



A Flying Family Reunion

by Ron Burch

I spent much of my early working life as an account executive for several graphics production firms. In those positions, I assisted ad agency and corporate accounts alike in producing their ads and executing their print marketing ideas.

Success came from failsafe performance and in establishing and investing big time into long-lasting business relationships. Over time, some of these business relationships evolved into personal friendships. That was the case with my good friend Ronnie—one time, the production manager for one of the largest ad agencies south of New York City.

For many years, Ronnie and I had a standing business lunch every Friday. It was the age of unlimited expense accounts and we took proper advantage. Some Fridays we'd visit the hot spots. On others, we'd go back to a favorite. After ten years of spending nearly every Friday morning on the phone with the old boy trying to decide where we would go to lunch, we finally made a popular restaurant at the intersection of Peachtree and Spring Streets in midtown Atlanta our Friday default.

It wasn't the food that took us there; it was the friendly service and the

warm atmosphere—especially at the bar where we chose to put on the feedbag. We'd grab a stool, order a beverage and begin nibbling on an unlimited supply of cheesy Goldfish crackers that somehow tasted better than what we'd get at the grocery store. We'd chat with each other and with the other Friday regulars. Also with Shirley, the cute, dark-haired gal behind the bar, who took very good care of us.

We always ordered the same thing: a couple of sprucers, a bowl of clam chowder and a side of crab legs. At the close of the meal, our conversation would typically turn to the weekend and any special weekend plans.

That Friday in late July was no different. Ronnie said that that weekend, he and his wife were traveling to South Georgia to attend her family reunion. He was looking forward to the company and the food, but not the four-hour drive. I smiled and told him he should be grateful for family. As an only child,

my family members were few and far between. Matter of fact, we'd never had a family reunion. Even if we did, everyone eligible to attend could sit in our smallish den without us bringing in extra chairs!

Typical of the pal he was, Ronnie chimed-in, "Come on Burch, go with us—there'll be plenty of food—and there's an extra bedroom at my wife's aunt's house, where we'll stay. Come on, man, it'll do you good and it'll be fun." I thanked him for being so gracious, but declined. I felt family reunions were personal occasions—far too personal to be opened up to outsiders.

"No way," he exclaimed. You can bring your guitar and join in with my brother-in-law on Saturday night. My wife will sing; you can too. Believe me, it'll be a hoot." He was nothing if not persistent.

I thought about it for a couple of minutes and said, "Okay, sport. If you're serious, and if my wife doesn't have anything important planned, we'll go...on one condition: we'll take the airplane and eliminate the driving."

"Super," he said, "how long will it take us to get there?"

"Without looking at a chart, I'd say about an hour and a half. Beats the

heck out of a four hour drive,” I said reassuringly.

We agreed that we would meet at the airport at 8:30 am on Saturday morning. As we were slap in the middle of the summer’s worst dog days, I wanted to be airborne and into cooler air before the heat of the day began to build in earnest (small airplanes aren’t air-conditioned).

That night, I pulled out the aeronautical charts and planned the details of the trip. We’d depart Atlanta to the south and then fly a southeasterly heading until we were well beyond the Atlanta/Hartsfield-Jackson Class B Airspace on the east side. Once we were clear of Hartsfield-Jackson’s “big iron,” a course of 155° would take us directly to “FZG”—the airport identifier at Fitzgerald.

I measured the total distance point-to-point as being roughly 195 air miles—probably closer to 240 miles by car. With an average groundspeed of 120 knots (140 mph), our time en route would be 1:24—darn close to the hour-and-a-half I had estimated at the restaurant.

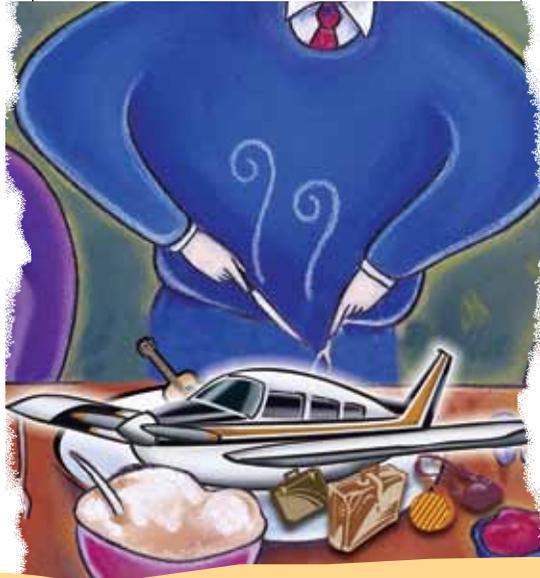
The next part of my pre-flight planning is what pilots call the “weight and balance.” In airplanes, big and small, consideration must be given to the load you are carrying and how it is distributed inside the aircraft. My little Beechcraft was a 200-hp, four-place airplane that had a useful load of 1,057 pounds. With full fuel and eight quarts of oil, we could carry roughly 690 pounds of payload—weight that could be allocated to passengers and luggage.

