

Flying the An-2 from La Porte, Texas to Phoenix, Arizona March 2006 ©

by

Matthew A. Nelson



Flying the An-2 from La Porte, Texas to Phoenix, Arizona, March 2006 ©

by

Matthew A. Nelson

Thursday, March 16th - La Porte, Texas

Wow! Has a year gone by already since I last saw Douglas Fulton and Neal Oppen, owners of the Antonov An-2 with whom I have previously flown on two other occasions? I last saw them at the La Porte, Texas Airport a year ago and now they are back again having another Annual Inspection done on the plane. And look at me, the sort-of designated historian for the adventures of the An-2 that has fallen down on my job of flying in that Russian-designed airplane and telling its story. OK, since I last saw it in 2005, it spent much of the year in a hangar at Beaumont, Texas, and only recently flew to Florida and the Bahamas without me, but I still have no new exotic photos of coconut trees like those in El Salvador or glad-to-be-back-on-the-ground stories after flying the windy passes of Alaska. Well, not so fast, because Texas has its own special winds.

Like hurricanes. Just a month after Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast, along came Hurricane Rita, causing extensive damage to the Beaumont area. Although not as extensive or expensive as Katrina, Rita initially was categorized as a Class 5 hurricane, and without going into all the details, my own family evacuated, along with a bunch more people living in the Houston area. About a week after Rita chewed up the Texas eastern coast, my wife Karoline and I were enjoying the beauty of an early snowfall in Wyoming's Tetons, when



Wyoming Tetons, early snowfall, September 2005

my cell phone rang. Douglas called and asked if we sustained any storm damage. Then he told me that the An-2 came through the storm unscathed. I had

forgotten that he left it in Beaumont last year. When I said those words to him, he said simply, "I didn't!" There is a guy that I know that has an aircraft maintenance shop in an old World War II hangar there, big enough to park the An-2 with its huge 60-foot wingspan. But the county airport manager wouldn't let Douglas store the plane in that hangar, but offered him the use of another WWII hangar. Great decision, because a Lear jet sitting in the first hangar was damaged when the roof collapsed during the storm and there was no damage to the hangar where the An-2 spent the summer. But hurricanes have a way of changing perspectives. Karoline said that if we lost our house we would not rebuild here, but go to Wyoming and put a cabin on our five acres on top of Casper Mountain. Since we are still in Texas, we obviously didn't suffer the fate of the straw house that the big bad wolf blew away with his huffing and a puffing. Neal and Douglas did not want to chance leaving the Antonov along the Texas coast again for another hurricane season. They found a place to store it in Blythe, California, and offered me a ride between Houston and Phoenix. Oh, well, I guess I will go, you know, it's a dirty job but someone has to do it! In all of my ancient life, I have never heard of hurricane damage in Blythe, California. Of course, this is near the Arizona border, and often it has been said that when the big earthquake strikes California, people along that border are going to have ocean front property. What is not heavily publicized and what most people don't realize is that the ocean front property along the California-Arizona border will be the Atlantic Ocean!



Shadow of An-2 on shallow ocean floor in Bahamas. Photo by Mavis Muller

Flying the Antonov back to Alaska through Canada is too expensive, so Douglas and Neal find a place to store it during the summer months. When the snow piles high enough in Valdez to walk up to the roof and the temperatures are cold enough to crystallize the bubbles that children blow and shatter like Christmas tree ornaments when they hit the ground, it's time to go south.

Canadian geese are smarter than Neal and Douglas and his wife Jeanne, because they fly south before Winter sets in, not afterwards. None the less, the southern migration of these guys is an annual event for whom their happiness of hearing the cough and sputtering and roaring to life of the 1000-Hp round engine of the Antonov is only surpassed by the joy the plane feels of being liberated from a dark and dusty hangar by coughing and sputtering and roaring to life and then living, flying, enjoying its freedom, exhilarating in the beauty of flight to places not seen before or going back once again to the Bahamas where there's a hundred degree temperature difference from Valdez and the colors of the waters are blue and azure and dark blue and light blue and sky blue and blues only poets can describe where the shadow of the mighty airplane can be seen racing on the bottom of the shallow clear waters (I know because I saw a photo that their friend Mavis Muller took when she travelled with them – she was kind enough to send it to me and gave me permission to use it in this story).

Somewhere during the course of the trip to Phoenix I told Douglas that this was the first time I remember seeing him wearing shoes when he flew the An-2. Most of the time he is barefoot. Mavis captured a very good shot of the right wings from the starboard porthole.



