



JEFF SKILES

COMMENTARY / CONTRAILS

Accomplishments in Aviation

Personal achievements in flying

BY JEFF SKILES

FLYING CAN BE a never-ending collection of personal challenges, and that is certainly part of its allure. Many need nothing more than a sport pilot certificate to satisfy their desires — ultralight flyers don't even need that. Others use aircraft to fly for pleasure. More still for vacation and business transportation to and from distant locales.

My own interaction with aviation currently follows a few different paths. Obviously, I fly for a living as an airline pilot. I also fly warbirds for the Commemorative Air Force. Plus, my Cessna 185 serves a number of aeronautical missions as befits this extremely versatile aircraft.

I occasionally use the Skywagon for long-distance transportation. It is my conveyance to EAA chapter events and pancake breakfasts. And, while it's no Super Cub, with proper caution it makes a decent backcountry flying machine.

I was fortunate to return to the Idaho backcountry this summer where I landed at a few strips that I wouldn't have felt at all comfortable with just a few years ago. This might seem mundane to regular backcountry flyers, but to me it marks progression in the most beautiful, rewarding, and challenging pursuit I can ever imagine. This, after all, is what I bought my Skywagon for.

DEWEY MOORE

I'll admit, some of the Idaho backcountry strips are simply too difficult for my tastes. Dewey Moore would be a good example. It's 700 feet of rough, uphill ground running diagonal to the Big Creek flowage. The strip is at 4,000 feet of altitude, and at the end of the strip is a 3,000-foot-tall mountain. As with many backcountry strips, there is no possibility of a go-around. Once you've touched down, you're committed. People have flown Skywagons into Dewey Moore, and done it safely, but I'm not likely to. The cost of failure would be just too dear.

I think successful backcountry flying is equal parts aircraft capability and piloting skill, with a dash of youthful bravado thrown in. Against that measure I don't fair particularly well. My Skywagon is unfortunately no Carbon Cub. I'm not the most skilled at high-altitude backcountry flying. And with age 60 closer than I would care to admit, youthful bravado left the stage long ago. I pick my battles. But this year I felt competent to try a few strips that I merely gazed at from aloft just a few years ago.



WILSON BAR

Wilson Bar lies alongside Idaho's Salmon River where its rushing waters have cut deep into the topography. The strip is advertised at 1,500 feet in length, but only 1,200 feet of it is truly flat enough to be usable. On approach, the deep, twisting canyon of the Salmon only allows sight of the runway on short final, so you must identify other landmarks to position yourself on approach. *Stay over the left side of the river – passing the sandbar on the western shore, have your wings level with the treetops and be configured for landing – aim for the little rapids ahead as if you will be landing in the river, and rounding the hill be ready for the strip to appear suddenly on the right.* Wilson Bar turned out to be such a gorgeous place that we camped there two nights.

DIXIE TOWN

The three aircraft in our group left Wilson Bar (C48) early so as to arrive at Dixie Town by 7 a.m. for breakfast at the Silver Spur

Outfitters. Taking off toward the river you are either going to get in the air or go right off the end. There was no room for an abort. A sharp bank to the left after lift-off and then another to the right keeps you over the river.

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The narrow canyon is flanked by 4,000-foot-tall ridges, and on takeoff I was sure the unholy wail of the Skywagon at maximum rpm reverberated for miles up and down the Salmon.

Dixie Town is only 10 miles away as the crow flies, but it's 3,000 feet higher than Wilson Bar. I was miles upstream before I had the altitude to climb out of the Salmon River canyon.

The strip looked like just another dirt road in the small town of Dixie, Idaho. It's plenty long but slopes from both ends strongly to the center where there is often a mud puddle. On this day, though, it was mostly dry. I got on the brakes and stopped before the soft dirt. The strip is so close to town though that I'm confident that few remained asleep in Dixie an hour later after our departure for Soldier Bar (85U).

I wrote about Soldier Bar three years ago in "Flying the Idaho Backcountry" (*Sport Aviation*, November 2014). At the time, I was new to backcountry flying and new to my airplane. I made an approach, but decided I was too far out of position. I did a go-around and ultimately decided to leave it for another year. Well, it took me three years to get back. In 2015 the canyons were filled with smoke from wildfires so I went to Utah instead.



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I wouldn't have attempted any of these strips three years ago. But now, with increased experience and confidence, I can truly join the ranks of backcountry flyers and add these challenging strips to my personal list of achievements.

Last year, life just got in the way, and I went nowhere at all. But this year, I went back determined to land at this most beautiful and isolated of strips.

SOLDIER BAR

Soldier Bar sits on a prominent grassy shelf on the side of a mountain 500 feet above Big Creek. It's a dogleg strip, and while it claims to have 1,400 feet usable, it's really three 500-foot runways separated by overly large humps. You land upstream and uphill. With a more than 5-degree slope, the runway gains almost 100 feet from end to end.

The humps, though, are a consideration. You really need to put the plane down on the end of the runway so that you are slowed sufficiently crossing the first hump. Too fast and it will launch you back into the air — it's that big!

I crossed over the strip headed downstream at 2,000 feet in the air. At normal pattern altitude, the canyon is only a mile wide — not much room to reverse course. I stayed high, slowed to 70 mph to limit the distance traversed across the ground, reversed course, and headed back upstream while configuring. As I hugged the right bank of the canyon, the strip

came in view. I was in a good position, about 65 mph and flaps at 40 degrees. I slowed to 60 mph but didn't dare go any slower.

I put it on the end but misjudged my flare and bounced it a couple of times before sticking the landing. The upslope slowed the Skywagon rapidly, and I coasted over the first hump at a fairly slow speed. In fact, it took quite a bit of power just to get the plane up to the other end of the runway to shut down.

Soldier Bar would make a perfect campsite high up on the plain with the roar of Big Creek so far below to lull you to sleep. An Eagle Scout project has produced the most delightful outhouse on this high shelf so far from the nearest road. A plaque on the side states that last year Tucker Vaterlaus, Boy Scout Troop 212, Boise, Idaho, managed the construction. How Tucker and those that helped him dug the pit out there is unimaginable. An amazing feat!



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Above: Eagle Scout Tucker Vaterlaus' open air outhouse
Left: Grave of Pvt. Harry Eagan

PRIVATE HARRY EAGAN

We visited the grave of Pvt. Harry Eagan. In 1879 a band of the Shoshone Indian tribe called the Sheepstealer Indians were camped on this plateau. The 1st Cavalry overran them and burned their primitive homes made of sticks and grass. The Indians counterattacked shooting Eagan through both thighs, and he became the sole casualty of the Sheepstealer war. For 138 years he has rested on that lonely plateau.

After a hike, we were off down the canyon for nearby Cabin Creek, an easy approach but don't try to go around down low; the rising terrain leaves little margin for error. Then we continued up to Big Creek's forested headwaters for the long and beautiful Big Creek strip. The only challenge there is a mountain ridge between the downwind leg and the runway completely hiding the strip. After checking out the construction progress on the Big Creek Lodge we were aloft, and soon were once again winding our way back down the twisting canyon for our camp at Wilson Bar.

I wouldn't have attempted any of these strips three years ago. But now, with increased experience and confidence, I can truly join the ranks of backcountry flyers and add these challenging strips to my personal list of achievements. *EAA*

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