

# *The Trailing Edge*

March 2024

## **My First Cross-Country Solo Adventure... with a Twist**

Around 1000 on Friday, 8 Mar 2024, I sent a text to my flight instructor, Bishoy Abraham. It simply said, “Weather is looking really good today.” His response, “Yes sir, Ur choice of what u would like to do.” My flight training school is the Edwards Air Force Base (AFB) Aero Club, which operates out of (obviously) Edwards AFB, California. At Bishoy’s request, I had been developing a flight plan for a dual cross-country trip to the Los Angeles Basin. As most of you know, The Los Angeles Basin has some very challenging air space including the LAX Class Bravo. I was excited for the trip, but had also been studying the Sectional, TAC and FLY charts religiously to ensure I would perform at least adequately and not look totally incompetent... especially with my comms to ATC. I had a route planned to Riverside Municipal Airport, on to Long Beach Airport, and then back to Edwards AFB through the LAX Special Flight Rules Area (SFRA).



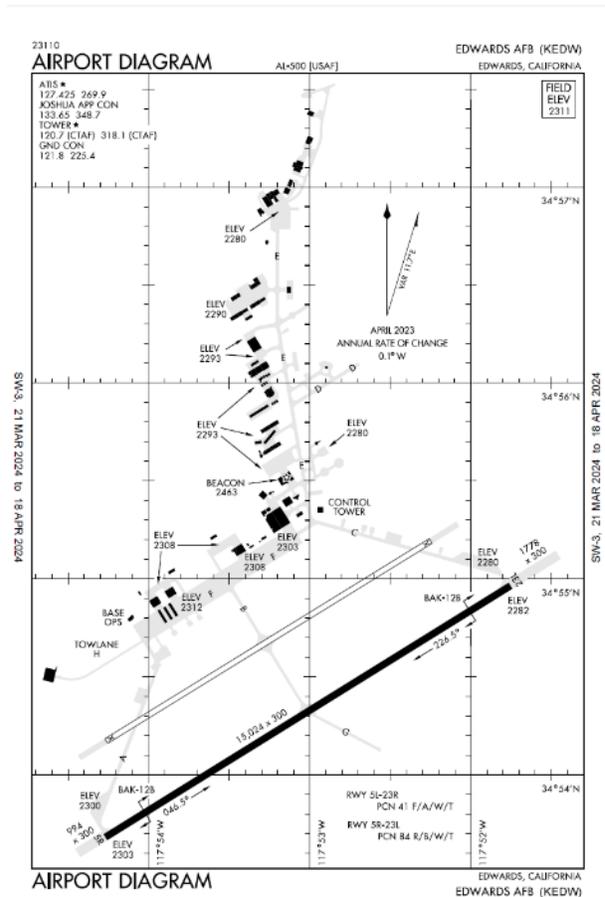
I arrived at the Aero Club a bit early. As I waited for Bishoy to land from a lesson with another student, I looked at my Foreflight flight plan for another review of the weather, frequencies, the altitudes I planned, NOTAMS, and the airport diagram. I wanted to be as prepared as possible given the challenging airspace. Bishoy finished debriefing with his prior student and sat down next to me. He grinned and said, “You know what’s going to happen next, don’t you?” I could see he had something up his sleeve. I narrowed my eyes and said, “No, what?” “I’m going to sign you off for your first solo cross-country to Bakersfield today.” I’m not sure, but at that moment, I think my heart may have skipped a beat. I uttered, “Whaaaaat?” Then, I laughed and said, “I haven’t really planned for that. I’ve been planning for the LA trip.” Fortunately, that wasn’t entirely true; I had been thinking a bit about a flight to Bakersfield