**Barefoot Douglas, flying the An-2.
Photo by Mavis Muller**



**Great view from the starboard porthole.
Photo by Mavis Muller**

Different subject:

ANTONOVICH
ANTONOV - 2

Look at the symmetry of those two names. Antonovich is Karoline's maiden name. Maybe that's why I love this plane so much, because its name is 70% of Karoline's last name the first time around before she and I married. Kinda neat!

Hillary Duff performed at the Houston Rodeo and Livestock Show tonight. People have told me that I wouldn't like her music, and they are probably right, because although I have heard her name, I have the impression she doesn't sound much like Johnny Cash – and I have the very distinct impression that on her worst day she looks a whole bunch better than Johnny Cash ever did. So what does this have to do with the An-2? Quincy Bush. He is the kid I work with in the Big Brothers Big Sisters organization, and they had arranged for us to have rodeo tickets and sit in a special suite to see the rodeo and Hillary Duff. But he called me late in the afternoon and said he was sick.

It just so happened that this afternoon Douglas called me and told me that he and Neal were at Bob Wagstaff's hangar in La Porte working on the annual inspection on the An-2. The world-renowned multi-winner woman's aerobatics champion Debbie Rihn owns and runs Harvey & Rihn Aviation, which is based at the same airport. She often performs at air shows, and her performance alone is worth the price of the ticket. Speaking of air shows, Douglas and Neal flew the plane in Titusville, Florida, after their little jaunt to the Bahamas. They had stopped in Gainesville for oil for that big old radial engine – the plane has a 35-gallon tank just for oil, and it burns at least a quart an hour. Thirty-five gallons of oil! The useable fuel capacity on my Stinson is thirty-six gallons. Someone told them that if they flew in the air show they could have the Antonov's fuel tanks filled. Last January, I called Douglas from Titusville right after they had landed near Tampa. The New Horizons launch to Pluto had been scheduled on the same day, and I had gone to see it from the balcony of my friend's Ron Caswell's place. Ron later told me that he had seen the An-2 flying around during the air show and had wondered if it was the same one that I flew on.

Since Karoline had already assumed I would be going to the rodeo, she planned either lasagna or tuna fish sandwiches for supper, so I opted to go to the La Porte airport and see Douglas and Neal and eat dinner with them at the Run Way Grill. The young waitress asked me come back on Friday evening and sing Karaoke but she is really lucky that she didn't have to listen to me.

When I arrived at the airport, Douglas and Neal were finishing up for the day. Jeanne had already left for Chicago. While I waited for them to go to dinner, I showed Bob the crankshaft out of my 1947 Stinson 108-1 that had broken in half last May while I was in flight. God and my Guardian Angel Jack Clodfelter

kept me alive that day, and guided me safely onto the runway at Brazoria County airport in Angleton, Texas. Two days ago, on March 14th, I finally flew the Stinson for the first time in ten months.

Saturday, March 18th - La Porte to Georgetown, Texas

Last night Douglas and I decided that I would fly with him and Neal on the Antonov, instead of me flying my Stinson in loose formation with the An-2. Although I was a little disappointed, the way things worked out we made the right decision. On the way to the airport I phoned my friend Harvey Ponder to tell him to hurry over to the La Porte Airport to see the An-2. Turns out he was on his way to see a doctor because he had injured his eye. Back in his Army days he had lived in Arizona, so knowing that he really doesn't have much of a desire to fly in the "Polack Airplane" that he calls the An-2, I told that we could give him a med-evac flight to Phoenix. He just laughed and told me to have a good time.

As I strapped myself in the seat just aft of the Antonov's cockpit, Douglas and Neal precisely followed the extensive start-up checklist. Once again in my An-2 adventures, I could hear the prop start its rotation; a couple of coughs and sputters later I heard that very distinctive sound of Puff the Magic Dragon rumbling to life. We departed at 11:20 AM, banked left and flew through the VFR corridor in Houston, which is between Houston Hobby and Houston Intercontinental Airports. We had a good view of downtown Houston on the south side, and could easily see the medical center, the astrodome, and Hobby Airport. Heading towards Burnet, we had a good tail wind, and our ground speed registered on the Garmin model 295 GPS receiver around 120 – 125 knots. Initially, we had low ceilings but not so bad that we couldn't fly. Nearer the Austin area our visibility decreased rapidly; at Round Rock Douglas said he had to land. Georgetown was just few miles away to the north, and clearly showed up on the GPS display, as well as the sectional chart that Neal and I closely watched. Georgetown Airport has two runways, so Douglas headed there. We flew at 1500 feet to avoid the 1300 foot towers in-line with our flight path, passing one whose top looked very close below the left wing. Had we been able to go higher we would have, and if the towers hadn't been so close we would have gone lower. About a mile out from the airport our visibility improved quite a bit and we were past those threatening radio towers. About 1 PM Douglas made a very good landing on runway 11, almost straight into the easterly wind of 100°.

