

Prayer Update (January, 2005)

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December has been something of a scramble so far . But in fact the jumble goes back further than that - back to the sharp glowing Friday evening when I was wrestling a long ladder on to my pickup, and an invitation to Kentucky for Thanksgiving was confirmed by Dwight Jarboe, who stopped to give me a hand. With my acceptance of that - and Thanksgiving almost seems to rival Christmas in importance here - came the slightly delayed realisation of the timetable which that implied -



I was going to be "out-of-town" more or less continuously until it was almost too late to do anything about Christmas, unless I did most of it before then. So for the next couple of weeks I was glad of the otherwise horrid continuous emphasis on Christmas that the commercial world inflicts over here.

Then came a wet a frigid Wednesday when I set off with two kind almost-strangers to collect their 20-something artist son from his new flat in Columbus and drive the 7 hours more or less south to a university town called Bowling Green, Kentucky. Western Kentucky has a gentle landscape, still with hardwood trees in abundance, but great slow-rolling fields as well, and the fangs of the winter arctic only occasionally stab this far south. It also lacks the slightly creepy grid of roads and farms of the flatter places like Indiana - in short I liked it!

Which might have been something to do with the family I stayed with, a family of parents, their 4 sons and daughter and their families. Very musical (almost intimidatingly so), entirely literate, and hospitable, with them I witnessed virtuosi performances on the saw and the hammer dulcimer (Appalachia's culture fades slowly to the west), a turkey roasted in a metal dustbin, and a house with more books than mine - (I even managed to read one in between times). The oldest brother is an artist in ecclesiastical stained glass -

so I had a glorious trip to his employer's workshop (the upstairs of a converted barn in a wood) and discussion of glass topped off by a introduction to a late-model Model T Ford -- the occupant of the lower story of the barn--, and then a trip to see one of his finished commissions. This is mingled in my head with a blur of copious food, a trip to the Corvette museum, (they're made in the town) 2 church services, one with my hosts the Jarboe parents, and one immediately after it to hear my boss do his MMS presentation. Many American churches have 2 complete services in the morning, so there is even more opportunity to overdose on sermons than in NI, if that's possible!

Seven hours after leaving that Sunday, and being considered a good enough risk to be allowed to help with the driving, I got back into my flat, emptied one case and finished another already mostly packed, and flopped into bed around midnight.

Monday morning 7 30 am and I'm helping to load a plane bound for Florida - and I'm going to be on it. It's 30 F and I can only hope that the heater my team thought was fixed really is.... After fueling, and all the other things that the airlines do so surprisingly fast (now it seems fast, anyway) , we fly south, across the Ohio river, and south along the edge of the mountains you see seemingly on the eastern edge of your map of the USA. There's a lot of them. We flew south at about 160 knots for 4 hours before we ran out of mountains.

Even at the creeping speed of the little plane we're taking back for fixing, we're still going to take about the same amount of time that it would have if we had been on an airline- we didn't have to drive 2 hours to the airport, spend an hour there, change aeroplanes at another one, and so on. And that creeping speed is still 3 times as fast as the best time you'd make in a car. Just a pity they're so expensive. But here we were, able to fix a plane for a outfit almost 1000 miles south of us, and then deliver 3 mechanics to fix another one in 7 hours including an unhurried stop for fuel and food. And if there had been four of us, the fuel costs for the trip would have been cheaper than the airline tickets. So you can tell I believe in missionary aviation!

The land flattened out after some extraordinary parallel abrupt ridges, and I had grits with my lunch - (a sort of grey maize based goo) at a sleepy little Georgian town. It was in the 60's by now, and the ground was sand under pines. The airport had a four-foot fence, and kept a free and ancient self-drive van to take visiting pilots into town for lunch, which smelt inside exactly like my old Avenger, and was , appropriately enough, made by Chrysler, about the same time.

Thence to Florida, with me in the front seat now, and even being allowed to steer for a while - which cut my concentration on our sight of the Space shuttle runway down considerably. There's nothing like steering to make a flight go quickly! And I still think that Florida looks prettiest from the air. It's a big state, with a long long east coast, with great swards of swamp inland - and everything only feet above the sea. So down to Palm Beach International, in a remarkably democratic mix of

