



The ferry pilot's nightmare

Seven hours out, 300 miles from land and the engine stops. But David Plange lived to write the story

Well, it started out as a normal ferry flight. Tony, the aircraft owner and I met up at Heathrow to fly to LAX on April 27th with a view to starting homeward next day. In Los Angeles we were met by the salesman who had sold Tony a really nice 2000 Archer III. We checked out the paperwork the following morning and made sure everything was OK before heading up to Watsonville to meet Dustin Rabe and collect my HF radio. Dustin is also a ferry pilot and a very good friend, and was instrumental in getting me into the business. We had 30kt winds against us on the way up the California coast, which showed as a ground speed of 85kts. I remember thinking that this was going to be a mammoth trip. Little did I know.

We decided to stay the night and went to one of Dustin's favourite fresh seafood restaurants before turning in for an early start across the Rockies and into the desert the following morning. Departing Watsonville for Albuquerque we knew we'd have to refuel en route as we had around 4.5 hrs endurance with reserve. The wind was giving us a 20kt push as we turned left on the airway at Palmdale at 11,000ft and headed east. As we approached Edwards Air Force base we experienced some really strong downdrafts and were unable to maintain altitude. I thought then we had a bumpy ride ahead of us. Little did I know.

The airmet had got it right, and moderate turbulence saw us head into a lovely little place named Lake Havasu City. This is a little oasis in the middle of the desert nestled in a cluster of mountains and sporting a very inviting lake. The taxi driver enthused in telling us the story of Robert McCulloch, of the chainsaw empire, who back in the 1960s purchased London Bridge and had it dismantled and shipped to Lake Havasu City, rebuilt it in the desert then channelled some water from the lake to run under it. We departed from there bound for Albuquerque and this time managed to get within a few miles, but decided Double Eagle looked a better proposition with an airmet for mountain obscuration and thunderstorms looming. We had to wait for a couple of hours for the weather to pass and eventually the nexrad presented a window of opportunity. We headed



back out over the desert and turned north east into tornado alley, bound for Oklahoma City. There we met a couple of corporate pilots and Tony struck up a conversation with them. He was proud of his new toy, and with good reason. These guys were really interested in our journey, and Tony had a look around their Citation X. I planned the next route to St Louis, the home of flight, as I thought it would be an interesting stop. As we approached St Louis we still had a decent range with better than expected winds so we continued on, and then we were forced to take a sharp left into Decatur as a thunderstorm blocked our path. Again we waited for a weather window to present itself, and when it did we set off for Cleveland. We were in cloud for three hours solid, which wasn't that much fun for Tony, and we broke out close to Lake Erie. Again we had fuel in the tanks, so I did the calculations and Rochester was a feasible option. I was constantly watching my clock as I definitely didn't want to miss the Mayweather-Moseley fight. Anyway, we set off bright and early the following morning for Bangor to complete our

Top: Tony's Archer in California at the start of an unforgettable ferry trip
Above: turbulence over the high desert meant the Archer was unable to maintain altitude

2,600 mile trip across the States and relax in the knowledge we were already halfway home with very little in the way of delay.

The ferry tanks were being fitted the following day so we had time to relax. Dustin was flying in with a brand new C206 Stationair with synthetic vision, which I was keen to see in the flesh. Another friend of mine was also due to fly in on the Tuesday but we would be long gone by then – or so we thought. We were actually stuck for three days awaiting the paperwork for Canadian clearance. We were also hearing of the Icelandic volcanic ash cloud preventing IFR clearances from Gander, so a rethink of our options was needed. In the event we were able to make up a group of six ferry pilots who enjoyed swapping some great stories over a beer that evening.

