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Eyeball to Eyeball with Cyclone Gene

It was 5:30am when the wheels of our precious Cessna 400 rolled off the ground in American Samoa, daylight was imminent and the weather surrounding the island was extremely calm.

This was an eerie feeling as we knew that only four hours flight time away was a huge cyclone called Gene. So many questions were running through my mind, how strong was the headwind component going to be, how bad was the associated weather surrounding it, and could we get into Fiji if our transit failed and we had to turn back?



Refuelling in Bend Oregon

Four years previous I'd travelled from Japan towards Guam and had to run down the right hand side of a cyclone in a Cessna 210. The 75 knot tail wind was nice but the associated weather that had been kicked up on the southern side was so bad that we had to track 90 degrees to our destination for more than one hour. That was one hour that we did not make a mile towards our destination.

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Three and a half hours into this trip the sky looked dark and uninviting. There didn't seem to be any better path left or right of track, so dead ahead it was. We're maintaining 8,000ft and it looked as though we'd run underneath. We experienced light rain for the next forty minutes, no turbulence and then it cleared to reveal scattered thunderstorms. These were bad, hungry monsters, with teeth, the sort of CB's that would destroy a small aircraft if it tried to transit.

Our only option was to steer left and right to avoid them, and so for the next three hours it was left, and then right of track, up to fifty miles, these were huge. Our friend Earl Covell was above in a Super King Air that was also going to Australia, it was his weather radar that gave us a clear picture of the best way through this mine field.

We had to be mindful not to go too far south as our direct track took us within 300nm of the cyclone eye, Gene, the ultimate nasty storm.

In the clear sky between the CB's you could see a distinct cylindrical cloud south of us, which marked the northern portion of the cyclone.

Our headwind component steadily increased to 30 knots, which is what we'd estimated it would get to, and for one hour it was right on the nose. The wind gradually came around onto our left wing as we'd expected.

We decided to land and refuel in La Tontouta (Noumea) due to the headwinds, as this airport marked the end of our cyclone transit. From here it would be further and further away from the monster, and closer and closer to home.

This brand new Cessna 400 is the first of its type to enter Australia, its almost jet like performance makes it a unique aircraft. You'd all remember our stories last year on Columbia and how they were purchased by Cessna, well this is the story of the first Cessna badged Columbia.



Extracts from USA based www.Jetwhine.com editor, Robert P. Marks. Robert ran editorial on the trip as the aircraft crossed from the USA.

Pictured with the new Cessna 400 in front of the factory in Bend Oregon is Garry Mitchell. Mitchell is considered a veteran pilot with over 100 Pacific crossings to his credit in a variety of single, multi-engine and turbine aircraft. Mitchell says this delivery trip is going to be truly sweet because flying the new Cessna 400 is "like flying the Lamborghini of aircraft".

For readers new to flying single engine airplanes over long distances, this kind of trip is sure to test any pilot's knowledge of navigation, flight and fuel planning, as well as the limits of their body. It's nearly 40 flying hours over four days.

Takeoff

The trip begins at the factory in Bend Oregon in the high desert, from here it's a three hour flight through some very ordinary weather down to Hollister, where the aircraft will be tanked and readied for the trip.

We departed Hollister California (KCVH) about 40 miles northeast of Monterey, then on to Santa Barbara (KSBA) for the first over-water leg.

We departed Santa Barbara Airport in California on Wednesday and spent the first four hours at 8,000ft. We encountered 30-knot winds from the north that at times gave us a head wind component of ten knots. After about four hours we climbed to FL180. The Cessna 400 cruise climbed easily at 1300ft/min right up to 18,000ft. The nil winds up there were very disappointing, it would have been nice to see 200 knots on the GS (groundspeed) with a small tailwind.

There's only enough oxygen on board for five hours so it seemed to make more sense to wait until the later part of the California to Hawaii leg to climb, as the winds were forecast to be from behind us for the second half.

As we approached 100nm from Hilo, the Honolulu air traffic controller informs us that really bad weather sits just thirty nautical miles from Hilo. He offers a solution, "I can radar vector you south around the weather if you'd like." This assistance was much appreciated and it wasn't long before we found ourselves commencing an instrument approach into Hilo Airport, which was experiencing heavy rain and low cloud. The next day we rested and fuelled the aircraft. Why rush out of paradise?

Friday morning we departed Hilo at 5:30am, climbed to 8,000ft, and set sail for American Samoa. Approximately four hours into the trip a voice came over 123.45, asking if anyone was listening. We had very clear reception; someone was very close, which was surprising in this very remote part of the Pacific. "Can you relay a position report for me?" the pilot asked. Since things were pretty quiet, we started chatting. Turns out we'd met this other ferry pilot previously and he was flying a Super King Air 200 to Australia.

