

SAVVY MAINTENANCE / OPINION

# Miracle in Sioux Falls

My hapless blunder en route to Oshkosh triggered a series of incredibly fortuitous events.

BY MIKE BUSCH



IT WAS MID-JULY and my annual pilgrimage to EAA AirVenture Oshkosh was rapidly approaching. I'd finished preparing PowerPoints for the 11 different presentations I would be making, and I started thinking about the upcoming flight. Flying from California to Wisconsin solo can get lonely, so I called my colleague Colleen Sterling and asked if she was interested in flying with me. After conferring with her husband, Dave, they both accepted my invitation.

Colleen and Dave are two of my favorite people. Both are very accomplished pilots—Dave's a recently retired Boeing 787 captain—and both are A&P/IAs. They own five airplanes between them, all based at San Diego's Gillespie Field (SEE), and they race three of them at Reno. Serious aviators!

On Friday, I flew my Cessna 310 to SEE and stayed overnight with Colleen and

Dave. We planned to launch early Saturday morning and fly at least two-thirds of the way to Oshkosh, remain overnight, then depart Sunday morning to arrive at Wittman Regional Airport by noon.

## Northern route

Colorado looked awful on Nexrad, so a northerly route via Salt Lake City looked prudent. Using ForeFlight, I found a promising fuel stop—Evanston, Wyoming (EVW)—with cheap 100LL and a beautiful 7,300-foot runway. Field elevation was 7,143 feet, minimizing the descent from and climb to cruising altitude. The best overnight options were Sioux City (SUX) or Sioux Falls (FSD), which would put us two hours from Oshkosh. Avgas was a buck cheaper at Sioux Falls, clinching the deal.

On Saturday, we rose at oh-dark-thirty, drove to SEE, loaded our stuff into my 310,

and launched for EVW about 0730 on an IFR flight plan. The three-hour flight was beautiful, smooth, and CAVU cruising at 11,000 feet. I shot the GPS approach for practice, then taxied to the self-serve pump. With density altitude of 10,000 feet, I topped the mains but left the auxiliary tanks half full.

Evanston to Sioux Falls was a four-hour flight at 200 knots groundspeed. Upon reaching cruise altitude, Colleen passed out sandwiches, seedless grapes, and bottles of cold water. With the two-hour time zone change, our ETA was 1800 local. The flight was smooth and pleasant, although we did have to request a few minor weather deviations. As we neared Sioux Falls, all seemed right with the world.

