

Washington D. C. for a Month

Patrick & Mailinh Haslem

Recently I was given the opportunity to travel and work for my government agency in Riverdale, Maryland for 4 weeks. My wife and I elected to fly our Mooney to Maryland rather than driving or flying by the airlines. I wanted to write about my trip for this month's newsletter so that I may document for all of you some of the misconceptions about flying into the Washington SFRA and to show to you how the permanently stationed private pilots enjoy aviation around the Maryland area. Some of my flying strategies for my trip were unconventional and after looking back I am happy with the decisions I made. As with any true cross-country adventure, weather plays an important role and this was no different for me during this trip.

This was the third true cross-country trip my wife and I made in less than a year. We flew twice to Michigan last November and July, and then this time to Maryland. I am happy to say that with these trips I have acquired about *half* of the number of hours that are said to actually make owning a personal airplane more cost effective than renting.

August 17th we departed at around 7am. The South Texas weather was good and as usual a front was approaching from the North and was somewhat stagnant running from around central Louisiana to the Virginia area. The winds were steady around 12 to 15 at the ground and approaching 20kts at altitude, diminishing the higher we climbed. Employing an unusual strategy, I requested a cruise altitude of 4500 from ATC, and was granted my request. Attaining 165-175 knots ground speed, this slight deviation from normal procedures allowed us to cover our first leg much faster than was originally planned.



Nearing Houston's class B airspace, my expectation came true as the controller informed us of our deviation from normal altitude for the direction we were flying, and acknowledged that we did not need to adjust altitude, however preparing for the proximity of the stagnant front, I picked up an IFR clearance and climbed to 5000 which maintained the majority of our additional groundspeed. Our first stop was in DeRidder, Louisiana (DRI). We arrived about 25 minutes ahead of schedule due to our significant tailwinds.

I have always been told by my counterparts in the EAA club of the humidity of Eastern Texas, and you could practically cut the humid air with a knife in DeRidder. A quick top off, rest room break and back in the air we went towards our next stop, around a three hour leg.

With cross country trips, equipment malfunctions are a regular part, and I have experienced my fair share of problems. The first equipment problem of this trip, our ADSB weather radar was not working. For the remainder of this trip, I was placed back 5 years to the time I flew without the in-cockpit weather assistance and relied on ATC and my preflight weather planning to know what we could expect.



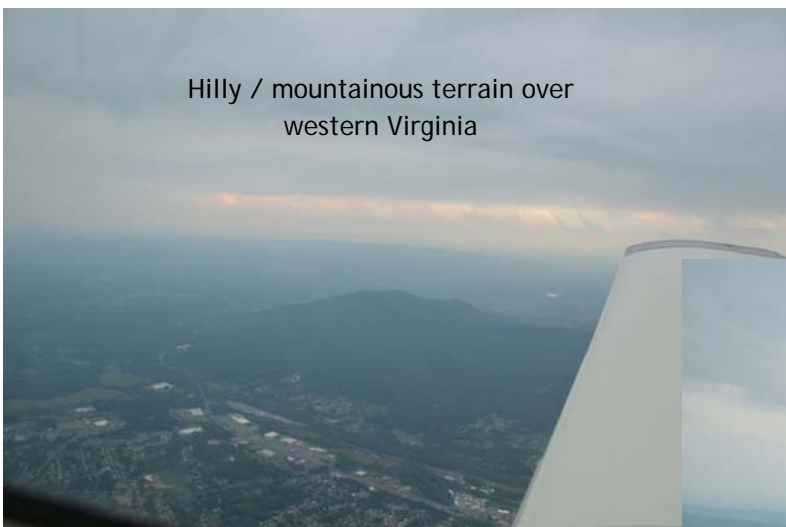
As we approached eastern Mississippi and Alabama, we began to encounter additional vertical cloud formations and some early Cumulonimbus. For the next couple of hours I was able to deviate slightly to the left / right of course and avoid them with just a couple of times having to pass through. We felt some light to moderate bumps and a few moments later we were out again in clear air.

As we neared Alabama, using flight watch I maintained a clear idea of the frontal location and the areas of problematic weather. But nonetheless, after a little over three hours of flight time we both were ready to rest just south of Huntsville, Alabama. Landing at Morgan country regional (5M0) we encountered a lot of wind and buffeting due to the large trees beyond both ends of the runway. A quick top off and a call to flight service, lead to quick preflight and departure. Flight service informed me that the cloud development we flew through was approaching 5M0 and had become a line of thunderstorms. The briefer mentioned that we would need to depart fairly quickly to avoid a large area of weather that would soon engulf Huntsville and the surrounding vicinities.

