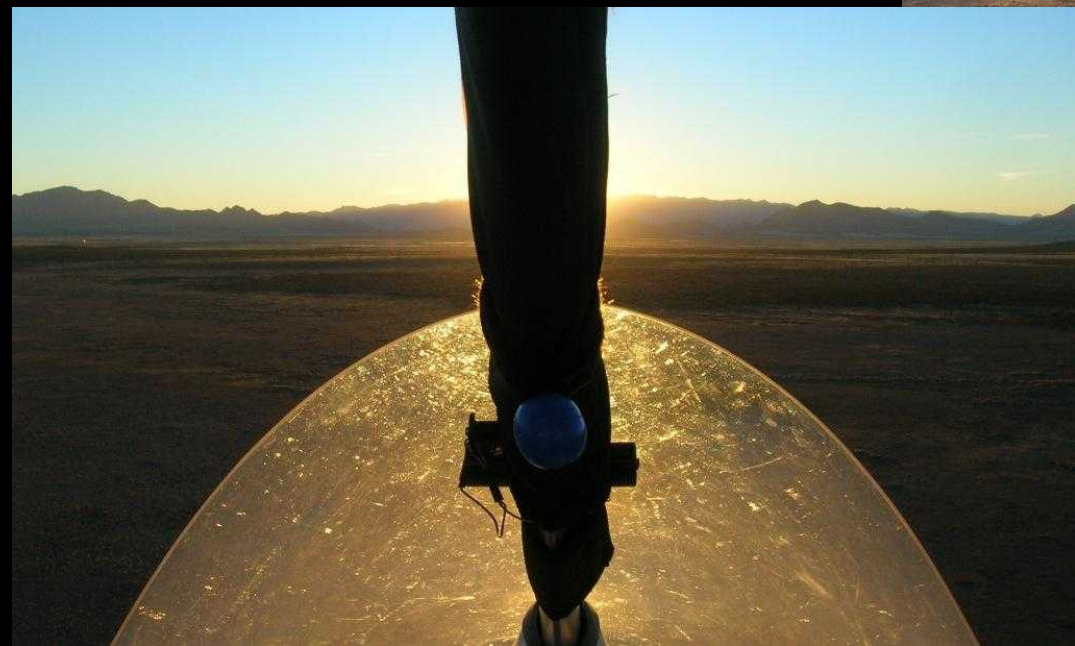


Friday, February 8, 2008
191st Cobra flight, 201st PIC, 6 landings
Elephant Butte Lake, TorC, Caballo Lake,
Hatch Valley, Cookes Peak, Deming, Rodeo

Time was running out. Pulling the control bar into my gut, I could inch my ground speed up to 40 mph. I was fighting a 25 mph headwind. The time was 4:20pm, and my GPS ETE to Rodeo showed 2:10. That would put me on the ground 30min past sunset. Frank wanted to turn back for Deming, but talked him into pressing on. We had more than 2 hours till dark, and I argued we should fly for at least one hour and if the winds stayed the same or eased off we would be fine. And if we had to turn back, well at least we would have a good tailwind.

Belen Takeoff:	9:46 am	Belen Landing:	10:07am
Belen Takeoff:	11:23 am	TorC Landing:	1:07pm
TorC Takeoff:	2:14 pm	Deming Landing:	4:04pm
Deming Takeoff:	4:12 pm	Rodeo Landing:	6:04pm
Today's Airtime	5.8	GPS odometer	306 miles
Total PIC Time	480.0	Total Logged Time	501.2



Rick was ahead with this faster Astra wing. Although Frank and I both fly Aeros Stream wings, I was pulling ahead of him. Motivated by fear of landing in the dark, I dropped down to 50ft AGL, wrapped my arms around the control bar and pulled in hard.

This was going to be a long 2 hrs.



The day started out promising enough. Rick, Frank and I had been attempting this trip to the far southwest corner of New Mexico for months. We bailed on the Dec 28,29,30 trip when temps dropped to 8 deg F. We almost went last weekend, but high winds forced us to cancel again.

Although a snow storm blew through Wednesday night, this weekend looked good. Predicted Friday morning temps were in the teens, so Frank and Rick set their departure from Double Eagle for 9am. After a stop at my hangar in Belen, we would head down to TorC and Rodeo. The forecast was for light tailwinds all day putting us in Rodeo by 4pm.

I took off and headed north, hoping to meet Frank and Rick enroute to Belen. I had a bad feeling when I couldn't raise them on the radio by 10am, so I turned back and landed. I saw Denise's car parked by my hangar. She was on the cell phone with Rick.

It windy up at Double Eagle and Rick had parked his trike in the shelter of the hangar (upper left). They were reluctant to takeoff without knowing the conditions in Belen. I let Denise tell Rick it was calm down here - Rick would believe her. If they didn't call back in 30 min, they were heading south. I heard them on my radio ten miles north of the Belen. By now, the winds had picked up for me, blowing 20 cross for my take off. Rick and Frank skipped the stop at Belen to save time and a crosswind landing.