(KBFL). I picked up my Foreflight iPad and pulled up the trip to KBFL that I had entered a few days ago. It looked ok to me. Bishoy took a look at it and said, “That’s perfect.” His only suggestion was to climb to 8,500 MSL instead of 6,500 MSL for some extra cushion over the Rosamond Hills (a low mountain range in the Mojave Desert) and the Tehachapi Mountains. After that adjustment, he said, “Are you ready to do it?” I confess I was quite nervous and not entirely sure since this completely surprised me today, but I mustered up the courage to say, “Yes, I think so. Let’s do it.” Bishoy started inputting the two necessary endorsements into my Foreflight logbook. I started writing down frequencies and reviewed the KBFL weather, runways, and airport diagram. Bishoy and I had flown a dual flight to Bakersfield, but I wanted to refresh my memory on the runway configurations and the taxiways. After Bishoy completed his logbook endorsements, he looked at me and said, “Are you nervous?” I said, “Hell, yeah.” And I very, very rarely use language like that – it just slipped out. He laughed and said, “I’ll repeat what I said before your first pattern solo... That’s good, it’ll keep you alive.”

Folks familiar with Edwards AFB will know that there are two primary, big runways on “Main Base” (23L/5R and 23R/5L) and a smaller runway on “South Base” (7/25). The big runways on Main Base are used by a plethora of military aircraft, including C-17s, F-35s, C-12s, KC-46s, T-7s, B-1s, and my two favorite aircraft, the F-16 and the B-52. As you might imagine, the traffic pattern can sometimes get very busy and challenging with all these dissimilar aircraft. Because of that, Aero Club solo students are not allowed to take-off and land on the main runways when the tower is in operation; they must be chaperoned to the South Base runway by an instructor where they are allowed to take-off and land solo. Given this, Bishoy and I walked out to Skyhawk 108ED together. As I plugged in my headset, prepped the cockpit and did my walk-around, I found myself being very deliberate and slow. I wanted to make sure I did everything right. It would all depend on me, now. For Bishoy’s part, he just plopped down in the instructor’s seat and acted bored and disinterested – I guess to let me know I’m the PIC of this flight and to give me a measure of confidence.

The winds were nearly calm, but were favoring runway 5L, 5R, and 7. We took off from Main Base, flew to South Base, and landed. Uncharacteristically, Bishoy didn’t say a word the whole time. As we taxied back, Bishoy took comms and told Edwards tower that he would be getting out of the airplane and his student would be flying a student cross-country solo. They acknowledged. Bishoy looked at me and said, “If you need help or get any non-standard comms you don’t understand, what’s the magic words?” I replied, “Student pilot solo” (he’d told me this earlier). “If you don’t like your approach to landing?...” “I do a go-around.” I stopped in the ramp area. Bishoy said, “You got this.” He unhooked his headset, gave me a fist bump, hopped out, and started walking to the truck waiting to take him back to the Aero Club.

I started to taxi out and immediately made my first mistake. I turned left towards runway 25. The winds were favoring 7. This mistake is difficult to admit publicly -- it’s hard on the ole ego, but I think other student pilots should have the opportunity to learn from my mistake. Even when you’re trying to be deliberate, careful and perfect, the excitement and stress of a first solo can cause you to do things without thinking it through enough. In my defense, I had never taken off on runway 7. Every other time I had flown out of South Base, I had used 25. So out of habit, I guess, I turned toward 25. Also, the winds were calm, so I could have taken off on 25 with no problems. Admittedly that’s not a good defense; it was dumb mistake. My phone (which was connected to my headset by Bluetooth) rang. Can you guess who? It was Bishoy, “Are you going to take off on 25?” I immediately realized my mistake and sarcastically said, “Well this trip started out auspiciously.” I turned the plane around and headed toward the correct runway, runway 7. Bishoy laughed and replied, “No big deal, you got this,” but I bet in that moment he was wondering