Even on rainy days the Antonov attracts the curious. The first guy we saw worked as an avionics technician and remembered meeting Ernie Neal nearly twenty years ago. Before I moved to Texas I had worked at Kings Avionics in Casper, Wyoming with Ernie; he and his wife Pam and their daughter had moved to Round Rock about the same time Karoline and I moved to the Houston area. Within minutes this guy still stuck in the Sixties started talking about the An-2, and then launched into a speech about how people need to keep Loran receivers in their planes, because in about five years the sun spot cycle will be peaking

and modern day GPS receivers will be useless. He may be right – I'm certainly not going to forget that tidbit of information, and hopefully I will take his advice one of these days and buy a Loran unit off e-Bay while the price is still fairly low.

Inside the terminal sat three guys drinking coffee who started asking me questions about the An-2. We chatted a while. One of the guys often flew mentally handicapped children around in his Grumman Tiger. Another one had served as a C-5 load master for 29 years in USAF reserves and had gone all over world. With well-deserved pride in his voice, he told me that he had learned all the aircraft systems very well. Forgot what the third guy does. (Sorry) He did tell us about a 3000 ft. tower west of airport about 15 miles, direct on the flight path to Burnet. Good thing we stopped. I think he was the one who told me about the An-2 that had once been based at Georgetown Airport hitting a pole barn several years ago at a nearby airport. While I talked to these men Neal checked the weather then walked back to the plane and Douglas talked on his cell phone.

As we drove in the rain towards town in the airport courtesy car, Douglas asked if I had heard what happened. His father had just died that morning. We grabbed some lunch at a Luby's Cafeteria. Pretty somber mood for the rest of day. Back at the airport Neal camped on the weather computer. Not good. Their friend Ken Gray in Phoenix managed to find an airline ticket to Philadelphia for Douglas at a good price, with a schedule departure for Tuesday. We hung around the terminal until 7 PM, when it closed. Back in the plane Douglas heated a can of chili for me in the microwave, and Neal and I and Douglas read and chatted until 10 PM. It wasn't a good day for Douglas, and although he didn't talk much, Neal and I could both feel his pain, for we also remembered the pain when we lost our fathers. Douglas removed the table that sits across from the door of the plane and fixed up a bed from me using a cot and mattress he had bought from one of the discount stores. He sleeps in back of the plane on a bed that he constructed that is level when this tail-wheeled aircraft is on the ground, and Neal took his spot near the cockpit where I first slept three years ago by making a bed between the first two seats and the cockpit. As I lay in my sleeping bag I could see raindrops racing each other down the porthole on the door, and managed to sleep quite well.

Sunday, March 19th – Georgetown, Texas

By 7 AM, we were all eager for Scott Stone, the man on duty that morning, to finish checking the fuel pumps and open the terminal building so we could go inside and have some coffee and look at the weather computer. Again, not good. Using the sink in the men's room, I managed to wash away the grungy. Photos on walls inside the terminal showed the early days at the airport. One corner had photos of four well known women in aviation, including Patty Wagstaff, Amelia Earhart, Astronaut Eileen Collins – and I forgot the name of the fourth one. Another photo showed a plane augured into a runway nose first. Those things happen.

Inside the pilot lounge sits a display case for Tony Bingelis, one of the Experimental Aircraft Association's (EAA) well-known pilots. In the past there have been Tony Bingelis Memorial Air Races held at the Southwest Regional Fly-In (SWRFI) in Georgetown and New Braunfels, Texas. At the SWRFI held this year in Hondo, Texas, the winner of the Best of Show – Homebuilt, received the Tony Bingelis Memorial Award. On the EAA's webpage, referenced at the bottom of this page, I found an obituary and tribute to him. Below is a summary of what it says:

Tony Bingelis died at age 80 in 2001. His parents immigrated from Lithuanian [Seems sort of fitting for the An-2 with the name "*Lithuanian Airlines*" painted on its side to land here]. He was a World War II veteran pilot and an Air Force career officer. For almost 25 years he wrote his own column in the EAA magazine *Sport Aviation* called "Sportplane Builder" which was considered a premier guideline for the thousands of people who built their own airplanes. He built at least eight airplanes, "including two Emeraudes, a VP-1, a Flaglor Scooter, a Turner T-40, a Falco, an RV-6, and an RV-3. Many of these projects illustrate Tony's books, *Sportplane Builder*; *Firewall Forward*; *Sportplane Construction Techniques*; and *Tony Bingelis on Engines*."¹