His name is Earl L. Covell, one of Southern Cross's (One of America's first ferry companies) original pilots. The next four hours was just swapping ferry stories from all over the world.

Earl is a veteran of more than 35 years ferry flying. He once ditched an Islander BN20 200nm off Majuro and spent 24 hours in the water before being rescued. He suffered a badly broken leg, four broken ribs and four broken vertebra. The rescue boat also shot some footage of a couple of huge sharks circling the life raft when they arrived. Earl tells me he only flies turbines now, no more piston powered aircraft after that incident.



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Earl landed in American Samoa one hour in front of us and as the sun set over the sleepy little island we found ourselves in a little bar swapping stories.

The King Air and the Cessna 400 traveled together to Australia, we relayed Earl's position reports while he looked after our weather radar and upper airways observations.

You'll often find someone who can help, when for instance you have HF radio problems. Our one common goal is to get an aircraft from one place to another safely.

Day three report from American Samoa

We're currently poised for a departure in American Samoa. Sitting between Fiji and Vanuatu is a huge tropical cyclone, called Gene. As we departed Hawaii it looked like we'd slide beneath, taking advantage of the tail winds, however, it elongated and the eye moved right onto our track, making the southerly route way to long. It looks like we'll head to Fiji for fuel and track north around the top, taking the head wind on the nose, so to speak. We'll come within 300nm of the eye of the cyclone, as we pass to the north.

Just in case, the Cessna 400 was equipped with a life raft and an emergency supply of food and water although Mitchell says he's never needed those kinds of supplies on a trip. "I did have a single-engine airplane dump oil all over the windshield once. I returned to land OK though."

Is There a Psychologist in the House?

Robert P. Marks says, some readers may see this trip over thousands of miles of open Pacific as an incredible adventure, while others may question Mitchell's sanity at such a trip alone.

I wondered after we hung up the phone ... does he talk to himself when things are quiet? I called him back on his cell. "Actually, I keep pretty busy during these trips," Mitchell told me. "I also have my iPod with 250 or so songs on it to listen to, a little Elton John, Celine Dion, that sort of thing."



Is this a career others should think about, I asked? "I don't make as much money as an airline pilot," he quickly answered. "But I have a heck of a lot more fun." Mitchell recalled one trip when he came within range of the U.S.S. Kitty Hawk steaming around the Pacific, something the Navy wasn't very happy about. "We convinced them we were not a threat and things calmed down. Then I asked the Navy if we might do a touch and go on the carrier deck in the Cessna 182s we were flying. The Navy didn't think that was such a good idea."

What unlikely traveling companions, a Super King Air at FL240, at 240 knots and the new Cessna 400 at FL180, at 190 knots.



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The Cessna 400 turns out to be a performer, it will cruise climb at 1300ft/min, and when you're passing through FL200 and it's twin turbo's are still providing full manifold pressure and therefore, 1300ft/min you really start to appreciate the real potential of this aircraft.

The inflatable door seals are nice; it cuts out the wind noise and minimizes the engine noise. And the environmental package is fantastic; you can simply set the interior temperature during taxi and forget it, unless you'd like to change it at some point. It's automatic, so it'll simply compensate for the outside conditions. There's no need to turn it on or off during take-off either.

The two independent alternators have a cross-tie switch which means it has very little loss of equipment due to an alternator failure.

The fully integrated G1000 Garmin cockpit even has the oxygen supply system integrated, so you simply turn it on and off from the right hand screen touch pad.

Another great feature is the FLC button, Flight Level Change, means you can pre-select a climb or descent speed and the aircraft will simply climb or descend at whatever rate maintains that speed, it's great for cruise climbs.

The finest leather is used to complete the perfect package, the seats are very comfortable and the high quality leather finish gives the interior a classy feel.

Short Final

What an amazing trip, we'd climbed into the flight levels and found old friends to travel with. We'd encountered a tropical cyclone and still managed to deliver the aircraft within 9 days. That was nine days from factory to customer. Not bad considering the challenges we'd faced.

Cyclone Gene had changed its face and our plans had to change to keep pace. We spent one day in American Samoa studying the weather, this always proves to be a valuable day, its extremely important to get it right when your confronting what is potentially devastating weather, especially when you're flying a small aircraft.

Mother Nature is at times spectacular, but she can also be unsympathetic if you're in the wrong place at the wrong time. We've found in the past that it's nice to watch these spectacles, but from a safe distance. Luckily we'd stayed just far enough away.

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