

2014 El Salvador Trip



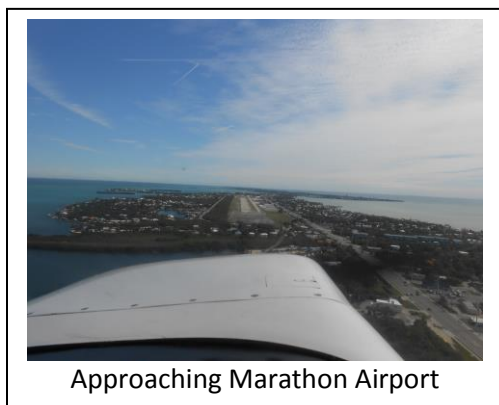
Story and photos by:
Galin Hernandez & Millie Santiago

2014 El Salvador Trip

We were stationed at the US Embassy in El Salvador for 3 ½ years made great friends, visited many places and enjoyed ourselves so much we call it our second home. After we left in 2010 we had been trying to return but something would always come up that changed our plans. So, having been invited to the 2014 Ilopango Air Show we decided it was time to finally return and visit. We were looking forward to visiting since several good friends would be performing during the show, including Dondi Pesquera whom we had not seen in more than 20 years. We also decided that instead of taking a commercial airline, we would fly our airplane “Blanquita” there.



The trip would take us over Mexico, Belize, Guatemala and Honduras before arriving in to El Salvador so we needed to coordinate overflight and landing permits with these countries. We contacted one of our good friends, Milton Martinez, and he took care of all the arrangements. We would leave home on January 17th, spend the night in Cozumel, Mexico arriving in to El Salvador on January 18th. We would return after the Air Show, which was scheduled for January 25 and 26.



Approaching Marathon Airport

On January 17th, we got in our plane around 9am in Flagler, Florida for the 1st leg of our trip which would take us to Marathon Key, Florida. Here we would take a short rest and eat lunch before heading out to Cozumel, Mexico. The IFR flight from Flagler to Marathon was nice and easy 2 ½ but the flight to Cozumel was a different story.

When Galin turned the engine on in Marathon, he felt that the plane was acting different but during the run up everything was fine. The flight to Cozumel would take about 3 hour, mostly over water about 25 miles off shore from Cuba. We were about ½ way between the tip of Cuba and Mexico (about 50 miles off shore) when all of a sudden the Electronic Flight Information System (EFIS) low battery voltage alarm came on. It took a few seconds for Galin to realize that the alternator was no longer powering the airplane and it was running only with battery power.

This was a big problem since the airplane relies on electricity to run most of the instruments. The engine’s electronic magnetos, which need electrical power, thankfully have their own internal generators so they don’t need the alternator providing power to keep the engine running. Galin tried re-setting the alternator and voltage regulator circuits to see if that corrected the problem but it didn’t work. The airplane systems were still draining the battery at about 18 amps.

With nowhere to make a precautionary landing Galin started turning off all electronics except the bare minimums needed. This included the audio panel intercom so now we couldn't talk to each other. Once all the unnecessary electrical equipment was turned off, the battery was only discharging at 4 amps. This meant that at this rate the battery would last over 6hrs, more than enough for the 1hr remaining to Cozumel. Galin knew the plane would easily make Cozumel, he started hearing strange noises and felt odd things with the airplane even though, except for the battery still being discharged, all the airplane's instrument indications were normal. It didn't help that we were ½ way between Mexico and Cuba, over water and about 50 miles from any strip of land.

As we approached Mexico, Galin advised Air Traffic Control (ATC) about the situation. He requested a precautionary deviation into Cancun instead of continuing on to Cozumel, which the controller approved. Once the Mexican coast came in sight, it seemed that all the strange noises went away and the airplane felt normal again. Galin realized that we weren't in any danger and that the plane would easily make it to Cozumel, so he advised ATC that we would continue on to Cozumel instead of landing in to Cancun. We approached Cozumel in beautiful weather and were cleared to land about 15 minutes later.