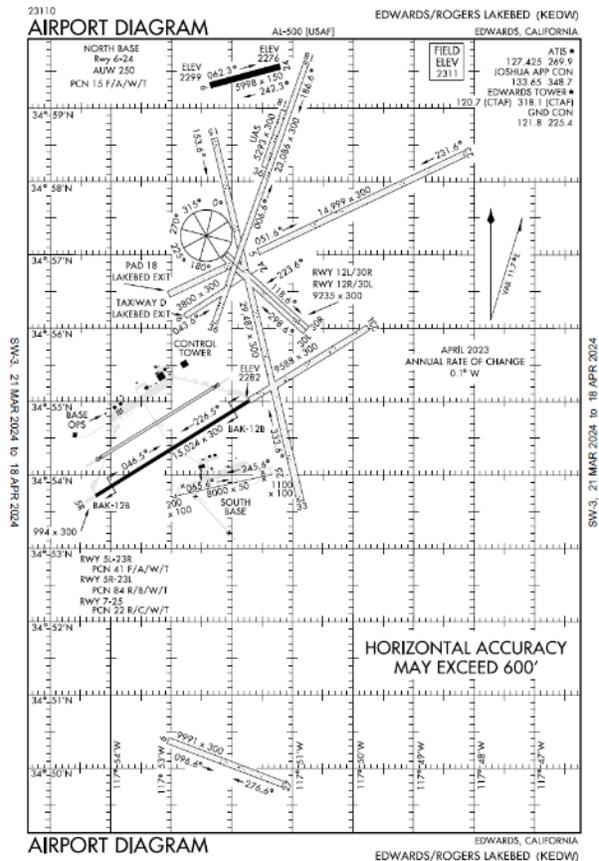


if he should have endorsed my logbook for the trip. I shook it off and focused on the task ahead as I taxied to the hold short line at the threshold of runway 7.

I checked all my controls and instruments, keyed the mike, and said, “Edwards tower, Skyhawk 108ED holding short runway 7, ready for takeoff, Westgate departure.” Tower responded, “Skyhawk 108ED, report airborne, Westgate departure approved, have a good flight.” I responded, “8ED will report airborne, Westgate departure approved, thank you, Sir.” Well, there it was... I was cleared to leave Edwards airspace all by myself; something I had never done before. ...My Lordy! I pushed in some throttle and headed onto the runway. As I lined up on center line, little did I know there would be a couple of “twists” to this solo adventure. The English Language & Usage website tells me the word “twist” colloquially means “an unexpected development of events; a change from usual procedure and not necessarily a good change.” ...And that, fellow aviators, was exactly what was waiting for me.

I dropped my heels to the floor and pushed the throttle in full. As the plane picked up speed, I checked the engine instruments. Full power at 2350 RPM and in the green. Airspeed was coming up. 55 KIAS. Rotate. And in the words of Lew Dix from the LewDix Aviation YouTube channel, “Welcome to the sky!” I climbed away from the ground at Vy (74 KIAS). Before I had a chance to report “airborne,” Tower called and said, “8ED, I see you airborne, fly runway heading and I’ll call your turn.” I repeated the instructions, “8ED will fly runway heading and you’ll call my turn.” I was expecting a right turn for a right downwind departure on Runway 7, instead I got, “8ED turn left, cross runway 23L and fly a right downwind for runway 5L.” My goodness, that wasn’t normal, “8ED will make a left turn, cross runway 23L and fly right downwind for runway 5L. I turned left, crossed the final approach to runway 23L (which was currently landing 5R, not 23L) and then turned left to fly a right downwind to runway 5L. This put me right smack dab between runway 5L and 5R. I was getting kinda nervous about this whole thing and doubting I heard it right. I wasn’t comfortable flying between 5L and 5R, but he didn’t correct my readback, so I guess I’m ok. “8ED, you’re over runway 23L, turn North.” I thought to myself, well of course I am, you told me to fly a right downwind for 5L. (Edwards Tower is used by the USAF as a training facility for up-and-coming ATC controllers. It works very well for this purpose because the very large variety of aircraft and operations challenge the trainees. Additionally, most of the aircrew at EDW are highly experienced and will catch and question trainee mistakes. I suspect that the tower wanted our hero on a LEFT downwind for runway 5L, which would put the airplane to the RIGHT of the runway, but that’s not what he said—EEZ) Although, I may have inadvertently turned left a bit and drifted closer to 23L/5R. “8ED turning north.” I turned North and back to heading 230 to parallel 5L on a downwind as asked—this time closer to 5L. I thought he wanted me to navigate North of 23L but stay on the right downwind for 5L; I didn’t think he would want me to cross 5L after he just yelled at me for being over 23L. Looking back, I should have just turned to a North heading. “8ED turn north, now.” “8ED turning North.” And I started turning toward a North heading. Then almost immediately after the last call, “8ED proceed direct Westgate.” “8ED will proceed direct Westgate.” I headed that way, but noticed he didn’t tell me to report Westgate. Hmmm. What the heck was all that? The Tower controller most assuredly sounded irritated at me. I probably didn’t do what he wanted, but I followed his instructions the best I could. That little twist was certainly confusing.