Our Archer, along with a brand new one from the factory flown by my friend The Flying Scotsman, Gary Hunter, and Dave Henderson, who lives just up the road from me, decided to set off for St John's, Newfoundland with a view to crossing the Atlantic to the Azores to route around the ash cloud. En route and about three hours in we were all chatting away on 123.47 when Dave reported some issues with the instruments in his brand new Warrior and decided to make a precautionary landing in Moncton. The two Archers landed in St John's, and I was amazed at how nice it was. I guess I had been used to the more primitive stopping points of Goose Bay and Iqaluit and was pleasantly surprised by this place. Gary and I had a look at the weather and wind options, and it looked good for a dusk departure the following day to fly 12 hours through the night to land in Santa Maria the following morning as the sun came up. The ferry tank was working well, and we had 148



Left: ferry pilot David Plange at Oklahoma City, deep in the heart of Tornado Alley
Above: downtown St Louis – we intended to stop but pressed on to Decatur
Below: before the ferry tanks were fitted we had 4.5 hours endurance

usg useable; we had worked out conservatively that in our overweight condition we were averaging 10.5 usgph, which gave us 14 hours endurance without reserve. We could have taken a net zero wind component and still have made the crossing to the Azores, so we planned and prepped and departed into the darkening sky.

Between 5,000ft and 10,000ft there was a potential for light to moderate icing, and Gary's brand new Archer seemed to climb better than ours, probably because I had a co pilot occupying the normally empty seat next to me. The excess baggage that usually fills the rest of the aircraft had all been consigned to FedEx at significant cost and for very good reason. With full tanks, our climb rate average would have been in the region of 300 ft per minute. We were trying to make 7,000ft – Gary in front was in the clear at just under 7,000ft and he was climbing to 9,000. As we slowly limped past 6,500ft with the throttle full and the mixture adjusted slightly, I got out the torch and could see we were starting to accrete ice on the leading edges. 6,800ft and I could see the tops of the clouds just above us. Another few hundred feet and we would be in the clear – but no, it wasn't going to work. I reported I was unable to make my climb profile due to icing and requested a descent to 5,000ft to melt it off. This was granted. We burned off some fuel and eventually managed to make it up to 7,000ft where we found a clear sky and twinkling stars. HF transmissions were impossible – I have never heard the HF frequencies as cluttered as they were on this night. It appeared everyone had rerouted due to the volcanic ash, and this particular airspace was significantly busier than normal. We managed to relay our position reports via some very friendly airliner crew from Virgin Atlantic – thanks Rob, and also Swissair and American. We were cleared for the ILS approach to runway 18 at Santa Maria (LPAZ) with the wind gusting to 30 kt from 290. It favoured 36 but there wasn't much in it. We were almost sideways as we crabbed down

final approach.

We met up on the apron with another ferry pilot, Vinnie Fuchetti, a real character who we had been with when we were stuck in Bangor a few days earlier. Vinnie had come with us when we hired a car and went to pay our respects at the crash site of Jim Beaton, a 78 year old ferry pilot who sadly lost his life earlier in the year. Vinnie was piloting a Piaggio twin push turbo prop to Delhi, India, but they had had some maintenance issues. We decided to try and get an early start the next morning and calculated Guernsey was a good option for our last overnight stay. We filled the tanks for the last time and headed out into a cloudy sky expecting a 20kt push which turned into a 20kt headwind. We wanted to try and get on the other side of the pressure system to convert to a tail wind, but we were unable to get communication with Santa Maria. The sensible thing to do was to stick to the flight plan route in case of any issue, so that's what we did. The two Archers were communicating this time on 8.33, 123.123 and all seemed OK. Tony was pretty tired and kept dropping off.

Seven hours into the crossing with about 700 miles to run, the ferry pilot's worst nightmare began to unfold. A sudden drop in fuel pressure! Tony noticed it, and in an instant I went into auto mode and switched on the electric fuel pump, switched from ferry tank to right tank and looked back at the gauge. Nothing. I remember thinking it must be a faulty gauge – then the engine died! I remember the eerie sound of the wind rushing past. I knew I had seconds to try and start a hot Piper with the ocean swell looming up at us. I pushed forward on the yoke and simultaneously switched to the left tank and the most welcome sound I have ever heard filled my ears as the engine roared. I managed to level off and then firmly instructed Tony to prepare himself for ditching. We had gone over

the procedure on the ground, but Tony was in a state of shock and I can't blame him. I helped him secure his immersion suit and gave him the life raft which he hooked on as I had instructed.