Walking around clockwise from the Bingelis display, there is a glass case filled with dozens of older aircraft radios and navigation equipment. One of the radios came out of a Stinson, but I forgot to take a photo of it. On another wall is mounted a propeller from an old Curtis aircraft, estimated vintage between 1910 and 1919. Underneath the prop is a 1943 San Antonio sectional chart (I think) that shows Georgetown and the surrounding area. Most of the artifacts in the room have been donated by Buz Landry. Next to the newspaper notebook there was another piece of paper that I didn't read until after meeting Buz Landry, the man featured. He is Mr. Georgetown Airport as far as I am concerned. The paper that I photocopied has a photo of him standing in front of his Cessna-185, but the quality of the print isn't good enough to put into this story. In summary, the paper tells of Buz soloing an Aeronca 7AC on his 16th birthday, three days before he received his driver's license, and he had his commercial pilot's license before he graduated from high school. He flew as a crop duster for five years, and then flew for thirteen years as a corporate pilot for a Houston company. Besides the C-185 that he currently owns, he has owned several airplanes in the past, and all but one have been taildraggers. The paper closes with the comments that he raised his children as a single parent since they were pups, and that "Buz is a Christian, raised in the First Baptist Church in Georgetown." Unfortunately, I don't have the source of this write-up, but since I am not planning on publishing or making any profit off of it, I hope the author doesn't mind. If I knew whom to give credit, I would. Probably, there are very few days in any given year that Buz doesn't go to the airport.

¹ http://www.eaa.org/communications/eaanews/010330_bingelis.html



Buz Landry standing near the 1943 sectional chart and under the Curtis Prop, both of which he donated



Douglas is looking at the vintage airplane radios with Buz Landry. The headset on the mannequin head has a throat microphone. The pilots on the TV series Baa Baa Black Sheep (based on Pappy Boyington's Marine Corps Squadron) used similar devices.

When Buz started speaking, I went to the plane and picked up my tape recorder. When I asked him if I could record, he didn't say yes and he didn't say no, but he did say a couple of times that maybe more than fifty percent of what he said is true, grinning as he told me. But as of this writing, in May, 2006, the

tapes haven't been transcribed yet, and I don't know when that will occur, so I'm writing the story anyway, and hope that I live up to the promise that I gave Buz that I would be inserting his words into this story. When the transcription is complete, I will go back and edit this story. When I started the recording he was talking to another man who has a large cattle and dairy business and flies several different aircraft, including helicopters. They talked about an old German man that made very good knives, and Buz told of giving the man his first airplane ride. Buz also talked about flying the crop dusters. After the other man left, Douglas walked in and Buz started talking about the different radios in the display case. With his Stetson, western clothes, and his trim build, Buz reminds me a lot of my Uncle Ed in Wyoming. Had the weather not encouraged us to land at the Georgetown Airport, I would have missed the opportunity and honor of meeting Buz and hearing some of his stories. I am not sure, but I think he may have been the third man who chatted with me the day before, giving the warning to avoid the 3000-ft. tower.

Beneath the Curtis prop there is a loose-leaf notebook that has several copies of WWII and post-war newspaper front pages. One paper that caught my eye had the following two articles, and I use them in this story with the permission of the editor:

WILLIAMSON COUNTY SUN
Georgetown, Texas, Friday, February 8, 1946

Flying Ace To Appear at Southwestern
Col. Gregory "Pappy" Boyington, Marine Corps Flying Ace, to Tell All

"[Appearing at the Southwestern University auditorium Wednesday, February 13, at 8:15 P. M., will be Lt. Col. Gregory "Pappy" Boyington, Marine Corps' top flying ace and Medal of Honor holder, who was held in a "special" prison by the Japanese for twenty months, learned about the Jap personality the hard way. He tells of his experiences and his program for Japanese rehabilitation in his talk, "Untold Truths About the Japanese."

"Pappy" met his first Japs in the skies over China as a member of the daredevil Flying Tigers. He became better acquainted with them when he led his famous Marine squadron, the "Black Sheep," in writing a blazing chapter of aerial combat history in the South Pacific. In January 1944, when he went down over Rabaul, he had Twenty-eight Japanese planes to his credit, making him the number one enemy airman of the people of Japan. Soon after he was picked up at sea by a Jap submarine, his captors realized what a valuable prize they had.

He was flown to Japan and placed in as special "intimidation" camp. This meant he was given no medical care for his many wounds, he was not allowed to take shelter during the air raids, he received only a half of the regular food ration, he was not allowed to speak to fellow prisoners, and the United States Government was never notified of his capture. He

was beaten, starved and humiliated. At one time he was hit forty-seven times with a baseball bat, but made no outcry. Fellow prisoners have since testified to “Pappy’s” unflinching stoicism under torture as one of their greatest morale builders.