We waited for a heavy shower to pass and completed a quick runup and VFR departure and we were airborne looking at the weather from the air. I could see the heavy showers and could see clearings that we targeted as our path of flight. With the assistance Huntsville approach, we picked up our IFR clearance and navigated our way around the cells of precipitation. Soon we were in front of the eastbound weather and were handed off to Atlanta center.

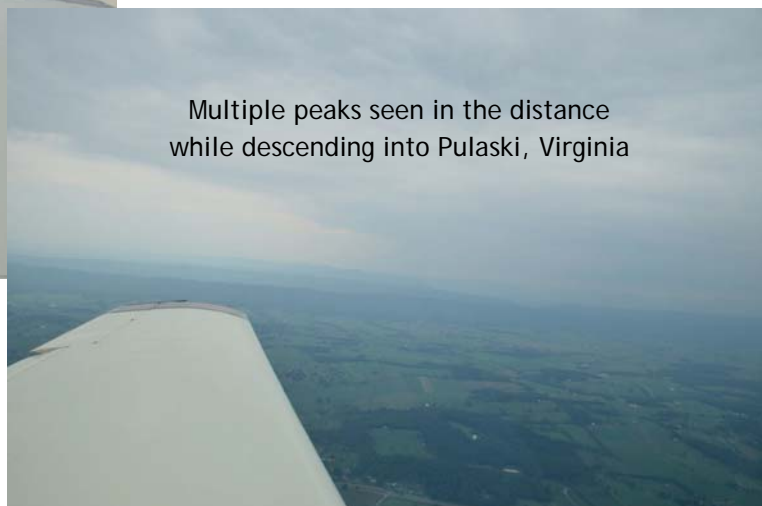


Towering cumulus / deteriorating weather over northern Mississippi and Alabama



Hilly / mountainous terrain over western Virginia

Continuing northeast we flew over Tennessee and began to see the landscape change to more hills and then to the Appalachian Mountains. Soon we were told by ATC that we would need to climb to 9000 or take a diversion north of course to maintain the Minimum Enroute Altitude due to the mountain chain. I elected to take a northerly course and remain at 7000.



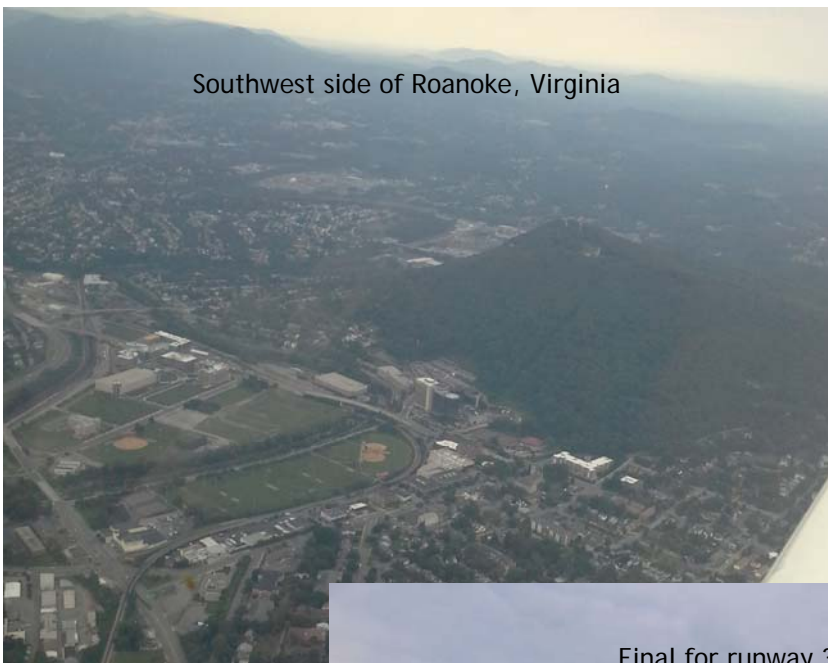
Multiple peaks seen in the distance while descending into Pulaski, Virginia

We began our descent and were cleared for a visual approach into Dublin / Pulaski's New River Valley airport (PSK) which has a 6200 foot runway. The runway is easily visible, and the terrain is beautiful with the dramatic hills that are littered with houses and properties, none of which are the same elevation as their neighbor.



