




A COAST-TO-COAST FLIGHT



Contributing editor Michael Leighton recalls the winter day in early 2016 when he and his student had to declare an emergency.

Story by Michael Leighton | Photos by Stephen Lieberman

“O.K. then, Cherokee 7978C is going to declare an emergency. I want a vector direct to Papa 33, and lower now.” In 37 years of flying, including a couple of in-flight engine failures, I had never had to say that for real.

The trip started in Palm Beach, Fla. the day before. The Cherokee 235 Pathfinder I was flying was going home to California with its new owner, who just happened to be a freshly-minted private pilot.

“Going west in the winter in a Cherokee is going to be a slow go, and you just don’t know what the weather is going to be,” I told him before we started. “There’s always the possibility of getting weathered in somewhere.”

Like a scene from a book

The next day, we were living a chapter from a Richard Collins book. The wind was howling—more than 60 knots on the nose—and it was dark. Level at 10,000 feet, the headwind had reduced our groundspeed to just over 65 knots.

The controller asked us to climb to 11,000 feet, the minimum MEA for that segment of the airway between El Paso and Tucson, Ariz. Between us and Tucson loomed Rincon Peak at 8,900 feet.

The little Cherokee could barely give me 100 fpm. I asked the controller if we could stay at 10,000 for the duration, and he offered us a “T” route that was slightly to the south that would allow that.

Unfortunately, that put us into some weather, and we began to pick up ice. Now, I had reached my limit. Night, in the mountains, picking up ice; a trifecta of bad things.

“OK, 78C is picking up ice and we want direct to the nearest airport with an instrument approach and lower,” I said.

The controller asked if could take an intermediate fix for the GPS approach, and we agreed. Then he said, “Stand by,” and left the frequency for a while.

IN A CHEROKEE

No answer from ATC

Several other aircraft called, but Center did not answer. I called three more times, to no reply.

Thinking that ice might be affecting the com antenna, I transmitted in the blind to any aircraft, and one replied. He suggested calling on guard, and he would stay on the frequency to relay if necessary.

Before I could do that, the controller came back on. "Everybody just hold on," he said. "I had to go off frequency to get a clearance for another aircraft. I'm back now."

"Seven-eight Charlie, what do you need?"

At this point I was annoyed that the controller chose to go off-line and get a clearance for another aircraft when there was an aircraft in distress on the frequency. I decided to declare an emergency.

"What is the nature of your emergency?" he asked.

"Like I told you, we are picking up ice and we can now no longer maintain altitude," I replied.

Previous difficulty

That exchange was the second time in about four hours that we got poor service from ATC while in actual instrument conditions. Earlier in the day, we were cleared for the GPS 26 left approach into El Paso, Tex., then given direct to a fix that wasn't on that approach.

Halfway down that approach, we were told that if we could not acquire the airport visually, we would need to be vectored to the ILS 4 approach, as the GPS 26 wasn't approved for service at that time.

We couldn't see anything, so a missed approach and vectors to the ILS followed.

Back to the emergency

"I can give you direct to Papa thirty-three, but I can't get you lower than 8,900 until about four miles from the airport," the controller said.

We were 22 miles away from Cochise County Airport (P33); full power, prop full forward, descending at 100 fpm. I'd turned off the autopilot and began to fly by hand when I first determined that ice was affecting performance.

I tuned the Unicom frequency for P33 into the number-two radio then proceeded to activate the pilot-controlled lighting. (Still in the clouds, I had no way to know if I had in fact done so, but I did it anyway.)

Then I put on the defroster to make a hole in the ice on the windshield. It was calm and methodical in the cockpit. My student asked if he could do anything to help. I politely said no, and being ever the instructor, explained what I could do at the time to him.



...every pilot has to know his or her personal limits, the limitations of the aircraft they are flying, and must be able to recognize when there is any possibility that they may exceed either.





Above: The radar clearly shows a storm well beyond the capability of the aircraft to operate safely in.

Left: New owner Stephen Lieberman pushes his Cherokee into the hangar for the first time after his adventurous flight.