Colonel Boyington emerged from this experience with an unusually clear-sighted perspective of the Jap, unhampered by hate or revenge. As one New York writer said, “He not only can take it, but he diagnoses it while getting it.”

In his talk he gives new insight into the “little people” of Japan, and reveals incidents about the infamous Tojo and Prince Konoye. He tells of the Japs’ reaction to the atomic bomb, and how he managed to outwit the Japs and lived to tell his story.]”

Famous Texas Ace To Stunt Thirty 1946 Airplanes To Arrive Saturday

“[Sam N. Wilcox, Jr. president of the Georgetown Junior Chamber of Commerce, received a telephone call from Jack W. Bates, of Fort Worth, arrangement manager for the Southwestern Aviation Expedition,...stating that the aerocade flight consisting of thirty 1946 model airplanes will arrive at the Georgetown Airport Saturday afternoon, Feb. 9, at 2:55 o’clock.

Mr. Wilcox was told by Mr. Bates that among those coming will be Colonel John Landers, famous Texas Ace, who has thirty German and Jap planes to his credit. Col. Landers will stunt a BT-13.]”

By noon vending machine and drizzle boredom overcame Neal, Douglas, and me. We grabbed the courtesy car and ate lunch at the Monument Inn. The name makes the place sound old, but it was opened in 1995, and the food was pretty good. We then drove around Georgetown. Near Southwestern University Douglas spotted some condominiums under construction, close to completion. Since he is a drywall contractor in Alaska, he wanted to see the walls. Neal and I took a quick look inside, and while we waited for Douglas to reappear, Neal walked around a bit and saw a sewer plate announcing the Georgetown Sesquicentennial (150th) year celebration. He said that he had never seen a personalized sewer plate before! Afterwards, we all attended the play, “*You Can’t Take It With You*”, put on by a local stage company. And we were only charged \$16 each, (which I thought was a little high) because they gave each of us the senior rate! Ha! Ha! Oh well, we weren’t doing anything else and the performance was well done. Sounds like a steak!

Mike Gentry, the afternoon man working the airport terminal, and I started talking. He was a retired aircraft mechanic from the Air Force, so when I took him out by the Antonov, he made some comments about how well the landing gear was built. After I told him in our conversation that I worked at the Johnson Space Center, he asked me if I knew any astronauts. When I told him yes, he asked me if I knew “Vegas” Kelly. My answer was no, but then I realized “Vegas” had flown

on STS-114 last year, the same space shuttle mission commanded by Eileen Collins, whose photo is on the wall. Mike worked on the planes that “Vegas” flew in the Air Force. It dawned on me that I just happened to have an STS-114 mission pin on my hat, so I gave it to him – the pin, not the hat! Immediately, the grinning Mike pinned it onto his denim jacket. Later, that evening I read another one of the local area newspaper clippings, which just seemed to compliment our talks about space shuttle astronauts. Again, I quote from it with the editor’s permission:

THE AUSTIN AMERICAN
Austin, Texas, Monday, November 12, 1945

**Sees Space Ships Not Far Off
Design Almost Practical
V2 Ideal for Sending Atomic Explosives, Declares Air Chief**
WASHINGTON, Nov. 11 – (AP) -

“[Space ships – moving outside the earth’s atmosphere and capable of launching atomic bomb rockets on the enemy – will “unquestionably be brought into being within the foreseeable future.” Gen. Henry H. Arnold said Sunday.

The commanding general of the army air force mentioned space ships – now existing only in comic page adventure strips – as a counter weapon if defenses are developed against a 2000-mile an hour rocket delivering atomic bomb explosives.

“The design of such a ship is all but practicable today,” Arnold said in a summary of the air war and recommendations for the future prepared for Secy. of War Patterson.

Arnold said, “The United States should be ready with a weapon of the German V2-type”, a rocket launched projectile that travels some 2000 miles an hour and went from 50 to 60 miles high. “V2 is ideally suited to deliver atomic explosives,” he said, “because defense against it would be extremely difficult.”]”