As I flew over the Westgate visual waypoint, I keyed the mic, “Edwards Tower, 8ED, Westgate.” “8ED contact Sport on 132.75. “Over to Sport, 8ED.” I switched to Comm 2 since I had preset Sport’s frequency there prior to take-off, “Sport, Skyhawk 108ED checking in, 3,300.” “Copy, 8ED, say intentions.” “Sport, 8ED is outbound headed to Bakersfield, Kilo-Bravo-Foxtrot-Lima.” “Roger, 8ED, climb at your discretion and we’ll hand you off to Joshua for flight following in just a little while.” “Sport, climb at my discretion and copy all, thank you, 8ED.” I started my climb and headed toward my first visual waypoint, Rosamond Skypark.

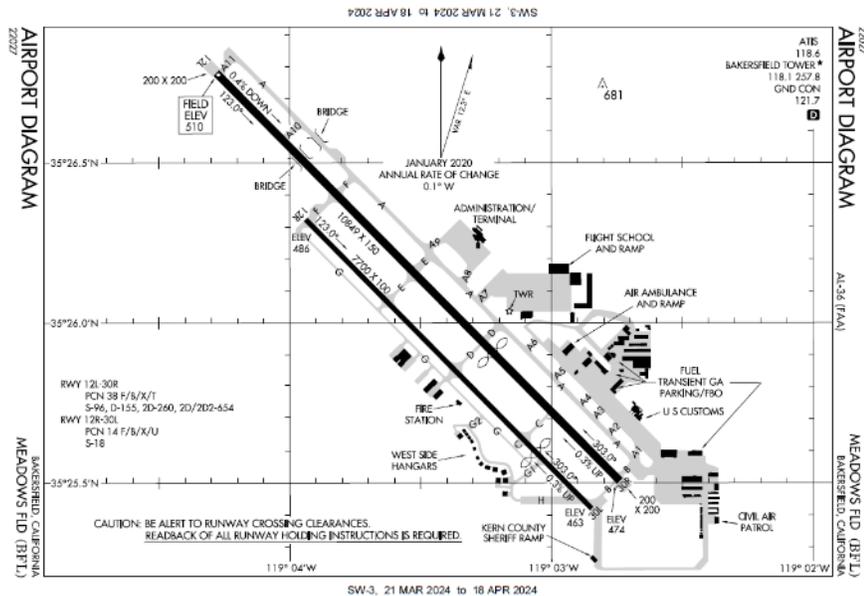


After I flew past Rosamond Skypark, I turned toward the northerly magnetic heading prescribed by my Foreflight plan (323°) that would take me through the Rosamond Hills pass. As I passed through 7,000 the air calmed and it was smooth flying. I had set my altitude bug to 8,500 and as I reached that altitude I leveled off. The engine was in the green, I was on the correct heading, and I leaned the engine a bit. I was flying over the Tehachapi windmills and took that opportunity to dial in the Bakersfield ATIS and Bakersfield approach frequencies into Comm 1. I had Joshua's frequency in the Comm 2 standby. Things were looking good. Sport turned me over to Joshua. I checked in with Joshua, "Joshua, 8ED checking in 8,500." Sport had told me they would request flight following for me with Joshua. Evidently, they had. "8ED, squawk 4457 and ident." I took a few seconds to push 4457 into the transponder, pushed ident, and said, "Joshua, 8ED, 4457 and ident." "8ED, radar contact, 10 miles south of Tehachapi Municipal, garble, garble, garble." He came in broken on that last phrase. "Joshua, copy radar contact, say last." "8ED altimeter 3011." "3011, 8ED." I changed the setting in my G1000 altimeter to 30.11 and then dialed it into the standby altimeter, too. Then, as I looked up from changing the altimeter setting, I saw the clouds. ...Another twist.