When we taxied to our parking spot and got out, we saw a person working on an airplane right next to where we were parked so we asked if he was a mechanic. He pleasantly said yes and



said he would be happy to help us. He told us to clear Immigration and Customs while he finished the airplane he was working on. It took us just over one hour to clear everything then Galin went back to the airplane. The mechanic was there waiting on the ramp. They quickly had the cowls off and started trying to find the problem. Since Galin had advised ATC about the situation and had requested a deviation, the local Mexican DGAC inspector (equivalent to our FAA FSDO inspector) arrived to see what had happened. It was a little before 6pm when they found out the problem was just a blown fuse in the alternator

circuit. The mechanic would get the part and would meet us back at the airport the next day around 7am. We were very happy to realize it was not a serious problem.

We took a taxi to a small hotel called La Casona Real and had dinner at a local spot called Woody's. The food was excellent and we listened to some musicians providing live music while we ate. The hotel was comfortable and their internet connection was excellent. We knew we would stay here on our flight back to the US.

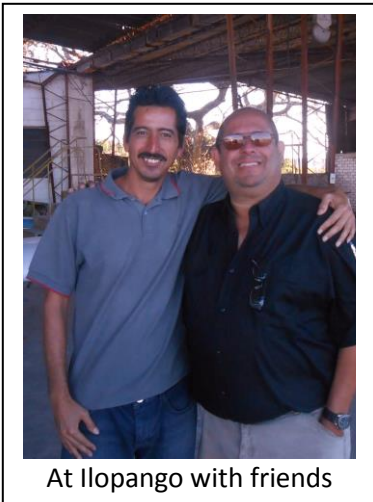
The next day we were at the airport bright and early and the mechanic was there waiting for us. After putting everything back together Galin did a ground check and everything worked perfectly. With the problem corrected, Galin requested fuel and started the outbound paperwork. This included explaining to the DGAC inspector what they had found with the airplane and how it was corrected. The inspector was pleased with the results and wished us a

good trip. So by 10:30am, and with a full load of fuel, we were in the airplane going through the check list confirming everything was working properly before departing. A few minutes later we were airborne on the IFR leg towards El Salvador.

Our initial climb was to 8,000 feet as we flew past Belize towards Guatemala. Just before overflying Puerto Barrios, Guatemala we were cleared to 12,000 feet the minimum altitude needed to clear the mountains between Honduras and El Salvador. All through the flight, we were above a broken deck of clouds until we saw the beautiful tall green mountains. We knew then we were approaching our 2nd home. Once we contacted El Salvador approach the controller recognized Galin's voice and welcomed us back to El Salvador. It was sweet to know that we hadn't been forgotten even after many years. A few minutes later we were cleared for the VOR approach to runway 15 and the Ilopango airport quickly came in to view.



Left downwind for landing at MSSS



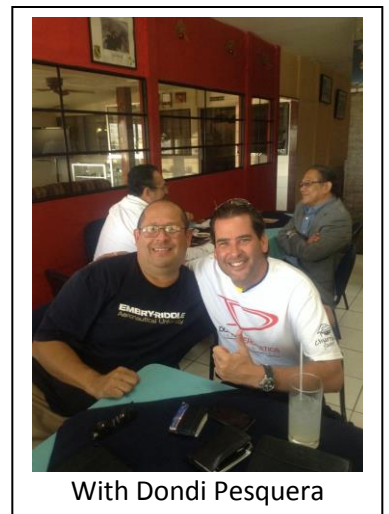
At Ilopango with friends

As soon as we landed and parked the airplane at the international ramp we saw a small welcome committee waiting for us. Many of Galin's pilot friends were there to help us so we didn't have to worry about our luggage, the rental car or the hangar because all was done for us. We felt so loved and happy to be there. After getting up to date with everyone and having lunch at the airport, it was time to go to the hotel. One of our good friends was there to help us get to the hotel since there was road construction going on and we had to take a route we weren't familiar with.

Once at the hotel we realized how tired and hungry we were. It is so nice to be within walking distance to "La Zona Rosa". While walking we noticed several

changes but recognized where we were heading. We ended up at "La Hola de Beto" and had a wonderful dinner. Once we got back, we started sending messages to our friends so that we can meet with them. This way we can manage our time here and see all we wanted to see. We were glad to be back in El Salvador. The rest of the week was spent visiting with old friends and doing some minor maintenance on the airplane.