About dark-thirty Douglas and I went back to town to eat some authentic Mexican food at Taco Bell (well, sort of!). We could see the lights on the plane when we drove back to the airport, so we knew that Neal had the Honda generator fired up. When we opened the door, we saw two guys sitting in on the last row of seats. Simon Diver and Joshua greeted us. In years past, Simon had flown the same An-2 that had crashed a few miles away into the pole barn; only his father was the one flying that time. From what I remember, he was flying at night, and hit a ditch that he hadn’t seen. The plane ground-looped into the barn, twisting the fuselage. His dad also owned several DC-3s and Convairs in Gainesville, Texas, which he used to fly cargo. Simon told us in his English accent that he was mentoring Joshua, a high school kid. Together, they had rebuilt another plane, and the reason they had come by was to pick up a Cherokee 150 that was parked next to the An-2. Joshua was taking ownership of the 150, due to all of his hard work helping Simon. Neal told him to learn to fly

gliders and do aerobatic work. Good kid. After I came home I sent Simon a CD of some of my flying stories, and received this e-mail from him:

Matt,

Thanks for the great Disk of stories, it was good talking to you guys, sorry for the late reply. Josh has passed his written and has started training. I don't know if you saw on the news but the Tornado that went through Gainesville last week knocked out my Dads DC3's and Convairs!! Moderate damage to some and not so much to others. Pretty wild what the weather can do.

Take care

Simon Diver

More rain, lightening and thunderstorms visited us that night. Listening to the rainfall on the plane reminded me of "The rain falls on the plane in Spain" or "The plane in Spain flies through the rain" or however that song goes. Actually, I found it rather soothing, and the winds didn't rock the plane all that much, so all in all, I once again slept fairly well.

Monday, March 20th – Georgetown to Pecos, Texas

Calm, clearing morning. Another sort of shower in the sink. Airborne by 7:40 AM. For my friend Hawks Abbott, make that 0740! Those guys weren't kidding when they warned us about the 3000-foot tower. Even on a day like today it looked menacing. Finally, we made it to Burnet for our fuel stop, after a short 15 or 20 minute flight and two days from Houston, making the five hour drive from Houston live up to the old axiom, "Go by air when you have time to spare!" While taking on 245 gallons to fill the 317 gallon tanks, I talked to Daniel Smith who was wearing a shirt with the name of D & D Avionics Services. When I asked if he knew Ernie Neal, not only did I have a "yes" answer, Dan used his cell phone to call Ernie, and then he handed the phone to me. Neither Ernie nor I were grandfathers the last time we talked! Even more of the small world talk, Dan had also worked for Kings Avionics in Salt Lake City, after one of the owners moved from Casper. While Dan and I visited, another guy talked to Douglas about flying Russian helicopters registered in South Africa from Florida to California.

Right after takeoff we flew over the pretty water of Lake Buchanan, where I've had a couple of floatplane lessons. This is a man-made lake with the water from the Colorado River flowing into it. No, not that big Colorado River, but the one that flows in Texas. Karoline and I have twice stayed at a lodge on the northern end of the lake and have taken dinner cruises on the river to see bald eagles, and I have landed a Cessna 172 on floats on the river. From the air Buchanan Dam looks quite impressive. It was built in the 1930s. During our climb

out we had a good tailwind and a ground speed of 120 knots; soon we encountered 40-knot head winds.

After we flew over Lake Buchanan, Douglas moved to the back of the plane, Neal moved to the left seat, and I sat in the co-pilot's seat. Neal took the controls for a while, and later I took over. During that flight I flew 2.5 hours. On the pilot's side, most of the Russian instruments have been replaced with American instruments, but the original Russian instruments are still in place on the co-pilot's side. The airspeed is in kilometers per hour, so roughly 90 miles an hour equates to 150 kilometers per hour; likewise, the altimeter reads in meters, so 4500 feet is close enough to 1500 meters. It doesn't take long to adapt. For the backup radio, an American-built Collins is used, but the prime VHF radio is Russian made, and it is very clear. Despite ideological and political differences, I am still impressed with Russian engineering. I absolutely detest the politics of the former Soviet Union, but greatly respect their rocket and airplane manufacturing and design capabilities. One thing that the sticks out in my mind is the electric fuel pump on board the plane used to pump fuel out of 55-gallon (or whatever the liter equivalent is called) drums. They knew that the plane might not always land on an airport with fuel tanks available, but the drums can be transported fairly easily.