Lower right: Heading south along the escarpment.



Rick and Frank said it was blowing 18, gusting to 26 when they took off at Double Eagle, but at least it was aligned with the runway. The worst part was taxiing around.

We were moving fast with a 25mph tailwind. Frank wanted to land in Socorro to check his gas, but I talked him out of that. The Socorro airport is tucked in close to some hills only two miles NW from the center of the runways. It would be rough down there. We pressed on to our first refueling stop at Truth or Consequences, NM.

Upper left: 20 miles to the north, the Magdalena Mtns were generating nasty rotors. I dropped a wing and entered a gut wrenching dive that bought back my hanggliding days.



Lower left: I-25 is not a realistic emergency landout. I climbed high and headed east towards the river, mentally shifting from one land out to the next. The road to the Camino Real Museum (right) was one of them.

Upper right: I could see Elephant Butte Lake far ahead.

Lower left: I dropped down low and cruised along the edge of the lake. The surface and air was smooth, but only because it was in a valley, out of the wind.

Lower right: A flock of birds flew with me for a while, then headed for the deep water at the center of the lake. I did not want to follow them out there.

I had trouble lining up on the runway at TorC. When I taxied past the windsock I found out why. The wind had shifted 180 deg while I was on final.





We refueled and took a break at the TorC airport. Denise met us there and took these pictures. Upper left, that's me and my Cobra trike with the official airport dog.

Upper right, Frank and his Aeros trike. Frank looks cold. Lower left, Rick and his Astra trike.



The three of us taxi away from the ramp at the TorC airport.

We were 2 hours behind schedule, but we weren't worried. We had more than 4 hours of daylight with only 125 miles between us and Rodeo.

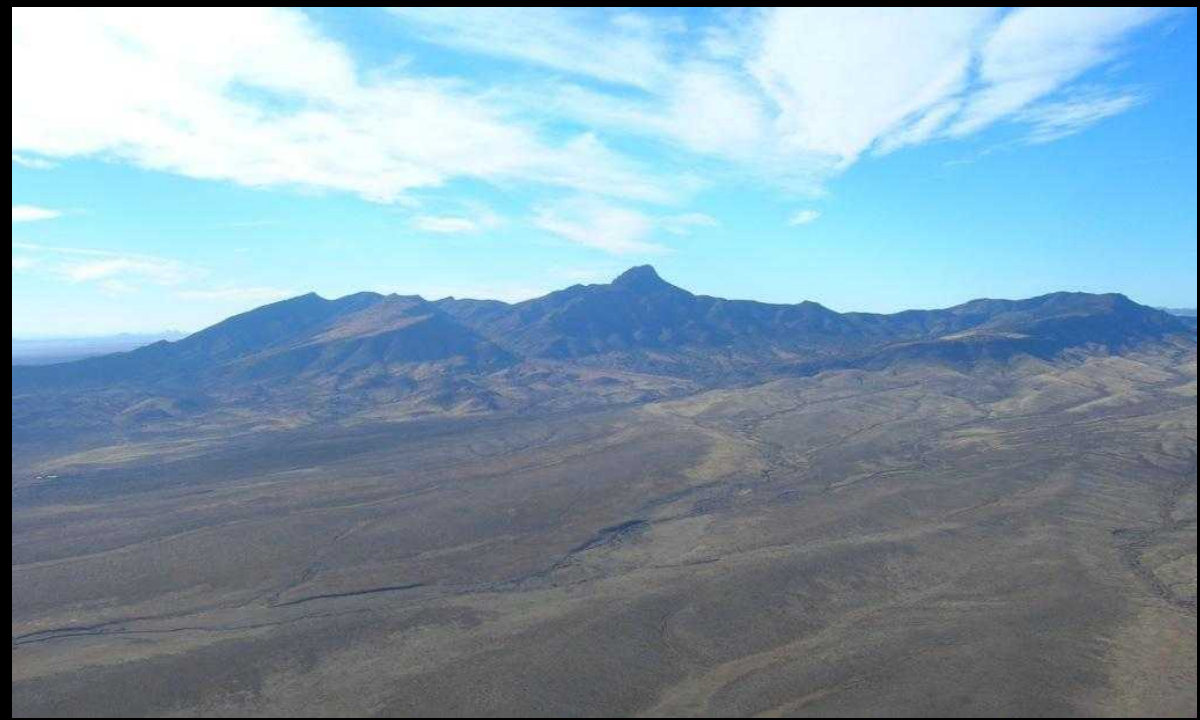
We flew around the town of TorC and rejoined the Rio Grande. South of Elephant Butte Lake is Caballo Lake. Caballo had low water so we flew over these flatlands upstream of the lake. The islands of dry land became fewer and further separated as we worked our way south.