thundering 777's and tiny Cessna's leavened by just about everything else in between. Then off to their hangar, and introductions, including that of to our car, loaned to us by MFI, who had the care of it from a missionary who works in Haiti and leaves it with them (one of MFI's services). A white Ford Thunderbird, a sort of American Capri - sporty looking but not the fastest - about 12 years old and home to a thriving community of sugar ants. Which was just fine if you didn't mind finding one or two in your shirt at night. (It eventually got to Ian about half way through, and he found a can of insecticide somewhere and fogged the car one night and left it closed - but by the time we were leaving the ants were on their way back!) Scott used to get in and swat around himself for a few minutes. Since they didn't bite, stink, or tickle noticeably I wasn't too worried, but I didn't leave any food unattended. (intermission for attendance at the one choir performance I AM home for) A longer intermission than planned, but , thanks to what folk here call an ice storm, I'm catching up on all sorts of things.. An ice storm isn't actually that cold - just around freezing - but it consists of rain or very-nearly melted snow which starts to freeze as it lands - on everything. Trees, cars, electricity wires, and trees with fragile branches leaning over electricity wires... It looks very pretty, but it's lethal to electricity grids. But God is good, while our hangar has been dark and frigid for 2 days now, my flat is toasty and bright (And I'm typing on a computer!)

Back to Palm Beach. We stayed with a couple who help MFI and MMS by providing accommodation for visiting mechanics, aided in their welcome by a gormless young Great Dane. Art Axtell is a concrete formwork contractor, and works all hours. Marilyn keeps house and helps in the office. Their house is a bungalow full of under - used delights a pool table, a swimming pool , a TV almost as big as the screen in the old Jet centre cinema in Coleraine.... One of their grown children live about a 1/4 of a mile away and both houses resemble the upwardly mobile American dream .. except that their son's house is his second, and he has just sold it to pay for the first... working his way up in houses as an investment - and houses in Southern Florida can be that, - this house sold while we were there for 400,000 dollars plus - a comparable one in "ordinary" places would probably be a third to half of that.

The DC3's were fun. Almost no danger of tightening anything too tight - all the bolts are too big! Nothing tiny and delicate or complicated about these planes - but on the other hand, almost nothing free from a film of engine oil! Still, they manage to have all the tight places that smaller planes have too, and their cowlings demand wrestling and pounding into submission. Don't get involved though, if you don't like ladders - you need one to work on the underside of a lot of this plane, never mind the top. Just don't freak at the thought of inspecting maybe 200 bolts on each wing (that's what the magnifying glass was for). Every Tuesday and Thursday MFI take off with an assorted load of mail,

cargo and people for missionaries. They predominantly fly to Haiti and the Dominican Republic, but do go to the Bahamas, and Jamaica as well. They fly to all sorts of little strips, and can arrange to buy stuff, and bring it, medevac people (in the Cessna we returned to them), deliver mail faster and more reliably than the local post, and generally keep things coming. You can also park a car with them if you're not gone more than a few months. They're not a terribly large outfit, maybe 20-something people, pilots load and work on planes when they're not flying, and almost everybody has two jobs. If I had had a different visa, I probably could have gone along to see the other end, but after a previous MA'er nearly got refused re-entry, they weren't anxious to try. So my only flight was a short test and run-in , still great fun. We had been lined up to swap over two engines, but one hadn't arrived when we came, so we helped out on other inspection work (those bolts) and on regular maintenance on the one DC3 with turboprop engines - a very much less oily bird.

Florida isn't all work - Art Axtell is a mad keen scuba-diver -and willing to teach, so we ended up, in his pool first, and then on Saturday in 20 ft of water off Palm Beach. An experience of a lifetime - breathing away underwater, within arm's reach of fish, and picking up sea-shells off the sea-FLOOR! Sad to say I didn't catch any lobsters, but I had a great time.

That was jammed in with a whizz up the road to say hello to Tommy and Sharon Barkley - Tommy being an old pew-mate of mine in the days of ...well it was him who told me that it was 18 years since we had actually seen each other !! I stayed with them on Saturday night, and went back on Sunday morning. They seem to be happy and settled in the university town of Gainesville, and immersed in their studies.

Then back to N300MF - our patient, and on with the engine, and a engine which needed wondrously little setting up - only one high-speed taxi, after one run-up. Their current over haulers are good. We finished up on Friday after lunch, and wended our tedious way home on the airlines, over to Atlanta, and then north, with the 2 pilots with me muttering all the way if only they had an airplane they'd be home by now, and at half the price in fuel... and by half past midnight , I was inclined to agree with them!

And, since you and I know that that has had some polishing, here's' some more recent news....

