



**JEFF SKILES**

COMMENTARY / CONTRAILS

# Mountain Flying

Training for new challenges

BY JEFF SKILES

**AS AN AIRLINE PILOT** I have lived a life of almost constant training. I have endured initial training on six different transport category aircraft types. This usually extends for two months or so with ground school, simulator, and what they call operational experience. Once trained there are six-month or yearly checks to maintain currency. This is in addition to the training and evaluation necessary to achieve all the flying certificates a pilot commonly possesses. I have a fairly pedestrian background for a professional pilot and hold an ATP and CFI—instrument and multiengine, as well as a seaplane rating. That's eight different certificates or ratings for those of you who are counting. Plus I have six type ratings carefully noted on the back of my certificate; that's not a lot actually, some people have dozens. Oh yeah, and there's a turbojet flight engineer rating thrown in there somewhere.

Being in an airline training program does have the benefit of eliminating the need to take a flight review every other year, but that is probably not a good thing. Airline flying could not be more different from general aviation and probably should be considered as a separate animal. I have tried, though, to seek out some unusual general aviation training challenges, some of which I have shared with readers over the years.

## SANTA FE

Recently I took an excellent training course that I think would have value for just about anybody no matter where or what they fly. A few months ago I had reason totally unrelated to aviation to be in Santa Fe, New Mexico, on a Monday. I happened to get an e-mail from the Recreational Aviation Foundation advertising a mountain flying course conducted by the New Mexico Pilots Association the Friday before, conveniently right in Santa Fe. And the weekend in between—the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta only 45 miles away. It seemed like kismet.

The course involved a day of classroom work followed by an optional day of flying with a flight instructor. I wish I had been able to fly my airplane from Wisconsin for the second day, but my wife came along with me, and she is not enthusiastic about flying in small airplanes. That's her story anyway. The truth more likely is that she's not enthusiastic about flying *with me* in small airplanes.

## THE COURSE

The course officially started at the National Guard training facility at the Santa Fe



airport, but really it began many weeks before. All the participants were asked to accomplish a few hours of preliminary work answering 25 questions related to mountain flying. The questions and scenarios were designed to incorporate decision-making and risk management more than just rote knowledge and were excellent preparation for the class. Collecting up our homework was the first order of business.

The majority of pilots attending varied in experience from people still learning to fly to those having maybe a few hundred hours experience, so no one should feel intimidated about attending. There was only one other airline pilot.

Six instructors presented the course, and they were all exceptional teachers. It was obvious that the instructors were very experienced in the area of discussion. This clinic wasn't designed to teach you how to land in the backcountry on a sandbar but rather how

to plan and problem-solve when flying in more challenging mountain conditions. The majority of pilots in the room flew standard tricycle gear aircraft off paved runways, and that is where the discussion was aimed.

I found some of the topics quite enlightening. The segment on hypoxia taught all the various signs of lack of oxygen. Surprisingly every person will have a different reaction; some get headaches, some become progressively enfeebled, others can simply pass out. I know from experience that my personal signal of hypoxic onset is a progressive tunnel vision that grays the periphery of my vision. In all cases, though, decision-making skills are affected. Knowing your personal signs of hypoxia is the first step to recognizing a developing problem.

#### DENSITY ALTITUDE

The performance section was quite interesting for a flatlander. From my own flying

experience I know that density altitude can just take the guts out of any airplane. But, you don't need to be in the mountains; it can actually affect those of us at lower elevations as well. The instructors introduced us to the Koch chart, which is a ballpark tool to evaluate performance degradations due to density altitude. I have to admit that I never really gave it much thought at the 800 MSL elevation of my home airport. But an 80 degree day in August can have significant penalties.

The section on survival equipment was quite informative. Some key points are that most people survive the crash but often find it difficult to stay alive until help arrives. You can only count on what you have on your person, particularly if the plane is consumed in fire. I do wear a fishing vest with a personal locator beacon, glow sticks, space blanket, and fire-making equipment when I fly in the mountains. But much of my emergency equipment, like a knife and emergency



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medical kit, are scattered around in the baggage compartment. I resolved to find a seat-back pack that I can put all these items in so I can grab them easily on my way out of the plane.

### WEIGHT WATCHERS

Surprisingly food doesn't make the list when it comes to survival equipment. We were taught that you can survive three minutes without oxygen, three hours without shelter and warmth, three days without water, three weeks without food, and three months without hope. In the Rockies you can walk out of anywhere within three weeks, not that walking out is necessarily recommended. Given that, food may actually be counterproductive. If you don't have enough clean water to process food in your body, eating can be a detriment. Food items like granola or energy bars take a lot of water from your body and can actually hinder survival.

**The performance section was quite interesting for a flatlander. From my own flying experience I know that density altitude can just take the guts out of any airplane.**

As I noted earlier, I have been through more aeronautical training than most, but I'm going to go out on a limb and say that this may be the best organized and presented training that I have ever had. Everything flowed logically, and the audio/visual presentation and training materials were excellent. The total cost of this course was a small fraction of the commercially available courses I have researched, too.

The New Mexico Pilots Association has done a tremendous job in creating this mountain flying course. Someone put a lot of thought into the presentation, and as a bonus they also give you a very fine baseball cap.

Unfortunately, I didn't take advantage of the second part of the course. The staff of this clinic was available to fly over the next two days with anyone who brought an airplane. The planned route of flight encompassed three or four hundred miles of flight with landings at six high-altitude airports while traversing six mountain passes. I'm sorry I missed it—this time. But I plan to find a way back with my airplane to participate in the flight portion someday.

Oh, and my wife was really intrigued with the balloons at the ABQ Balloon Fiesta as well. Next year may very well find me back with my airplane for the full course. I'll fly my airplane, and my wife will fly United. I hope you consider taking the course, too. **EAA**

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