The clouds were right in front of me. The tops looked to be about 9,500 and the bottoms were around 7,500. If I kept flying at this altitude I would fly right into the clouds. The weather mins went through my head...in class E, which I was flying through, 3 Cessna 152s – 3 SM viz, 1,000 above, 500 below and 2,000 horizontal. I studied the sky in front of me. The clouds were scattered, and I didn't see any clouds lower than the ones directly in front of me. I decided since I was past the Rosamond Hills, I could descend to 6,500 and still get through to Bakersfield. No problem. I descended to 6,500 and that took me below the clouds in front of me. About this time, Joshua called me, "8ED say altitude." "8ED, 6,500, I had to descend to stay below the cloud deck." I decided it was ok to abandon strict radio comm protocol and just tell them what was going on. I must have been just barely within their radar coverage at that altitude, because Joshua said, "Copy, 8ED, we'll switch you over to Bakersfield approach now on 118.8." "Over to Bakersfield, 118.8, 8ED." I switched to Comm 1 where I had already preset that frequency earlier.

"Bakersfield approach, Skyhawk 108ED, checking in, 6,500 inbound to land." "8ED, altimeter 3011, when able make straight in to runway 30." "3011, make straight in to runway 30." "Hmm," I thought, "strange that they didn't tell me 30R or 30L. I guess they'll tell me later." I was still quite a distance from KBFL, in fact, I still had the Tehachapi Mountains to fly over before I could start looking for the airfield. At this point, since the clouds were scattered, I was able to navigate around the clouds and stay within the weather minimums. However, as I flew farther Northwest on my planned heading, I saw the clouds were getting lower. I also noticed that the clouds were moving South, which meant the low clouds were moving closer to the Rosamond Hills. That could be a problem if I had to turn back South to Edwards.

Not only had I flown a dual cross-country to KBFL with Bishoy, but I had flown this route over the mountains several times with my good friend Russ Erb in his Experimental Bearhawk. During those flights with Russ, being a teacher at heart, he pointed out many of the important visual landmarks and terrain along that route. Thank you, Russ! Because of that, I was familiar with the area and knew if I followed the valley, I might be able to get over the lower Tehachapi Mountain pass at the North end of the valley. I descended a bit lower. I knew I wasn't going any lower than 5,000 and I was starting to get uncomfortable at this altitude. I followed the valley a bit longer. I had turned West to follow the valley and planned to turn back North as the valley contours that way. I heard a Twin Comanche driver, 94CR, talking to Bakersfield approach, but I couldn't hear Bakersfield. I must be lower than their line of sight, I thought. That's not good. Then I heard, "Bakersfield approach, 94CR, I can try to reach him. What's his tail number again?" Then he gave me a call, "N108ED, Comanche 94CR, how do you read me." "94CR, 8ED, I read you loud



and clear, I had to descend to stay below the cloud deck, I may be too low for Bakersfield to hear me right now.” “Copy, 8ED, I’ll relay that to Bakersfield.” “Copy, thank you, 8ED.” I heard him relay our conversation to Bakersfield. I had navigated around some clouds and could now climb again. I climbed and looked North down the valley as I rounded some high terrain to my right. The clouds at the end of the valley were even lower. I looked at the mountains that were on a direct path to Bakersfield. There was some blue sky between the top of the Mountains and the bottom of the clouds, but not enough for me to comfortably fly over the mountains. By that time, I’d had enough of this fun (sarcasm intended); I decided I was going back to Edwards. I probably had to hurry before the clouds reached Rosamond Hills.