It has rained here for most of two weeks with a vengeance, with weirdly high temperatures - it got up to 70 F one day - and fell the next to 30F . The river at Coshocton is up over its banks, and Lake Park is mostly lake The flood control dams are full, and they'll keep the rivers full for a fortnight (that's one word that is guaranteed to confabulate Americans round here - you have to say 2 weeks) . Thankfully, no more freezing rain, though, which is sort of sore on the electricity wires. Half of MMS had a dim and sometimes chilly Christmas, though thankfully,

I got away unscathed. Now it's back to the frost again - 0 F (-17C) last night

I've been back at the books, trying to get a few miles under my belt with them so that I don't have to worry later. We've been stock-taking (called inventory here) and now I'm working on a 206 that MAF-US have brought back from Venezuela, and they want it all tidied up and re-registered in America. Plenty to do, but nice to work on a well-looked-after plane for a change. So far the main excitement with that was that we found a 4 inch crack across the rear half of its prop hub -not radial, but more or less like the chord of a circle. No-one here has seen anything quite like it before. It was last overhauled about 100 operating hours ago in Venezuela, and the blades show no signs of impact. The makers have taken it back and are investigating. We thought we had a Caravan coming here to get fixed up after a nasty landing, but that has evaporated, but at least one of our best customers is hot on the heels of a turboprop- a Beech Kingair 200 he wants - so we may finally have one coming in regularly - which is what I want along with this 206 we're working on.

Went to a Texan couple , Ronny and Denise Erekson's for New Years Day, and asked if their girls would like to see a beaver dam I had found about a week earlier - and was taken up on it. So Ronny and the 4 older girls (they've 5, all under 10) accompanied me and Alasdair Munro (another MAF'er) to some old coal-mines (opencast - sort of like a messy big quarry, all over -grown, with roads dozed through it)about 5 miles south of Coshocton. There are horse -riding trails and so on through the trees, and about 1/2 a mile from the car-park is this beaver dam - but no lodge or visible beavers so far. The girls enjoyed themselves, having got more than a touch of cabin fever, and I watched in trepidation as at least 2 pairs of "my little pony" style snow-boots (white plastic with bright pink fur around the top , and pink pom-poms) quickly went mud -coloured. And that saintly mother said nothing when we got back.....

Daniel Leakey (the fellow I stayed with when I first arrived in Coshocton and I went back on Sunday with our bikes, since it was almost 60, and we'd had lunch, and had nothing much to do. The ground was so soft that we had to pedal hard down hill never mind up hill. Then it started to drizzle. Felt just like home! Still, there's at least one promising trail for a bike, and nothing much in the way of competition for it. The bikes needed, and got, literally hosed down when we got back. So now you're more or less up to date, apart from the fact that I've picked up my tin-whistle again. (I bought it almost a year ago, and trying to play it then made me sweat, literally) And this time I can actually get notes out of it. I should have stuck to something simple like this years ago. Maybe we should start a hangar band for special occasions - (like the impromptu choir which is deliberately flat sharp or maybe on the wrong page entirely, when we sing "Happy Birthday").

Two of the permanent staff already do hilarious mock brass-band tootling now and again when they're feeling really merry ! Just don't book me for anything at church. It'd take me 6 months to get a recognisable tune practised up.

And finally, the hot, or rather distinctly cool news that my next and probably last field trip is to... Kenai, Alaska! In February ! (To work, eat and sleep, I hear, in a (thankfully) heated hangar.) Doing legally required work on a Piper Navajo, (a big 8 seat twin engined affair), which is used by SOAR, who fly it to the Russian far east. Snow mobiles, Northern lights, maybe even a dog sled to see / experience. I can hardly wait (except for the temperature bit) I'm away from the 31st January, to 11 th of Feb.

Kenai is in the south, about 60 miles west of Anchorage.

PS This evening I heard that the first King-Air aeroplane our customer found has proved on inspection, to be a no-go. Shot engines. Half the hangar (6 people) is over in Virginia helping to inspect the rest of it. I'm back at the choir again - and discovering where they get some of their sheet music. When I've worked out what sounds good, I'll try and get you a copy. The one performance I got to, due to Florida, was in a small church down the country 20 miles. There was 80 of us in a place not much bigger than Llantara, with hard walls. No mikes needed. :) Because it was about -14 C that night, the congregation was a bit thin, but they got their trip out's worth. The railway lines down the middle of the street outside the church (complete with sleepers) claimed 2 victims of inattentiveness on the way home. (driving across railway lines away from level crossings only works in films) I helped change the tires on one of them ... and I've NEVER been as cold!

Here are some snaps to give you a flavour of life for me at the moment:



Team Photo



Easyjet MMS Style



Wing Bolt Inspection



P&W Engine Overhaul



Fixed & Flying



Fishy Visitor