At the time, I weighed in at 180; my wife at 95. That left 415 pounds for Ronnie, his wife, and our combined luggage and gear. Now folks, these guys were big people. I estimated Ronnie’s weight at 210, his wife’s at 165. After a little fifth grade math, roughly 40 pounds remained for luggage, my guitar, the gal’s curlers and hairdryers.

With Ronnie and me in the front, the

wives in the back, and everything else in the baggage compartment, according to my calculations and the owner’s manual, the airplane would be at maximum gross weight and within the center of gravity envelope for take-off—barely. No sweat.

Saturday morning dawned bright and clear but very still. The air was heavy, thick; hot and sticky. By the time we arrived at the general aviation ramp



I was looking dead ahead when my wife said we cleared the roof of the K-Mart store just south of the field by less than a hundred feet.

airport, the temperature was already past 82°. Our guests were waiting patiently on the tarmac, already dripping a small puddle of perspiration.

As was my custom, I spent a good fifteen minutes doing a very thorough preflight—inspecting the exterior of the airplane and the control surfaces. I visually checked the fuel quantity, drained a fuel sample and looked for contamination. Ronnie followed my every move. He was looking at his watch for the third time when I unlocked the baggage compartment door and began to load the luggage. As I stuffed our belongings into the rather smallish space behind the rear seat, the bags seemed heavier than expected, and the thought of the weight and balance again came to mind.

Huffing and puffing, I said “Hey

Ronnie, last night when I did the flight plan, I calculated your weight at 210 and your wife’s at 165. Is that reasonably accurate?”

He broke into laughter. “You gotta be kidding? I weigh closer to 240 and she’ll only admit to 190. Is that a problem?”

I replied somewhat sheepishly, “Uh, no...uh, of course not.” Then when he wasn’t looking, I quietly removed my box of tools, a set of chocks and a couple of spare quarts of oil from the baggage area. “*It shouldn’t be a problem,*” I thought to myself, “*these little airplanes are pretty forgiving of a little excess weight...aren’t they?*”

I recalled one other such occasion when I still had my first airplane, a 145-hp Cessna Skyhawk. One brisk fall evening following a flying club meeting, three two-hundred pounders and me shoehorned ourselves into that little Cessna and went for a ride over the city. Sure, old N1644Y squatted low, moaned and groaned and creaked noisily as we began our taxi to the runway...

and the ground roll was longer than usual. But we made it out just fine...and since my flight instructor, who also went along, remained quiet, I figured it must be okay to push the weight and

balance past its limits—a least a little.

But that was then and this was now. That was on a cool fall evening and this was the hot, hot summertime. So to be on the safe side, I declined the 3750’ runway, 20-right and asked the controller in the tower for runway 20-left...over a mile of concrete, 150 feet wide...the longest runway on the field. I hoped 20-left would allow a margin for error.

Engine run-up and a check of the flight controls complete, we were soon cleared for take-off. I taxied into position at the north end of the runway, locked the brakes, and pushed the throttle to full power. In the humid, less dense air, I went ahead and leaned the mixture a bit in hopes of getting a few more horsepower out of the little Lycoming 4-banger.

A release of the brakes, and we started to roll—slowly, ever so slowly. At a position on the runway where I would normally be at 60-knots—the minimum airspeed for a safe take-off—the airspeed indicator was still resting on the left peg. It seemed not to be moving at all. A few hundred feet more down the runway, and it started to move up slowly—only about a needle-width past 40-knots indicated. We rumbled past mid-field still well below take-off speed.