Elephant Butte and Caballo sucked the river dry. The Rio Grande had dwindled down to a trickle when we flew over the farms by Hatch, New Mexico.


Lower left, right. I saw this rope and plank bridge crossing the river. It has seen better days.





We flew past the Hatch airport, and turned right to follow NM 26 to Deming. Frank's fuel gauge was flakey, so he was using accumulated fuel flow. He had shifted the scale factor in TorC and now his gauge was reading zero. He couldn't deal with the psychological torture and wanted to land at Deming and check his fuel.

They had drifted 10 miles ahead of me, so I told them while they landed at Deming, I would waste some time diverting to Cookes Peak (upper left), then meet them enroute to Rodeo.



Cookes Peaks can be seen for 100 miles in southern New Mexico. I had grown up nearby in El Paso, and couldn't pass on taking a close look at the summit.

As I looked down on Cookes peak, I heard Frank and Rick land at Deming. We needed to stick together and they would never catch me if continued ahead. I altered my course for Deming, listening for their take off, but it never happened. I came in to land and get them moving. We were running out of daylight.

Upper right: I landed at Deming and pulled up near Frank and Rick's trikes on the ramp. Frank had topped off his gas tank and was getting ready to leave. I just turned around and headed back to the runway.

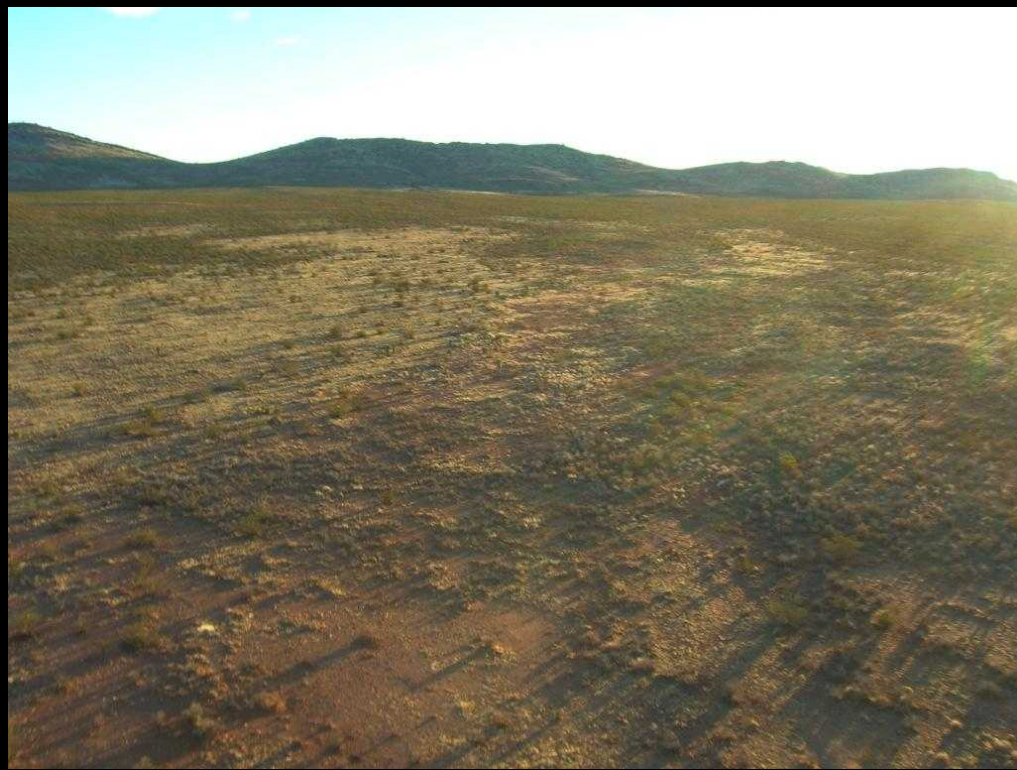
We took off and immediately felt the full force of the headwind, pointed exactly along our course line to Rodeo. In another miserable coincidence, the setting sun was on the same bearing. I dropped down low to get out of some of the wind and pulled in on the control bar, keeping a lookout for the rare but deadly powerlines.



I glanced down at my GPS ground speed and ETE to Rodeo. It would be close. We would be landing 30min after sunset. With max pull in, I could reach 40mph, which meant I was fighting a 20-25mph headwind. My arms grew tired, but I knew I only had to do this for 2hrs. And at the end of twilight, I would be grateful for every minute I gained by pulling in earlier in the flight.

After an hour my ground speed slowly inched up, I could easily maintain 40mph now and grunt my way up to 45. My ETA was slowly shifting forwards. Soon I was doing 55 and my ETA was 10 min after sunset. We were gonna make it.