I had climbed high enough to finally hear Bakersfield approach calling me. I responded, “Bakersfield approach, 8ED reads you now. I had to descend to stay below the cloud deck. I’m not going to be able to make it over the mountains because of the cloud deck, I’m going to do a one-eighty and head back to Edwards.” “Copy that, 8ED.” I was already in the 180 turn when I was talking to them. I took a moment to call Bishoy on my cell phone. He answered and I told him I couldn’t get over the 2<sup>nd</sup> set of mountains because of the cloud deck and I was coming home. He said, “Ok, that’s a good decision, see you when you get back.” I remember saying, “Sorry about that.” And he promptly, said “No, nothing to apologize for.” I hung up and focused on flying. I kept the climb coming knowing that I had to be at least 6,500 to get over the Rosamond Hills. I saw that the clouds were still moving toward the Rosamond Hill ridge and that had me a bit worried, but I was approaching the ridge fairly quickly and I could see a way through the clouds. At one point, I had to slow the climb to get under some clouds, but then continued climbing. Bakersfield Approach called, “8ED, contact Joshua on 133.65.” “Over to Joshua, 33.65.” Luckily, I had left Joshua in Comm 2. “Joshua, Skyhawk 108ED checking in, 6,500. “Copy, 8ED, are you heading back to Edwards?” “A-Firm, I’m heading back to Edwards. I couldn’t get over the mountains to Bakersfield because of the cloud deck. Request Westgate arrival, 8ED.” “Copy, 8ED, altimeter 3011.” “3011, 8ED.” I noted my altimeter was already set to 30.11. As I reached 6,500, I leveled off so I wouldn’t penetrate the clouds right above me. I pushed the power to a high setting so I could fly over the mountains as quickly as possible. There were clouds to my left and terrain higher than my altitude on my right, but I had enough room to fly through and keep the proper spacing from the clouds. I passed over the ridge into a clear sky and felt myself relax a little.

Now that I was past the Rosamond Hills, I was in very familiar territory. I could see the town of Rosamond, the little butte beside Rosamond Skypark (L00, where my friend Russ hangars his Bearhawk), and the town of Lancaster (where I live) in the distance. I started dialing in the Edwards frequencies into Comm 1. I also started a shallow descent. I pushed the button to monitor ATIS on Comm 1. I was so far away, it was spotty, at first, but I wrote down the info I needed as the signal got stronger. I turned off ATIS, put the Eddie Tower frequency in the Comm 1 primary position and dialed in Sport in the standby position. As I passed by Rosamond Skypark to the South, Joshua gave me a call, “8ED, you are cleared for the Westgate Arrival.” “Cleared Westgate, 8ED.” I descended down to the required 3,300. I must have been getting a bit tired, because as I approached Restricted Area 2515, I couldn’t remember if they had cleared me in. So, I asked, “Joshua, 8ED, confirm I’m cleared into the restricted area.” “A-Firm, 8ED, we’ll switch you to tower soon.” “Copy, 8ED.” Then, a few minutes later, “8ED, contact Edwards tower on 120.7.” “Over to tower 120.7, 8ED.” I switched the radios, “Edwards Tower, Skyhawk 108ED, inbound over Westgate with Kilo.” “Copy, 8ED, we’re landing 5L and 5R, winds 030 at 8, altimeter 3010. “3010, 8ED.” I set my altimeter to 30.10. A few moments later, “8ED, did you want to land at Main Base or South Base?” Darn, I should have requested South Base in my initial radio call. “Edwards Tower, 8ED, I’d like to land at South Base, please.” I glanced at the time, it was almost 1600 on Friday. There were probably no military aircraft landing on 5L or 5R now anyway, so my late request shouldn’t be a problem. “8ED, make straight in to runway 7, report final, there’s a Skyhawk in the pattern, be on the lookout for him.” “8ED will make straight in to runway 7, report 3 mile final, and I’ll look for the traffic.”

