to the aero club to pick Millie up. During the three weeks, we flew the Puerto Rico Flyer (Cruiser N819PR) through 7 different international airspaces, traveled more than 3,500 miles in over 28

hrs of flight time. We were home.

As we drove away, I could not help looking back in awe at that little airplane with such a sense of pride that is hard to explain. She was the most amazing machine in the world to me and I was so proud to own it. I silently thanked Rich Trickel for designing her, Dave Tate for building her and PULSAR for bringing her back to life. No matter what happens in the future, I feel I have been truly blessed by God for giving me the privilege to have experienced such an adventure with Millie at my side.

The Jazmynn trip was over.



The Puerto Rico Flyers; Millie, Galin and Cruiser 9PR

ABBREVIATIONS

100LL	100 Octane-Low Lead, Aviation Gasoline
ADIZ	Air Defense Identification Zone
AOPA	Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association
ASUR	Aeropuertos del Sur
ATC	Air Traffic Control
AV Gas	Aviation Gasoline
BFR	Bi-Annual Flight Review
CERAP	Combined En Route Approach (Air Traffic Control Facility)
CFI	Certificated Flight Instructor
CFII	Certificated Flight Instructor - Instrument
DGAC	Dirección General de Aviación Civil (Mexican FAA)
EAA	Experimental Aircraft Association
ELT	Emergency Locator Transmitter
ETA	Estimated Time of Arrival
FAA	Federal Aviation Administration
FBO	Fixed Base Operator
FCC	Federal Communications Commission
FSS	Flight Service Station
GA	General Aviation
GIA	Golden Isles Aviation
GPS	Global Positioning System
ICAO	International Civil Aviation Organization
IFR	Instrument Flight Rules
ILS	Instrument Landing System
KIAS	Knots, Indicated Air Speed
KTS	Nautical Miles (Knots) per Hour
LED	Light Emitting Diode
METAR	Meteorological Aviation Report
MHz	Megahertz
NM	Nautical Miles (Knots)
NORDO	Non Operational Radio
POH	Pilot's Operating Handbook
PTT	Push to Talk
RPM	Revolutions per Minute
UPS	United Parcel Service
USD	United States Dollar
VFR	Visual Flight Rules
VOR	VHF Omni-directional Radio Range