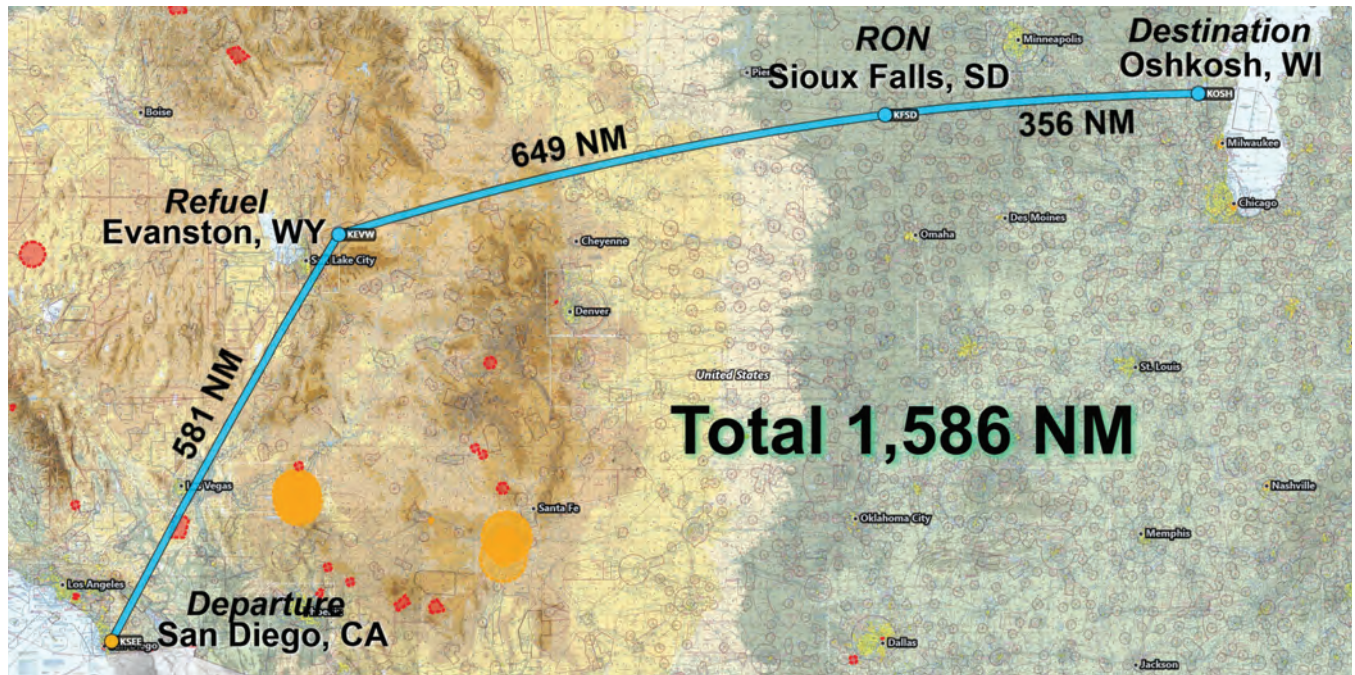
## Sioux Falls arrival

The ATIS reported sky clear, surface winds from the southwest at 12 knots, landing and departing Runway 21, with rain showers north. Both ADS-B and XM weather showed a nasty-looking cell near the approach end of Runway 21. We figured it would move out of the way by the time we got to the airport.

Minneapolis Center handed us off to Sioux Falls Approach, who advised us to expect the visual to Runway 21. The cell was still near the approach end of the runway looking just as nasty. Colleen checked out several small nontowered fields near Sioux Falls, but none seemed like suitable overnight candidates. We were getting close to the one-hour fuel reserve that is my personal minimum.

"Twin Cessna 38X, would you prefer Runway 15?" the approach controller asked, as if reading our minds.

Dave was working the radios. "Sounds good," he replied.



My crippled Cessna 310 with its flat-spotted tire on Runway 15 at Sioux Falls. Note the towering cumulus we were trying to avoid.



“Twin Cessna 38X, cleared for a visual approach to Runway 15, contact Sioux Falls tower on 118.3.” Dave called the tower, who cleared us to land on 15.

Our right downwind for 21 suddenly became right base for 15. I dropped the gear and ran through my pre-landing checklist. Turning final, I verbalized there would be a 10-knot crosswind component from the right.

We crossed the threshold right on speed—90 KIAS—with the expected crab into the crosswind. I applied left rudder and right aileron to align the airplane with the runway centerline. We touched down gently on the right main, then on the left. I

gently lowered the nosewheel. “Nice,” said Dave. My plan was to turn left off the runway to taxi to Maverick Air Center on the north side of the field. I lifted my heels from the floorboards and gently applied the brakes.

Then things went to hell.

### Déjà vu

The airplane drifted right of centerline. I applied left rudder and a bit more left brake, but the airplane continued to drift to the right. Then I felt the right wing start to drop. I instantly knew what that meant, because I’d experienced the same thing about two years earlier. (See my column “Blowout!” in *AOPA Pilot*, September 2021.)

Oh no! I felt like a complete idiot. It had been a perfect crosswind landing except that I’d neglected to hold full right aileron during the rollout, and I’d neglected to retract the flaps before applying the brakes. As a result, the right wing hadn’t quite finished flying and the right wheel locked up, flat-spotting the tire and taking out the tube.

“Never stop flying the airplane until it’s in the chocks.” Sigh.

I shut down the engines. Dave advised the tower that we were immobilized on the runway with a blown tire and would require assistance. I shut down the avionics and electrics and the three of us climbed out of the airplane.

### So now what?

Our first order of business was obviously to get the crippled airplane extracted from the runway and moved to a safe location. Colleen checked ForeFlight on her iPhone and found that while there were two FBOs on the field—Maverick and Signature—there was only one maintenance shop—Elite Aircraft Services LLC. A phone number was listed for Elite, but by now it was 6:30 p.m. on Saturday evening and we figured the chance anyone would answer was zilch.

Colleen dialed the number anyway. To her amazement, the phone was answered



by an actual human! Colleen described our predicament and was told someone would be there in about 30 minutes. Yay!

While waiting for help to arrive, we discussed our next steps. The 310 requires 6.50x10 tires and tubes, and I figured there was no chance Elite would have one in stock. The earliest we could get one there would be Tuesday or Wednesday. Colleen and I absolutely had to be in Oshkosh on Sunday since our first speaking engagement was Monday morning. So, we would have to leave the airplane in Sioux Falls, rent a car, and drive eight hours to Oshkosh,

In short, I worried recovery could get difficult, and I was determined not to let my airplane get damaged in the process.

