



A Cardinal's Close Encounter

The Navy had issued orders for my transfer to Japan, an exotic land that I had wanted to explore since first studying the martial arts as a child. My household goods were packed, and I was beaming with excitement, until I learned that not all my belongings could go with me. The Yokota flight training director on the international call made it very clear when I inquired about shipping my Cessna Cardinal: “Sir, the Japanese do NOT want your airplane here.”

I was not ready to sell, nor would I store her in a forgotten hangar while I served my overseas tour. Not surprisingly, my lifelong friend, Joe Guillory, volunteered to babysit my Cardinal in my absence. He flew to Seattle to ferry the plane with me to his home in Louisiana. We loaded our baggage and departed the Pacific Northwest for our journey to Cajun Country.

After fuel stops in Medford, Oregon and Hawthorne, Nevada, the glittering lights of Las Vegas came into view, illuminating the darkness from 75 miles away! Even though Joe and I felt like the luckiest men alive—barnstorming the West in a beautiful airplane—we skipped the casino games and strolled along The Strip to enjoy people-watching and an unrivaled Gordon Ramsay burger.

The following morning dawned a clear, blue sky that spanned as far as the eye could see. But it was a sweltering summer day, and the scary effects of density altitude

lurked. The Cardinal clawed for altitude—struggling to ascend at 150 FPM versus its standard 840. With the formidable mountains close by, I performed circle climbs until we cleared their peaks, eventually swooping over the majestic Grand Canyon. Everywhere we gazed, this geologic wonder flaunted its multi-colored canyons, cliffs, and tributaries.



Our adventure next charted us over Winslow, Arizona, where we stared in amazement at the massive meteor crater below us. Scientists claim this resulted 50,000 years ago when an asteroid traveling over 26,000 MPH collided with Earth. We welcomed the powerful tailwinds that propelled us in excess of 177 MPH throughout this barren region, but not the occasional turbulence so violent that we worried a wing might tear off. The Cardinal would no doubt refuse to fly without its wing, but we soared high enough to give me time to shake Joe's hand and tell him it was a pleasure knowing him before we created our own crater.



Without warning, our radio started to crackle with static interference. Joe and I began diagnosing the sudden mystery. We adjusted the squelch, rebooted the avionics, reinserted our headsets, and even changed their batteries—without any resolution. I recalled what my wife had told me the day before: “Be careful in Roswell. Aliens are real, and your employer is still trying to keep that a secret!”

A tumbleweed rolled across the cracking asphalt as we landed in Roswell. Although relieved we had arrived at our destination, it was creepy being at an airport boneyard. There was no activity—no buses carrying passengers, no baggage trucks, no aircraft tugs. Yet, we were maneuvering near hundreds of retired airliners that had been delivered to this graveyard to donate their organs.

We killed the ignition and opened the doors. A gust of oppressive heat filled the cockpit. We peeled ourselves from our seats, leaving melted skin behind, and entered the

FBO. I splashed cold water on my face and grabbed two sodas. The caffeine and sugar energized Joe and me, and we decided to continue eastward, instead of staying overnight. The lineman refueled the Cardinal while I checked the weather and notified the FBO in Texas that we would be landing after closing time. “See you in two and a half hours,” I said before hanging up. I didn’t know it, but my promise would be broken.

We verified the oil level was normal, completed our run-up, and taxied to the runway. Darkness now enveloped us. We bid Roswell adieu and disappeared into the twilight. We made mention of our great progress—flying farther than originally planned—when we noticed the oil temperature and cylinder head temperatures flirting with their redlines. I advised ATC I would discontinue my climb and level off at 5,500 to cool the engine, but just reaching 5,500 proved difficult. I enriched the mixture and checked that the cowl flaps were open. I transitioned from maximum power to cruise, and expected the decreased RPMs and increased airspeed would cool the engine. Nothing helped. The engine oil gauge continued to relay an abnormally high temperature, and the #4 cylinder head danced dangerously between 400 and 600°F. “The CHT probe must have failed,” Joe remarked, “but if it didn’t, we’re going to throw an engine rod at any moment.” Engine failure was imminent.

I surveyed my surroundings in the pitch-black. The odds were favorable that I would not hit anyone if forced to make an emergency off-airport landing in the desert. However, the last time a flying object had crashed here, it was never discovered. . .

I thought back to when I was a student pilot 15 years prior, completing my night cross-country flight over the Louisiana bayous when I experienced partial power loss in a

Cessna 152. A local pilot had previously told me how to land an airplane at night if the engine quit. “You have to look out over the landscape,” he had said. “Lights mean people live there, and you have to avoid endangering others. So, pick out a dark spot and start your emergency glide. Right before touching down, turn on your landing light. If you don’t like what you see, turn it off.” I successfully nursed that injured Cessna 152 back to my home airport, but I swore if a similar situation ever happened again, I would discontinue the flight and land at the nearest airport.

Here was that similar situation. I banked left to return to Roswell. I alerted ATC, and in Tom Bodett fashion, they left the lights on for us. We navigated straight to them—each second praying the scorching Lycoming O-360 would continue droning. It felt like the world’s longest ten minutes, but we finally made it back safely. This night, my Cardinal would slumber with the ghosts of airplanes past.

I investigated the problem by reading the owner’s manual, researching online, and consulting an A&P. I concluded that the thirsty air and prolonged laboring climbs caused the overheating. I would also learn later that the #4 CHT probe had indeed failed.

Joe and I departed at sunrise to take advantage of the cooler temperature. All gauges were in the green, and my Cardinal performed perfectly until mission accomplished in New Iberia, Louisiana. Aided by the light from the tower’s rotating beacon, we unloaded our gear. We had logged 23 hours, crossed eight states, and flown 2,075 miles. We had made lasting memories, and forged a closer friendship. I would miss my Cardinal, but she was in good hands. I gave Joe the keys and moved to my new assignment in the Land of the Rising Sun.