An-2 Panel. Photo by Mavis Muller

Soon, the green Texas hill country disappeared and the rugged-and-sparsely scattered mesquite trees spoke of the true nature of the tough men and women who settled this land. We passed south of the San Angelo Airport in clear sky but the tower personnel told incoming flights that the westerly winds were

gusting between 36 and 42 knots. I have never been to San Angelo, but feel like I know it well, because my good friend and former co-worker Shirley Connally lived there for many years while growing up. We heard the same range of wind velocities from the Midland/Odessa tower. Our ground speed ranged from 47 to 87 knots, and the winds aloft were also reported to be between 35 to 45 knots all the way up to 9000 feet. Douglas didn't feel well in back of the plane. All I could do to try and keep it steady. Neal was patient with me as sometimes I drifted slightly off course and altitude. Bill Readdy, one of my astronaut friends, told me that he flew the An-2 over thirty years ago and it was like flying a tractor. Today I could relate. Just as I reported about flying through Windy Pass in Alaska in my first An-2 story, the An-2 Colt tried to live up to its name as it strived to grow up to become a bucking bronco. I felt like a tennis shoe in a tumbling dryer. Reminds me of the lines in the song, "Born and Raised in Black and White", written by Don Cook and John Jarvis, and sang by The Highwayman (Waylon Jennings, Willie Nelson, Kris Kristofferson, and Johnny Cash): *"The wind blows harder across the Texas Plains, makes some people go insane."*

From over Midland about thirty-five thousand feet, one can see thousands patches of light-colored dirt, usually square or rectangular in shape. Flying a couple of thousand feet above the ground, visible in each square are the rocker arms of oil pumpers. With those pumps constantly going up-and-down, one has to wonder about the oil shortages that are always being reported by the media and how high the price of gasoline will go. It seems strange to me that when oil goes up a dollar a barrel, there is a dime increase at the gasoline pumps that same day, but when oil falls a dollar a barrel, it takes a week to go down a nickel! Enough editorializing!

For the last thirty minutes of flying, a somewhat pale Douglas came back to the pilot's seat, Neal took over the co-pilot's position, and those nasty stomach gremlins did some of their nasty stuff to me almost as soon as I went to the back of the plane. The guys up front decided to land at Pecos. Just before we were to touch down Douglas added power and did a go-around, saying he didn't think he could land there, with the wind gusting between 30 and 45 knots. He came around again, and managed to do a perfect landing on runway 27, stopping at the junction of runways 27 and 32. When we stopped, I opened the door and placed the small ladder into position, while the plane gyrated as if were on center stage at a rock-and-roll concert. We had to move the plane off the active runway, and worried that the left wing was going to lift due to the high winds, Neal and I gave some ballast of over three hundred pounds when we walked on the lower wing to the outer strut between the left wings, and I sat on the hub centered around the strut on top of the bottom wing. With the 45-knot wind still howling, Douglas opened the throttle of that 1000-Hp engine and stepped on the right brake to rotate the plane. He backed off the power when the tail came up, causing the fuselage to go horizontal, making the airplane ready for take off and wanting to go. Little nervous on that one! Neal and Douglas said I had more material for my next story. A couple of times Douglas said that he was glad he

hadn't bent any metal. Me too! In fact I was glad that he didn't bend any metal and didn't bend me either! When it comes to landing that plane in rough winds, Douglas and Neal are some of the best pilots to have in the cockpit. My skill level certainly does not match theirs.



An-2 at Pecos Airport. I sat on the strut hub on the left wing.

After we secured the plane as best we could with the chocks for the massive tires, Neal remained with the Antonov while Douglas and I walked towards terminal. Dennis Blanchard, owner of the Pecos Air Center, gave us a ride in the fuel truck and told us to go in and have a soft drink and a burrito. We weren't the first ones to enjoy his hospitality and that of his wife Isabelle. The Navy had a T-34 trainer from Corpus Christi parked on the ramp. A Marine Captain and a young Navy Ensign said hello, but the Ensign didn't know Bryce Abbott, the son of my friend Hawks, no relation to the two Black Hawks that sat on the tarmac. On the wall and in display cases there were probably hundreds of military unit patches and/or decals; including a patch from VXE-6, one of the best Navy Squadrons with whom I flew most of my flights to and from Antarctica, and a decal from STS-69, one of the space shuttle missions that Ken Cockrell flew on. He was one of the four astronauts I served with when I was attached to the Naval Space Command reserve unit in the 1990s. On the wall there was a photo of Patty Wagstaff thanking Dennis and Isabelle for hospitality and burritos; a SR-71 crew had written the same kind of sentiments, as well as all kinds of helo and plane photos and their grinning pilots. I knew I should have jotted down some of the names of people who had stopped at this really good place. Free-and-great tasting burritos are probably why so many aircrews stop. After my photos were processed, I had one of the photos taken of the An-2 at this airport enlarged and sent two copies for Neal and Douglas to sign and send back to the Pecos Air Center and to the people at the Georgetown airport.