I heard Tower calling 106ED, who was about to take off, and ask them to announce every leg of the pattern because they had traffic coming in. 106ED decided to clear the runway instead of taking off and wait for me to land. When I heard this, I was concerned that I had somehow got in the way of their mission. What I didn’t know was that the young man in 106ED was about to do his first pattern solo. They waited for me to land so he would have the pattern all to himself. I did my GUMPS landing check, reported 3 mile final, configured my aircraft, and started my landing. I was going to try to make this a good one because I knew Bishoy and Connie Farmer (our wonderful Aero Club Director) would be watching. And I was lucky. This was one of my good ones. I rounded out, flared, and as I continued the flare gently pulling back, I heard the stall horn go off as my tires gently touched the runway with a small chirp. I love those sounds on landing! I cleared the runway, reported clear of the runway, did my after-landing checklist, and taxied to the ramp area where Connie and Bishoy were waiting in the Aero Club truck. I waved at 6ED as I taxied past. They were waiting for me to clear the taxiway and stop on the ramp before he started his taxi. Bishoy walked up and jumped in the seat next to me. He plugged in his headset and asked, “How was it?” I replied, “It was fun, a little scary, but I didn’t get all the way to Bakersfield.” He said, “That’s ok. You made the right decision. In

fact, I'm really happy you made that decision. That's called ADM, aeronautical decision making, and that is something that can't be taught. You did great." I found that I was happy to hear that, because I thought that Bishoy and the rest of the Aero Club team might be a bit disappointed that I didn't get it done. As I look back now, I wonder why I would even think that – of course they would want me to make decisions that would get me home safe without flying outside my experience level. After all, there's always tomorrow with better weather to complete the mission. The flight back to Main Base was a blur. I don't remember much about it as it was routine, and because Bishoy and I were debriefing aspects of my solo trip. I do remember that this time they gave me a *left* downwind for runway 5L which makes much more sense than before. We did a nice short field landing on 5L and got off on taxiway Alpha, the taxiway at the threshold of runway 5L. We taxied to park in row Tango, shut down, tied down the aircraft, and called it a day.

After I've had some reflection time, I'm satisfied with the way I conducted the flight. It wasn't perfect by any stretch of the imagination, but it was safe. Number one: I didn't kill myself. I came away with more confidence in my abilities to be solo PIC, make good decisions, and get home safely. Number two: I made a good decision to turn back versus pushing the boundaries. I also stayed within all the weather and altitude minimums. A more experienced pilot could have probably gotten through the clouds to KBFL, but, at this stage, I'm not that pilot, and I did not feel comfortable trying it. It could be argued I should have turned back earlier, before descending below 6,500, and maybe I should have; but there were literally only single digit minutes between the decision to descend below 6,500 and the decision to turn back and climb – 6 minutes to be exact. 8 minutes after that, I was crossing back over the Rosamond Hills ridge. I don't think that's a terrible decision timeline for a pilot of my experience level. I quickly concluded that continuing the flight to KBFL was not going to work. It is interesting to me that during those minutes, I was so focused that time slowed down for me. I've heard that is a commonplace reaction in times of stress, and that it heightens your focus. That is exactly what happened to me. The phenomenon was definitely helpful to me in this situation.

For a more experienced pilot, this situation may not have been that big of a deal; but, for me, this was the very first time I've had to handle a weather situation as a solo PIC; so, to me, it was a significant event. I am both encouraged and disappointed about this trip. I'm happy that I made some good decisions, but I am sad that I made too many mistakes on this trip. I, of course, will learn from both my good decisions and my mistakes. In fact, that is the primary reason I write these accounts of my "adventures" as I call them. I lay myself bare to all you for two reasons. First, a thorough written record of my experience helps me to analyze my performance and learn from it. Second, I hope my story and commentary will allow my fellow pilots to learn from my mistakes and keep them from making the same mistakes. In addition, maybe you can learn from my good decisions and use that information, as well. Below are my main take-aways from my first solo adventure with a twist.