### Help arrives

A half hour after our arrival a white pickup approached down the runway. Two men got out and walked toward us. One was Elite's shop supervisor Logan Parr A&P/IA, and the other was his assistant who sported head-to-toe ink and a beard reminiscent of ZZ Top. The bed of the pickup contained a massive yellow wing jack that looked like it could lift a C-130, an equally

right main landing gear strut started to extend. I was sure we would run out of jack height before the strut fully extended and the wheel lifted off the pavement.

I was wrong. The wheel made it to about six inches off the pavement before the wing jack ran out of travel. This was almost enough to slide the dolly under the wheel, but not quite. Dave, ZZ, and I got under the right wing and pushed up with all our might, which provided just enough additional lift for Logan to coax the wheel onto the dolly and secure the strut with the dolly's winch strap. The jack was removed. ZZ repositioned the white pickup so Logan could hook the towbar to the 310's nose-wheel and the pickup's hitch.

Logan, ZZ, and I got into the pickup truck. Dave and Colleen elected to walk. After coordinating with ground control via handheld radio, the airplane was slowly towed about a mile to Elite's hangar. By now, it was 7:30 p.m. with sundown rapidly approaching.

### Saturday night fever

I tried to figure out the best way to get a 6.50x10 tire and tube shipped to Elite. Meantime, Dave hiked to the terminal to rent a car for the week. We were now resigned to the prospect of driving eight hours to Oshkosh.

Then Logan had an idea.

"I'm pretty sure the shop at Mitchell Municipal Airport maintains a bunch of twin Cessnas," Logan said. "They might have the correct tire and tube in stock. It's west of here, about an hour and a quarter drive."

"I assume there's no way to find out until Monday morning?" I asked.

"Well, I know a guy who used to work there and might be able to give me the cellphone number of the lead mechanic at Mitchell," Logan said. "Let me try making some phone calls." He disappeared into his office and emerged 10 minutes later.

"You might want to start driving to Mitchell," he said. "It'll be dark when you get there, but the outer vestibule of Wright Brothers Aviation will be unlocked and you'll find a 6.50x10 tire and tube inside. If you can leave it in Elite's vestibule tonight, I'll come in first thing in the morning and get you on your way."



Recovery of '38X featuring Logan, ZZ, yellow jack, blue dolly, orange towbar, and white pickup.

and then drive eight hours back to Sioux Falls the following Sunday. Meantime, I was stressing over the logistics of recovering my airplane from the runway. Based on my experience two years earlier, I knew the normal wing jack for a Cessna 310 was too tall to fit under the wing when the tire was flat, and a shorter wing jack for a Bonanza or Mooney wouldn't lift the wing high enough to raise the wheel off the ground. Then there was the matter of finding a suitable dolly that could be slipped under the wheel to allow the aircraft to be towed.

massive blue dolly fully capable of moving a Gulfstream or Challenger, and a large orange towbar.

*This will never work*, I thought.

Logan and his bearded assistant wrestled the heavy jack onto the runway and rolled it toward the right wing of my 310. "Where's the jack point?" Logan asked. I pointed it out to him. He positioned the jack under the jack point—somehow it was not too tall to fit—chocked the left main wheel, and started pumping the jack handle. The right wing started to lift, and the





Dave, Colleen, and I jumped into the rental car and Dave drove like a bat out of hell—the speed limit on I-90 is 80 mph—and we made it to Mitchell by 9:30 p.m. Wright Brothers Aviation was easy to find, even in the dark. Colleen disappeared into the vestibule and reappeared triumphantly holding the tire and tube. We loaded it into the car. Dave drove back to Elite while Colleen found overnight accommodations. The tire and tube were stashed in Elite’s vestibule by 11 p.m. I sent Logan a text and said we’d meet him Sunday morning at 8:30.

### End game

By the time we arrived at Elite the next morning, Logan had already jacked the wing, removed the dolly, removed and disassembled the wheel (which fortunately was not damaged), dismantled the blown tire and tube, and mounted the new ones. This dude was fast!

“What tire pressure would you like?” were Logan’s first words to me.

By 9 a.m. he had the wheel on the axle and eased the airplane back down onto its feet. We called Maverick to send their

Great nighttime tire caper in Mitchell, South Dakota. Logan arranged it, Dave drove it, Colleen retrieved it on Saturday night at 10 p.m., and Mike couldn’t believe it.

100LL truck and transferred our luggage from the car to the 310, then Dave returned the car. While the airplane was being fueled, I filed a VFR flight plan to Oshkosh. We were wheels up by 10 a.m. and were parked at the Oshkosh FBO by 1 p.m., more or less on our original schedule.

Logan Parr describes himself as “aircraft mechanic.” In truth, he’s a miracle worker with a degree of dedication that’s rare. Hopefully I’ll never again blow a tire, but if I ever do, I’ll try to make sure it’s in Sioux Falls. ■

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