Douglas and I took the courtesy car around this West Texan desert town filled with tumbling tumbleweeds and I had Douglas stop at a Motel 6 so I could have a room for that night that didn't rock and also had a shower. We went back and fueled the plane, taking on 239 gallons for today's flight of 270 miles. Neal and Douglas stayed in the plane this night, but didn't mind going back to the motel and taking their showers before we all ate dinner at a truck stop. I dropped them back at the airport and went back to the motel, fell asleep shortly after 9 PM, and slept until 4 AM when some guy called me on the phone. He said, "Hello, this is Tom Bodet giving you a wakeup call. Now, before you get mad at me, remember you are the one that requested the wakeup call!"



Refueling the An-2 at Pecos. L-R: Douglas, Dennis Blanchard, and Neal

Tuesday, March 21st - Pecos to Phoenix and back to Houston

It was still dark when I drove the courtesy car to the plane. While Douglas and Neal took care of other preparations for the plane, I hand-turned the four-bladed prop through ten complete revolutions. Morning exercise. Take off occurred at 5:40 AM, still dark – Douglas barely had to turn the plane before we were lined up on runway 27. Checklist complete, give it power, and off we go, go West young Man! Initially it was calm, but then we encountered some light head winds, and we climbed to 8500 feet until the ground speed started going down, so we flew most of the trip near 6500 feet. Once again we had good tail winds, often giving us a ground speed between 110 to 120 knots. Could barely make out Guadalupe Peak, highest point in Texas, but shortly after we passed it the sky lightened up some, so looking back at it several miles later I could see it better as the sun lit it up. Saw several old volcano remnants to the north, but I was standing behind the pilots and didn't have the best visibility out of the side windows, so I didn't take any photos. Near daybreak we could see some of those windmills with their slowly rotating three blades that are as big as the guns on the Bismarck. Neal remarked how much they looked like an ancient prehistoric monster. Sure enough, those white blades clawing through the air reminded me of the scythe carried by the Grim Reaper. I didn't want to even think about how

the An-2 would look if its four-bladed prop had waltzed too close to one of those three-bladed windmills. Not a good geometry solution, but could be one bad problem! As the sun illuminated the landscape, I thought how much of the land looks like the tanned weather-beaten and wrinkled leathery face of a hundred year-old woman. Each wrinkle could tell a story, each hill and arroyo and dried up stream could tell geological stories or may be able to intrigue an archeologist about some ancient Indian tribe sitting around stone fire circles or tipi rings chipping flint arrowheads. About 8:30 AM we flew north of El Paso through the clear fly zone between the city and the Military Operation Areas (MOAs) that go all the way to Albuquerque. The songs of Marty Robbins entered my mind, but I didn't feel the same calling of El Paso that he did when flying over the city at 30,000 feet. But indeed, we were "Out in the West Texas town of El Paso..."

Around Deming New Mexico I took the controls, and flew for the next two hours, until just out of Chandler, AZ. The GPS shows state lines on it; near the state line we had to go over some 8000-ft. peaks, and Douglas had me fly close to them to gain more mountain flying experience. Actually, I guess I could have been a lot closer, but I just need to build up the old confidence. In Arizona I flew along a spectacular canyon with yellow walls. Maybe they call it Yellowstone! The territory east of Phoenix is much better scenic wise than near the city. A few minutes out of Chandler I switched seats with Neal, and soon afterwards, Douglas did a routine, but after the one in Pecos, a slightly boring landing. The people in the tower told us to park near its base, which is where we secured the plane. About 30 minutes after we landed, Ken Gray picked us up. He has been a friend of Neal and Douglas for several years, had flown with them in the Bahamas a few years ago, and took the airborne photos of the An-2 flying in Alaska. He makes his living as a photographer, and there is no doubt by the quality of his work that he is a professional. Mavis Muller, another friend of theirs, was waiting for Neal and Douglas when we showed up at Ken's place. She lives in Homer, Alaska, but had also been on the recent trip to the Bahamas. She showed some photos that she had taken of the trip; I was also very much impressed with her photography, so I asked to her if I could use some of prints. She had been in Austin as a member of one of the 1400 bands that played there the previous week. We were twenty-five miles away when we were in Georgetown. Douglas and Neal have some very interesting and colorful friends.

Neal drove Ken's car to take Douglas and me to the Phoenix airport. My Southwest flight to Houston stopped in El Paso six hours after I flew near the same airport in the An-2. My friend Bob Simle met me at Houston Airport and drove me back to the La Porte airport to pick up my truck. Today is my granddaughter's Camyrn's 3rd birthday. I stopped by to see her but she had just gone to bed a few minutes earlier and was already sound asleep. Quite a trip! Had Harvey Ponder decided to fly with us to Phoenix on a med-evac flight, he would have had three days to enjoy the journey. Thanks, Douglas and Neal for inviting me on another adventure. Thanks to all the people that we met along the way for your hospitality. Thanks to God for keeping us safe.