The sun was right in my face. I flew with one eye closed the other behind the nose tube.



The sun finally dropped behind the mountains on the horizon and I could see again. I hoped Rodeo was behind that pass in the mountains ahead (upper right).

Lower left: We saw a hangar with a flag next to it. This was John McAfee's private hangar and runway next to his sprawling estate. I circled to let him know we were here, then headed on to NM90, Amigos de Cielo Airport, home of the Sky Gypsies.

Lower right: Blurry picture of McAfee's compound.





Upper left: On final at Amigos del Cielo. The airport was exactly where my GPS said it should be. I landed at 12min after sunset, with a whole 18 minutes to spare.

Once we were safe on the ground, Rick and I couldn't resist hassling Frank about his fuel gauge problems and the extra gas stop at Deming that pushed us to the limit.

But in all fairness, I couldn't really fault Frank. Rick and I had dragged him way beyond his comfort zone on this long distance XC flight. Frank is an experienced CFI, but he spends most of his time in the pattern at Double Eagle training students. He never worries about gas because he just fills up at the beginning of the flight. Without an accurate gas gauge, he would be really pushing his luck to fly more than three hours without checking his gas.

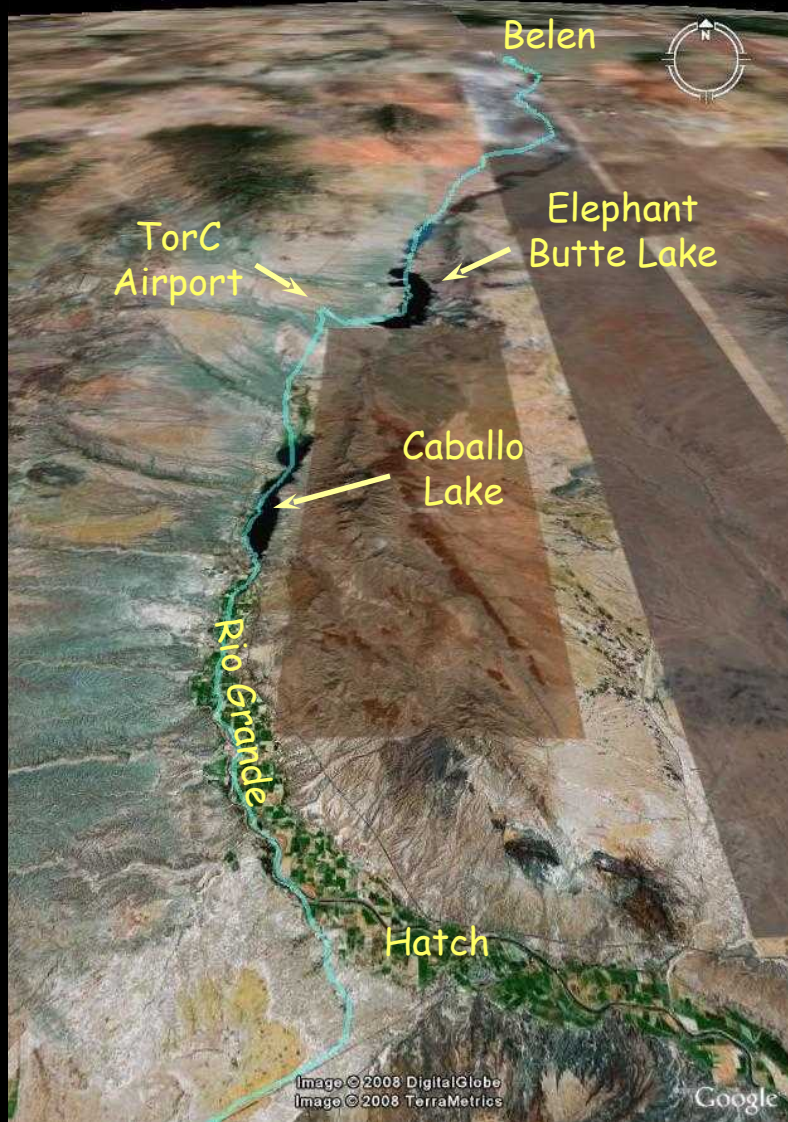
Flying in a group makes these long XC trips 100 times safer than going alone, not to mention a lot more fun. It was "*Fly Together or Crash Alone*" on this trip. We stuck together, and if one of us had trouble in the boonies, we were prepared to campout in the desert. I had a tent and sleeping bag in my gear bag.



Lower left: Our trikes parked in the spacious guest hangar at Sky Gypsies.

This was probably the most grueling XC flight I have ever made, battling rotors, winds and racing the setting sun, but it was a great flight. We grabbed dinner at the Sky Gypsy Café, and settled into the Airstream trailers that serve as guest quarters at Rodeo. I looked forwards to great flying weather tomorrow.

Belen to Hatch



Hatch to Rodeo

