ABOUT MAPS AND MODERNITY

BY

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I'll begin with a confession. I'm a child of the twentieth century – born during the middle of WWII. I started my flying lessons in 1960 and have been at it ever since. I've always thought I understood the planning and execution of a cross-country flight, but things have been changing fast, and now I'm not as sure as I used to be.

This story starts with a trip I wanted to make to Oklahoma City, followed by a second leg to Boulder, Colorado the next day. The first leg was to take place on Sunday.

In the last century, I'd have dropped in at one of the local F.B.Os and bought the charts I needed for the trip. But I can't do that anymore. The merchandise goes out of date so frequently that local merchants only stock what's needed for flights very close to home. If you need more than that, you have to order your charts from some out of town megastore.

So I picked up the phone on Monday, six days prior to my departure date, called my favorite navigational provider, and ordered the low altitude enroute charts I was going to need, along with all the approach plates that covered my intended flight. After I finished reading off the list to the lady on the phone and she had read back my order to confirm that it was correct, I asked her when I could expect delivery of my order.

“Those charts are about to go out of date,” she replied. “We can probably have the new ones to you by next week.” I had just wasted ten minutes of her time and mine. The acquisition of current charts from suppliers of paper products is an iffy proposition in this century, especially when the maps you want are about to expire. Since most of these publications are good only for a month or so, there’s a good chance that the expiration date on any charts you may want to have with you will occur either just when you want to leave or sometime during your trip.

I have been frustrated by this frequent expiration syndrome for quite a few years. The other problem with paper maps is that the distributors insist on shipping via UPS, and they also require a signature from somebody over 21 years old when the charts are delivered. Typically I get an email confirming that the shipment has been made and that delivery should take place within the next 3 working days. Then another email comes from UPS announcing that delivery will be made on such-and-such a date, between the hours of 8 A.M. and 6 P.M. You must have somebody available to sign for the stuff whenever it happens to show up. I don’t see how a company can do business like that in the twenty-first century, expecting folks to hang around the house for up to 10 hours waiting for the puce truck to show up, but that’s the way they do it.

So I started getting the deliveries made to the depot from where the trucks depart. I’d ask the shipper to mark the package, “hold for addressee.” Then I’d wait until I thought the package was probably there. Then I’d drive over and pick it up. This practice worked pretty well except when the maps had not yet arrived or when UPS had closed their freight depot for the

afternoon. Then I'd have to return after 6 P.M. when they held office hours for working folks.

One day a flying student of mine gave me an I-pad as a gratuity after he completed his training. I loaded the device with a service that, for a very small amount of money, provided electronic navigation charts of any variety I might desire. The cost of paper maps for just one of our vacation trips would nearly cover the price of this service for a year. Now I could download the latest navigational publications directly from the web, and I had access to all of the sectional, low altitude enroute, and approach charts my heart desired. If anything expired during my trip, I'd simply find an internet café and download the new publications.

Problem solved, right? Well, not quite. There were a few potential problems with this approach. If I planned to navigate using information from my I-pad, I'd be concerned with the device's battery running low and with any other technical glitch that might occur. I also had to make sure that I'd downloaded all the information needed to complete my flight, including being able to divert to another plan of action in case the original plan didn't exactly work out. Unfortunately, this was not a process that could be accomplished in flight.

Well, to be brutally honest, I did that with the paper charts too. If I planned to overfly a couple of states where I didn't intend to land, I still purchased the approach plates for all the airports to which I might have needed to divert – not too much of an issue, since paper charts were cheap; but I often departed with quite a brain bag full of charts I probably wouldn't be

using. In this case, the pubs for Kansas and the northern part of Texas would be included.

The law requires this thoroughness of preparation. Look it up if you want to. The pilot in command is responsible for having every bit of information he needs to make the flight as planned, and also any additional stuff that a change of plans may require.

So now it's the twenty-first century and I feel like a guy on a trapeze contemplating a transfer to an adjacent trapeze, probably without a net. The prospect of launching myself out on a cross-country flight without the benefit of paper products feels a little like the trapeze artist's prospective leap. It's probably going to work out, but the idea is kind of scary.

In an effort to provide myself with some kind of security blanket, to mix a metaphor, I decided I'd root through a pile of not *too* out-of-date pubs. As a last resort, I could probably make use of these charts, since the odds were that the changes that led to the expiration of these publications did not include anything I was likely to do. (I hope my English teacher never gets a chance to read that last sentence!)

So. Plan "A" was to use the information on my I-pad, which was totally current, to make up my howgozit, a little pen-and-paper flight log I always carry along to guide me through the coming festivities, assuming that everything goes as planned. Plan "B" was to use the information in the magic memory of my panel-mounted HAL 9000 GPS navigator, the brains that tell my autopilot where to go, otherwise known as a slightly obsolescent but still functional Apollo CNX 80.

If that were to go kaput, I'd fall back on the recently out-of-date paper charts that still bore the course lines I drew on them the last time I made this trip.

As this essay is being writ, I am in Colorado, having just completed the first half of this flight. Everything went according to plan until I reached a navigational fix southeast of Denver known as QUAIL intersection. Plan "A" was to go from there to another fix known as LARKS, a point southwest of the Denver Class "B" airspace. From there I could boogie straight up north to Boulder, my ultimate destination.

Here's what happened. I got handed off to Denver approach control from Denver Center, somewhere around QUAIL. The local Denver controller was a lady with a kind voice. I told her about my plan "A" to get around her Class "B," adding that I'd take anything she cared to give me, with extreme gratitude. From previous experience, I knew the controllers in Denver were the exact opposite of the ones in Houston ("Unable your request – What are your intentions?"). They have all of the wonderful qualities of the Boy Scouts of America, including being courteous, kind, helpful, friendly, brave, clean, and reverent.

The kind lady told me to fly directly to Centennial, thence to Front Range, then directly to my destination. The next time a break came in radio traffic, I inquired whether she might perhaps know the identifiers for those airports, and she promptly provided the information. I passed the data to HAL and instructed him to open the pod bay door. He passed the info on to the obedient autopilot, which immediately turned us toward Centennial.

The entire episode ended painlessly with yours truly, his plane, and his wife arriving unscathed at one of the most beautiful little airports in the world. The battery on my I-pad registered 96% when we landed and the paper charts stayed unused on the floor, just aft of the fuel selector.

I guess this means I've entered the digital age. People several generations younger than I take this kind of stuff for granted. But now I feel like the trapeze artist who's just made the successful jump to the other trapeze, grateful that he didn't have to make use of the somewhat questionable net down below. I'm slowly getting up to speed about electronic information sources, and I hope that someday soon I'll be right up there with my younger fellow pilots, using the e-stuff with not a care in my heart. But for this peripatetic septuagenarian, that may not happen until a few more trips generate a bit more confidence in the practices of the twenty-first century.