As the white touchdown stripes painted every five hundred feet on the opposite end of the runway started to pass underneath the nose, I knew I was past the point of no return. In literally the last few hundred feet of concrete, I applied the slightest backpressure to the control yoke to see if, by chance, the airplane was ready to fly.

The nose rose slightly, the stall horn blared its warning. The airplane wobbled back and forth on the mains as the nose wheel gradually lifted inches off the runway. We over flew the grassy overrun at the end of the runway at no more than 50'. The airspeed was still critically low and our rate of climb was 'nil. I was looking dead ahead when my wife said we cleared the roof of the K-Mart Store just south of the field by less than a hundred feet. In the meantime, our passengers were quietly enjoying the view. I suppose they thought take-offs in small planes were always like this!

Riding a few thermals from the asphalt below and slowly gaining altitude, I kept saying to myself, "Airspeed...watch your airspeed...don't stall this sucker." We made what's called a right-downwind departure from the airport traffic pattern. As I turned tail to the field, I breathed for the first time in several minutes. We were now 800 feet above the ground, climbing at 200 feet per minute with an indicated airspeed of 75 knots.

At 1000' I blew-out a long "wheew," shrugged my shoulders, recycled my neck and tried my best to regain

my Captain's composure. Suddenly, I noticed a somewhat foul odor. I thought to myself, "Is it Ronnie or is it me?" I checked my armpits as guys are prone to do. You betcha, it was me. I was dripping wet with sweat and smelling like a goat! In ten minutes of terror, I'd used up four days, 23-hours, 59-minutes and 60-seconds of a five-day deodorant pad.

The rest of the flight was incident free but I was quietly thinking ahead. With a fuel burn of 11 gallons per hour and an allowance for take-off

The food was fantastic--a lot like funeral food, but even better and more of it.

and climb, we'd have used 18 gallons of fuel by the time we arrived at Fitzgerald. That meant we'd be almost 103 pounds lighter and within landing limits. However, the lesson of diminished performance from being over gross weight had not been lost on me. I decided that there would be no steep turns in my approach to Runway 1 at Fitzgerald, no sudden movements at all. I'd keep it high on approach, and if everything didn't look right, we'd go around and try again.

And go around we did. Twice.

On the third approach, we landed and I squeaked the tires onto the tarmac. We taxied to the parking area and somewhat weak in the knees, I climbed down out of the airplane. We loaded our gear into an awaiting car—a big black Lincoln—coincidentally being driven by the town's mayor and the uncle of my friend's wife.

As soon as we arrived at the mayor's home, I excused myself, went into the bathroom, and took what we in the South call "a spit bath." I borrowed my wife's roll-on and changed shirts.

The weekend and the experience of a family reunion in South Georgia was as much fun as Ronnie had promised. The food was fantastic—a lot like funeral food, but even better and more of it. Best of all, the pickin' and grinnin' on Saturday night was an

absolute blast.

If anyone knew that we weren't related to the hosts, they sure didn't let on. We were treated as family—kissed by aunts and hugged by uncles. We were welcomed into everyone's home and into every activity with warmth and friendship, southern style.

On Sunday, after sleeping in and making a few last-minute social calls, we returned to the Fitzgerald airport. We'd off-loaded all the spare gear and baggage to a relative returning to Atlanta in a big Buick station wagon.

Coupled with the fuel burn on the flight down, we were roughly 160 pounds lighter at take-off than we were in Atlanta—even considering a weekend of heavy eating,

Thanks to the extra lift supplied by the radiational heating from a hot asphalt runway and by a hot South Georgia cornfield beyond, the airplane literally jumped off the ground. Soon we were high above it all in a clear blue South Georgia sky, dotted with white puffy clouds.

Our return flight on that summer afternoon was a breeze. We climbed to 10,500 feet where the air coming into the cabin was a cool 44° F. Ninety minutes later, the late afternoon cumulous clouds in and around Atlanta caused a somewhat bumpy ride on the descent and approach into the airport, but no one seem to mind—especially yours truly. I'd been well fed, entertained and embraced by a big, loving family—if only for a weekend.

Oh, and I learned another lesson about flying that day: you can overload a Cessna, but you can't overload a Beechcraft! My wife noticed it, too and said, "Maybe that's why the doors on a Beechcraft are narrower than they are on a Cessna!" Yeah, right.

*After retirement from a career in advertising and marketing, **Ron Burch** has authored a number of published essays and magazine articles, in addition to a full-length novel.*