1. Be deliberate, slow and think things through before moving your airplane. Don't let excitement or stress get the better of you and don't rush. Remember the adage "Slow is fast." My turn toward runway 25 instead of the correct runway 7 was a dumb mistake. In the future, before I move my airplane, I will set my heading bug on the correct runway heading and think through where that runway threshold is located *before* I release the parking brake and push in the throttle to taxi.

2. If you are confused with any ATC instructions, ask them to confirm or repeat. During the departure fiasco, I should have asked tower to confirm he wanted me on a right downwind for 5L. That would have probably cleared up the confusion. I would have been more confident I was correctly following his direction, and he would have known I was in the position he wanted me. On the other side of the coin, when I was approaching the Restricted Area 2515 inbound, I wasn't sure I was cleared to enter, so I asked. This, I believe, is a positive example of communication – and guess what?... nobody yelled at me for getting confirmation.

3. When you are in an uncomfortable situation, drop comm formalities. Forget about formulating those strict radio procedure calls in your head before you transmit. Just communicate to ATC what is going on in plain language – you can use those brain cells on something else more important. While I was dodging clouds, I was too busy aviating, navigating, and evaluating my situation to worry about how I sounded on the radio.

4. Never stop flying the airplane. If you don't keep flying your airplane, an uncomfortable situation can escalate to bad, or even tragic, in seconds. I found myself cross-checking my airspeed, altitude, engine stack, and RPM gauge a lot while I was near those clouds – much more frequently than I normally do. Remember the adage "aviate, navigate, communicate." It worked for me.

5. Don't "Scud run." Scud running is the practice in which pilots lower their altitude to avoid clouds or instrument meteorological conditions (IMC). Was I scud running? Maybe. I can't deny

I descended to avoid the clouds; but I never reached the point where it was unsafe or beyond my capabilities. In fact, I turned back before it became unsafe. However, this experience made me realize that it would be very easy to fall into that trap if you're not deliberate in your decision making and if you have plan continuation bias.

6. Get over any plan continuation bias, it's just not worth it. The FAA Aviation Safety Team (FAASTeam) defines plan continuation bias as "the continuation of an original plan even when information suggests the plan should be abandoned." In more common pilot parlance, this is sometimes called "get-there-itis." The FAASTeam white paper continues, "During a flight, a pilot may encounter motivations to change plans or discontinue the flight, like a *change in weather* (emphasis added by me), low fuel, or encroaching darkness. However, these motivations are typically weaker than the initial motivation to complete the flight, so they get overlooked or excused away. These weaker motivations can stack up and may end up being stronger than the motivation to complete the flight. However, at that point, it may be too late to complete the flight safely. Pilots should realize that a diversion to an alternate should be deemed a success, not a failure. Just don't wait too long to divert, as this can greatly limit your options." As I summarized my trip to my friend Russ (an Air Force Test Pilot School instructor and experienced general aviation (GA) pilot), he responded, "Congratulations on overcoming plan continuation bias." This made me smile. I hadn't really thought of it that way, but he was exactly right. I really, *really* wanted to complete my first solo cross-country mission, but I was just smart enough and just cautious enough to know where my boundaries were. I didn't let get-there-itis rule the day. This was the successful, unsuccessful cross-country flight, if you understand my meaning.

During my many years in the Air Force, there was a frequently relied on saying that is apropos for this solo adventure with a "twist": A plan is a just a point from which to deviate. I believe *every* flight will have its own twists. After all, no plan, flight, or pilot is perfect. It's just a matter of degree. Some twists will be minor, and some will be major. I think our job as pilots is to thoroughly plan and prepare, fly the plan, and then, when unexpected events develop, use all our training and experience to deviate from the plan in a manner that is prudent and safe. I faced my twists on this first solo cross-country attempt and made enough prudent decisions to get home safely. I will use this experience to improve my flying and airmanship skills. As my good friend, Stormy Weathers (experienced Air Force navigator and GA pilot) often says, and Bishoy also said to me after this flight: It's always better to be on the ground wishing you were in the air, than to be in the air wishing you were on the ground.

- **Glenn Nicholson**  
USAF Lt Col (Retired)  
Student Pilot