



JEFF SKILES

COMMENTARY / CONTRAILS



Rome Again

The places that wings can take us

BY JEFF SKILES

MY NEXT-DOOR NEIGHBOR of the last quarter century is an amazing gardener. She scrupulously tends an extensive patch of flowers that separates our two houses from one another. Over the years our conversations over the flower patch have been wide ranging, usually interrupted by our two dogs tearing through her plants and flowers as they gambol around the yards with wild abandon. For some reason my collie, Toby, loves to drink from my neighbor's rainwater collection station where he can usually be found lapping noisily. A couple of weeks ago she ended our on again, off again summer conversation by asking a simple question, "Where are you going this week?"

ROME AGAIN

My rather morose answer, "Rome — again." Even as I uttered the remark it sounded stale in my mouth. A sour note that didn't belong in a symphony of sound. After all, most people would love to take my place and be flying to Rome for a little mini vacation. Only 36 hours later I would be dining at Tony's in Trastevere along the Tiber River — a noted airline crew haunt. And, that only after an afternoon investigating the quaint mountain village of Frascati, mostly spent sitting under an umbrella in the main piazza watching the tourists over a plate of sliced salami and a glass of wine. Better yet — I was getting paid to do it. It just goes to show that no matter how many gifts we receive in life, undeserving people like me can always find something to complain about.

I assure you, my lack of excitement regarding Roma was solely due to the flying schedule produced by the vagaries of the preferential bidding system. Every month I bid a litany of preferences that a computer program takes into consideration against the wishes of other pilots and then overlays those hopeful desires with the iron shackles of the seniority system. Once the tarot cards have been read, and all the electrons have gotten themselves into alignment, the computer spits out a flying schedule for the month. For some reason, no matter how I rearrange the tea leaves, I seem to fly to Rome in the summer and Madrid in the winter. Frankfurt? Been there only twice in three years. Venice? Once in a blue moon. Athens? As they are fond of saying in my Philadelphia crew base — fuggedaboutit. It's Rome, Rome, and more Rome. Suffice it to say, I know the Colosseum, Pantheon, Trevi Fountain, and the Vatican better than most.



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FIREMAN? SUBMARINE COMMANDER? ANYONE?

I thought about that all day focusing on my snobbish insufferable countenance. But on the flight across the pond, something about the brilliant moonlight illuminating the benign North Atlantic skies caused me to expand my musings to consider my undeniable good fortune. I do have to admit that life has carried me so much further than my modest intelligence and abilities would have forecast. This, of course, is largely due to my fortuitous choice of occupations. When I was growing up I don't recall ever really wanting to be anything other than a pilot. No thoughts of being a fireman or a submarine commander ever entered my thoughts. While I certainly didn't come out of the womb as an aviator, the calling began not too long after I would think. Now, I am in my fifth decade of flying, and the sights and experiences I have enjoyed from the cockpit window have been inspiring and sometimes truly remarkable.

SPRING HAS SPRUNG

I remember my days flight instructing through college mostly spent observing the farms of southern Wisconsin from the right seat of a Cessna 150. Every spring I was amazed by how the land outside my window would turn green seemingly overnight. One day the pastures were brown and yellow showing the ravaging effects of a long, hard winter. And the next? A lush expanse stretching from horizon to horizon as spring had inexorably sprung. My students had ample opportunity to hone their simulated engine failure skills as the deep green terrain beckoned, inviting closer observation.

NARSARSUAQ

Airplanes have taken me to Greenland where I have flown the fjord to Narsarsuaq popularized by Ernest K. Gann in his book *Fate Is the Hunter*, an evocative tale of early aviation that I must have read fifteen times over the years. Gann describes flying down the fjord under a 50-foot overcast sky dodging threatening icebergs. Fortunately, in my time it was bright sunshine, and the icebergs calving off the glaciers and floating down the fjord to sea were only interesting white protuberances viewed from far above in an ocean of variegated aqua green.

THE ALASKAN ALPS

I've been to Alaska several times in small airplanes. For me, the flight is an exercise in measured appreciation. The long haul across the country holds little variety at first. The seemingly endless expanse of the pothole country of North Dakota followed by the massive, and isolated, wheat fields of Saskatchewan and Alberta seem to stretch on ad infinitum. There's really not much to see for the first 20 hours of flying until you get to Fort Nelson just south of the Yukon border. There, the scene changes to a beauty unimaginable. The mountain passes of the very northern Rockies make the trip a visual sensation as your small airplane circumnavigates the very large rocks to Whitehorse, Yukon.

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Alaska itself holds a variety of textures in my memory, flying up the Ruth Glacier to the great bowl of the amphitheater at the base of Denali (formerly Mount McKinley), rolling my wheels on glaciers high up in the Talkeetna Mountains, and ridge soaring over craggy peaks to distant valleys. The mountainous terrain of the Wasilla area just north of Anchorage is stunning. Lakes of the deepest blue nestled by white, snow-capped mountains, I imagined that this is what the Swiss Alps must look like.

THE BACKCOUNTRY

The western Rockies of Idaho are a sight accessible enough for anyone to appreciate. While I have a conventional gear Skywagon, with caution many airplanes can fly the backcountry of Idaho. The terrain below your wings varies considerably from the forested surroundings of Moose Creek in the north to the more barren hills of the Salmon River area. All are a feast for the eyes. And a night in your tent lulled to sleep by the roaring waters of the Salmon is a transformative experience.

DUBLIN AT DAWN

When flying to Europe, each destination has its own unique charms. After a long night aloft my bleary eyes are drawn to the vista ahead. The green patchwork farms on descent into Dublin, the snow-tipped mountainous spine of Europe landing in Zurich, the Montserrat monastery clinging to the side of a particular craggy mount on approach to Barcelona — all are amazing sights.

THE PLACES WINGS CAN TAKE US

These are but a few of the experiences from my own past exemplifying the places that wings can take us. I think every pilot, no matter how many hours noted in their logbook, can fill in their own tales of sights and experiences. That's part of the allure of aviation, I think. For the unfortunate passenger trapped in an aluminum cocoon, the flight is but a means to an end. A pilot, however, has a more transformative perspective. The journey becomes the prize, often more so than the destination. The land and sea passing below and the skies above hold wondrous exalt.

I have been living out of a suitcase for more than 30 years now. As a professional pilot you never really unpack. My duffel bag occupies a spot along the wall next to my bed only waiting until I am off again to wherever in the world a cockpit might take me. If I can continue to make my living with wings right up until my final day, I believe I will have lived an extraordinary existence!

ROME AGAIN!

A week and a half later my dog was again tearing through my neighbor's flower garden and eagerly lapping up her rainwater when she asked, "Where are you going this time?" I thought about it closely. In the intervening eight days I had actually been to Rome twice, logging almost 40 hours and four North Atlantic crossings in the process. While the words were the same, my response this time felt quite different. A much more positive sounding, "Rome again!" And that's pretty darn cool! *EAA*

Jeff Skiles, EAA Lifetime 336120, is an airline pilot who also flies the B-29 *FIFI* for the Commemorative Air Force and owns a Cessna 185. Jeff can be reached at JeffreyBSkiles@gmail.com.