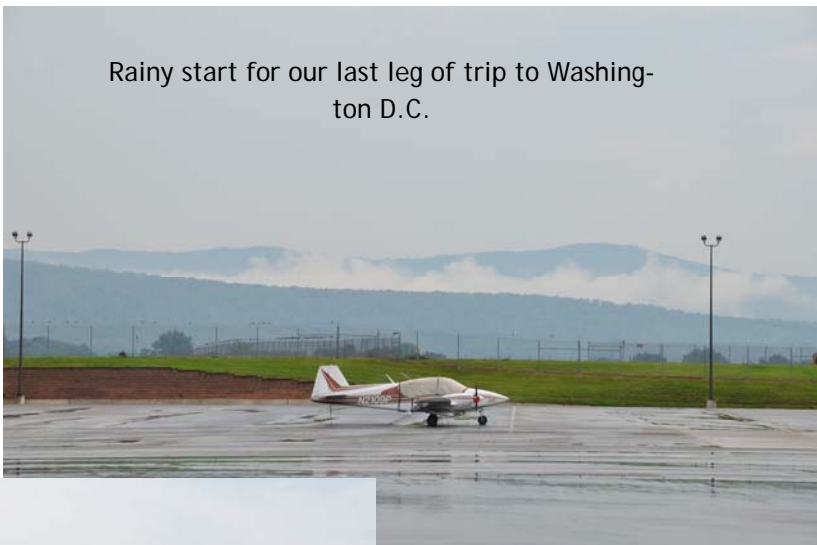
The airport was dead, and we were the only live traffic. A quick top off and we were ready to complete the last leg of our journey for that day. We departed VFR, and remembering the airport elevation, I took off with the mixture partly leaned and found the engine performance to be excellent.

The less than friendly ATC staff of Roanoke vectored us into sequence and a short flight later we were lined up for a final approach at a much higher altitude than normal. Some slipping of the airplane and soon we were at a proper decent rate making a smooth landing into ROA.



Parking at Landmark Aviation was easy and convenient. Normally we do not use higher end facilities as the cost of amenities is quite expensive. But due to the convenience and location in regards to a hotel with shuttle service, this clearly was our best option. We paid only for the parking / airport fee and did not take any fuel as we had planned. A quick shuttle ride and we arrived at our reserved hotel for the night.

The next morning, I acquired my weather briefing and filed IFR for my last leg of our trip to Maryland. Rain was in the area and we would need to fly through a line of showers before entering clear air in Eastern Virginia. Runup complete and cleared for departure, we took off on runway 34. Turning quickly to the northeast we avoided the mountains north of ROA. Again using the assistance of ATC, we navigated through the moderate precipitation and after about 25 minutes, we were east of the area of weather. The remainder of the flight was in hazy, clear air.



Rainy start for our last leg of trip to Washington D.C.



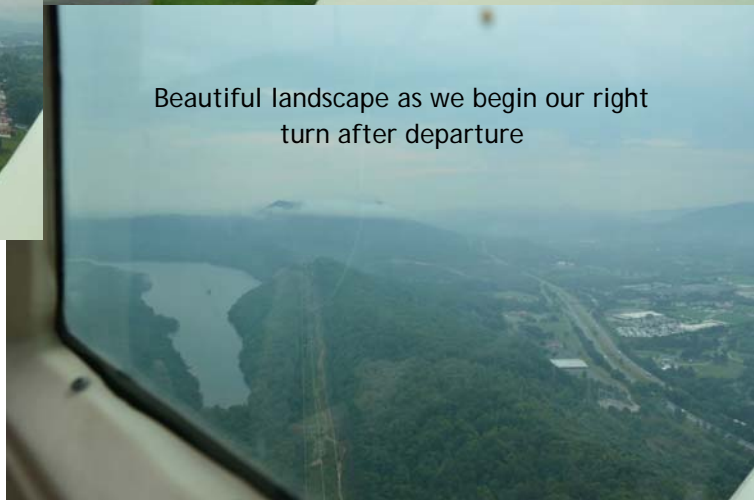
ATIS stated mountain obscuration was present that day as can be seen in the background