Left: N7978C is well equipped with a nice mix of new and legacy equipment. With XM weather and TCAS traffic, it's about as capable as a Cherokee gets, but no match for airframe ice.

Right: The aircraft owner (left) and the author in flight.





When Lieberman and Leighton were preparing to depart Palm Beach, Fla., temperatures were in the mid-80s.

On the ground in Willcox Az., Lieberman (pictured) and the author were greeted by the airport dog. The ultra-retro FBO at P33 was like stepping back in time, and the owners were great.



We broke out at about 7,900 feet into good VFR about two miles from the end of the runway.

The airport is at 4,200 feet, so we had about 3,500 feet to lose. Three 360s later, we were on final approach.

I canceled my IFR with the controller, took a phone number to call him after touchdown and proceeded to land uneventfully.

On the ground

I had my student/new aircraft owner make that call and let ATC know we were fine. So far, he had gotten an education I could not have possibly planned.

As we taxied onto the unlit ramp, we were greeted by the airport dog. When I climbed off the wing, I noticed the ice on the leading edge of the wing, the stabilator and vertical stab still firmly attached.

A few minutes later, a pickup truck rolled up and the gentleman driving it offered to give us a ride into town. Willcox, Ariz. is by any definition a small town; it doesn't even have a taxi or car service. But it does have a Holiday Inn Express and a truck stop.

The Cherokee's new owner, Stephen Lieberman, and I reviewed the day's events over food. I explained why I opted to land short of the destination. The decision to do so is pretty self-evident; at night, in IFR, in mountainous terrain does not require much explanation.

Then I explained why I turned off the autopilot and flew by hand. The autopilot, I told him, would try to maintain altitude at the expense of airspeed, all the way until the plane stalled. The ice increased stall speed, and I wanted to be able to feel the tactile indications of an impending stall if it came to that.

Also, I explained why I chose to declare an emergency. The controller was not being responsive to our requests—and apparently, even after being told of the issue—chose to go off frequency for nearly three minutes while we were technically without a clearance. In light of those circumstances, I chose to exercise my emergency authority to ensure the safe outcome of our flight.

Next I explained that every pilot has to know his or her personal limits, the limitations of the aircraft they are flying, and must be able to recognize when there is any possibility that they may exceed either.

At this point, exhaustion was setting in. We had started the day in Alexandria, La., 14 hours earlier. I needed a hot shower and a good night's sleep.



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From Willcox to Tucson

The next day dawned gray and raining, and the temperatures at the surface hovered around 40 degrees F. We bummed a ride back the airport from the hotel maintenance man. The weather in Tucson just 60 miles west was VFR, but in Willcox it was solid IFR.

We spent the morning and into the early afternoon at the local FBO. It reminded me of the little FBOs I remember as a kid. The owners were friendly and the place was an aviation time capsule. I used my time to write a NASA report on the events of the night before, just in case.

Finally, the sky cleared enough to ensure that we could make Tucson, and we set off on that leg VFR.

The weather in California, our final destination, was awful. A winter storm watch was in effect and there was no chance of us completing the flight for at least two more days. I opted to grab an airliner home, while my new aircraft owner and friend stayed with the plane.

Two days later, in good VFR, he got his plane home.



On top and between layers, the sun was getting ready to set as the author and Leiberman flew west from El Paso, Tex.

The value of the experience

My ex-partner Chuck Clapper is fond of saying, “experience is what you get when you don’t get what you want.”

Clearly, my student got the aviation experience of a lifetime during our flight, one that I could have never intentionally showed him. As an instructor, I was prepared—even before we left Florida—for this particular scenario.

Though I would rather have not had it happen, at no time was the safe outcome of the flight in question, and my student got an education in aeronautical decision-making he could never have learned from a ground school or by watching video.

It should be noted that my student will be starting on his instrument rating immediately. I could not be happier. |||

Michael Leighton is a 10,000-hour, three-time Master Flight Instructor and operates a Part 141 flight school and maintenance facility in South Carolina and South Florida. You can find him on the web at flymkleighton.net. Send questions or comments to editor@piperflyer.org.

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