On Friday we met up with Dondi Pesquera who we had not seen on over 20yrs. We talked about old times, how our different family members were doing and what future plans were. Dondi took Galin over to his airplane (Jet Provost Trainer) and they went over different aircraft systems as well as aircraft performance. Dondi will be participating in the Cozumel Airshow during May 2014. Since Galin has flown between El Salvador and Cozumel they did some basic



With Dondi Pesquera

flight planning to verify the flight route and distance. Saturday was the first day of the airshow so Galin went, enjoying the show along many local pilot friends. Galin was pleasantly surprised

and honored when he found the El Salvador Aeroclub had placed a picture of him with “Blanquita” on their aviation wall of fame alongside many important Central American aviators.



On the Wall of Fame

On Sunday we spent the day at the airshow with front row seats in the Aeroclub facilities with the performers milling around. It was fun but bittersweet knowing we would be leaving the next day on our way back home. The weather was forecast to be beautiful all the way to Cozumel so Galin decided we would make the flight VFR to enjoy the view. So early Monday morning our friend Dr. Sandoval picked us up at the hotel and took us to the airport arriving around 8am.

Once at the airport, we loaded the airplane with our luggage and taxied to the international ramp for our exit inspection.

Galin filed a VFR flight plan to Cozumel which meant we would climb to 11,500ft as we headed east over the mountains of Honduras. After Puerto Barrios Guatemala we would descend to 9,500ft until we arrived 3 1/2hrs later in Cozumel. By 9:30am everything was complete and we departed El Salvador. The flight was uneventful and we landed in Cozumel on schedule. Once again it took just over 1 hour to clear Immigration, Customs and their FAA, but we were back in the hotel by 3:00pm ready to take a break.



At US Customs in Key West

After settling in and resting a bit, we headed out to walk around downtown Cozumel and have dinner. After dinner we returned to the Hotel to plan for the return flight. Using the Hotel’s INTERNET connection Galin made our US Customs advance notice of arrival and the Eapis notification.

So early on the morning of January 28th, we took a taxi back to the airport, fueled up the airplane and by 10:30 we were airborne. Once again the flight was uneventful and with a nice tailwind we arrived in to Key West about 1:30pm.

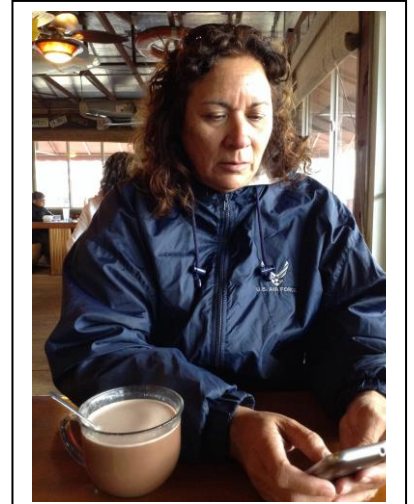
Clearing US Customs was a breeze, especially after how long it takes to do the same in Mexico. It was such a smooth and quick process that we were airborne IFR back home within one half hour. By the time we were just north of Pahokee, Florida the clouds started to close in and soon we were in and out of IFR conditions at 7,000ft.



IFR towards Flagler

When we were about 50 miles from Flagler and as we were cleared to 5,000ft, Galin felt the engine start to run rough. He tried different adjustments but the engine roughness would

not clear up. After a few minutes, and some more adjustments, the engine roughness seemed to clear up so Galin stopped moving the controls. With the engine running smooth again we approached Flagler airport and were soon cleared to land. When Galin reduced the power to start the landing, the engine started running rough for few seconds but then quickly cleared up again. We landed without incident and taxied back to our hanger. Galin decided to suspend further flying until he consults with a mechanic and they can work to correct the problem. The airplane needs to have the annual condition inspection done in March so the airplane won't be grounded a long time. In the meantime, we were glad to be home even though the temperature was very cold compared to the warmth of the Florida Keys, El Salvador and Mexico.



Back in Flagler