We weren't out of trouble yet. I checked the vent pipe for the ferry tank and the fuel lines but all seemed fine. I noticed Tony's seatback wasn't secured and was leaning against the tank but surely that can't have done anything? I ruled out using the ferry tank, turned right and headed for the shore some 300 miles away. Our best option was Santiago in Northern Spain. I reported what had happened to Gary, stated my intention and asked him if he could take a position report and my direct track to Santiago. He said he would follow me in and continue to relay and make position reports. Gary, who is also a corporate pilot flying Cjs, was fantastic, and it was great to have him with us for moral support.

I did the calculations and worked out we had around two hours left in the wing tanks. Leaned out, this trip was 2.5 hours at best, and that was assuming the right tank would work. There was really no good time to try it but I knew the left tank was working so I thought, let's give it a go and be ready to immediately switch back. First I switched off the electric fuel pump to rule out a mechanical pump failure; the pressure held. I then switched back on and reluctantly switched from the left tank to the right. The aircraft continued to run.

I turned the electric pump off and over the next half an hour or so tried to even out the wing tanks. I knew if I couldn't get fuel from the ferry tank, we were going swimming. Gary managed to get someone on 121.5 who relayed our position and intentions. As we got closer to the coast we were wished good luck from the Condor aircraft that had relayed the message, and also a couple of Monarch flights. At about 30 miles out I got the first murmur that the right tank was running out, so we went to the left. At five gallons indicated on the left I saw a freighter ship below. I figured if I tried the ferry tank now, then if it failed we at least had a chance of ditching and getting picked up with a chance of surviving. That water really didn't look inviting.



Landing and taking offs on the ferry tank shouldn't be attempted under any circumstances. That had stuck in my mind, so I knew I had to keep at least some fuel in one of the mains for the approach. I checked and double-checked everything and made sure Tony was prepared, then made the switch and waited a few agonizing seconds.

The engine continued to run.

Could it be we were we really going to make it, I thought, without getting wet? Then the message came that we would be better trying for Faro, which had VFR weather, while Santiago was down to minimums with driving rain, CBs and wind shear reported on the approach. I just wanted to get us down in one piece and already had it fixed in my head that we only had one chance. I opted for the more difficult approach, and it certainly didn't disappoint me – but the view of the runway as



Right: the shore of Lake Erie with the city of Cleveland in the distance

Below: tight fit - the 100-gallon ferry tank plumbed in on the back seat of the Archer



we broke cloud at 500 ft, lit up like a Christmas tree and fringed by the flashing lights of the emergency vehicles, was a sight to behold. We made a textbook landing and taxied around to the far end of the apron. Tony

had had enough; next morning he airlined it home as I filled up the main tanks and continued to Sturgate to have the ferry tanks removed and the fuel system pressure tested.

What had happened? The only thing I could logically deduce is that in the cramped space, one of us had inadvertently knocked the valve away from its ferry tank/right tank position to a point where it was drawing no fuel.

Did I learn a lesson from this episode? Most definitely. That space afforded by an empty right seat is invaluable in an emergency. Having that seat occupied compromised my safety as I didn't have enough room to prepare myself for ditching. Tony is now reunited with his aircraft and I am sure will remember his first transatlantic crossing for many years to come. I am sure this story will earn him many beers in the club house – and I won't forget it in a hurry, either. ■

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AOPA is working with its members to reduce the number of infringements. It is every pilot's duty of care to plan a flight and fly properly.

GA must take responsibility to reduce the unacceptable level of infringements.

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