Departure from ROA with the FBO visible to the right

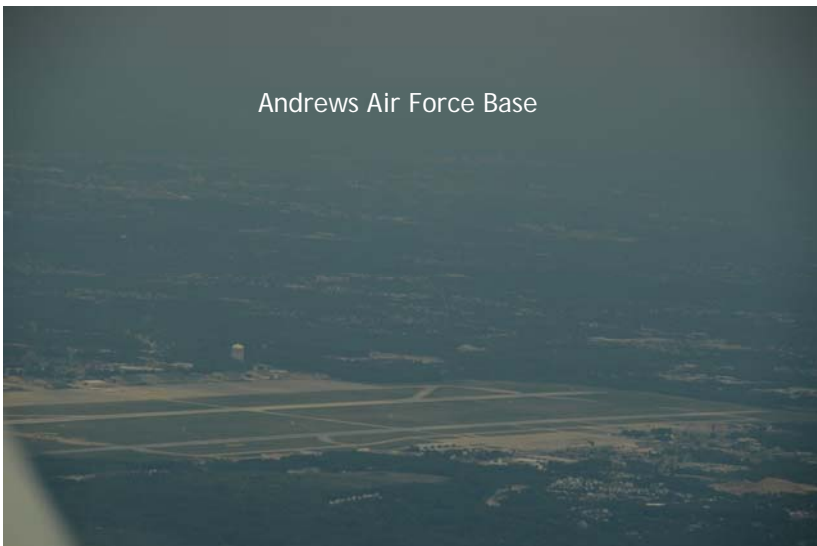


Hilly Roanoke landscape



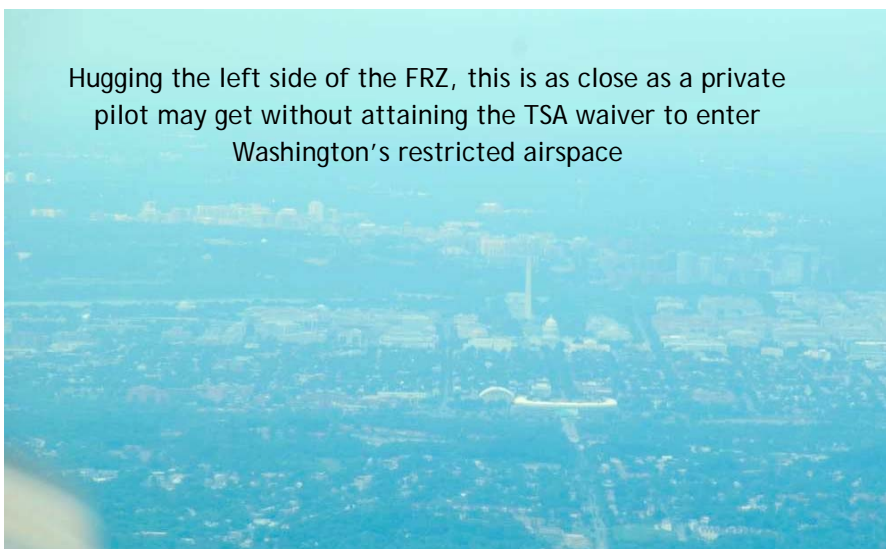
Beautiful landscape as we begin our right turn after departure

Surprisingly, ATC cleared us all the way to Fort Meade, (KFME) as filed. Intercepting three VOR's, a turn to 010 and direct to KFME. As we approached the southern part of the DC SFRA, we began to see houses and suburban landscape. Though not the best conditions for photography, Mailinh managed to get a couple decent photos of Andrews Air Base which passed by our left side, then distantly we could see the Washington Monument and the Capitol building. Soon, we were cleared for a decent and Fort Meade was visible in front of us. A quick check of the AWOS and ATC cleared us for a visual approach. We cancelled our IFR clearance, and found the procedures no different from other places in the country with the exception of needing to continue our squawk code until after landing.



Andrews Air Force Base

Hugging the left side of the FRZ, this is as close as a private pilot may get without attaining the TSA waiver to enter Washington's restricted airspace



The airport runway was relatively short and the trees were tall not far from the runway ends. Obviously being used to South Texas flying, I was surprised to see the tree cover so dense, however, this made for a very picturesque approach. The wind was light and a smooth landing was followed by a taxi by a very diverse and large number aircraft parked on the FME ramp. From experimental canard aircraft, to helicopters, a gyrocopter, a handful of twins, a turboprop, lots of Cessnas, Pipers and many fellow Mooneys filled the ramp.



KFME Surrounded by dense forest



Many aircraft line the parking ramp at Fort Meade Tipton Airport

The airport staff informed me that FME was re-designated as a public use airport and was previously military. The taxi procedures for the fuel pump are unconventional in that they consist of a one way direction taxiing around the back of the pump to pull up sideways in the front so that exiting the pumps is coordinated. It was not clear and the airport staff commonly direct newcomers over the unicom radio. One time is all it took, and now I feel comfortable topping off the plane. 100LL at FME is not much more at 5.70 / gallon. Making contact with an A & E on the field before leaving Texas, we were greeted by Mr. Tom Gorman who displayed the Southern hospitality we have become accustomed to.



Throughout our stay in Maryland, my wife and I have made three trips to visit friends in New Jersey just across the Delaware River from Philadelphia. For all three trips I filed IFR and have found they have been simple and relatively quick. The most time consuming parts have been navigating around BWI airspace. This is busy airspace and like all class B airports (Houston most familiar to us), one must expect a fair amount of vectoring to get to their planned course. In order to understand the reason for vectoring I encourage you to view the proximity of FME to BWI on a chart.

Washington D.C. though having more restrictions than other parts of the US is accessible and offers many interesting sights. I recommend that anyone who is interested should fly to this area and enjoy the freedom flying privately may offer. I hope to write more about this trip for EAA chapter 595 to see the many exciting parts that my wife and I have experienced.