

Flying Across the Pacific... to Get Down Under

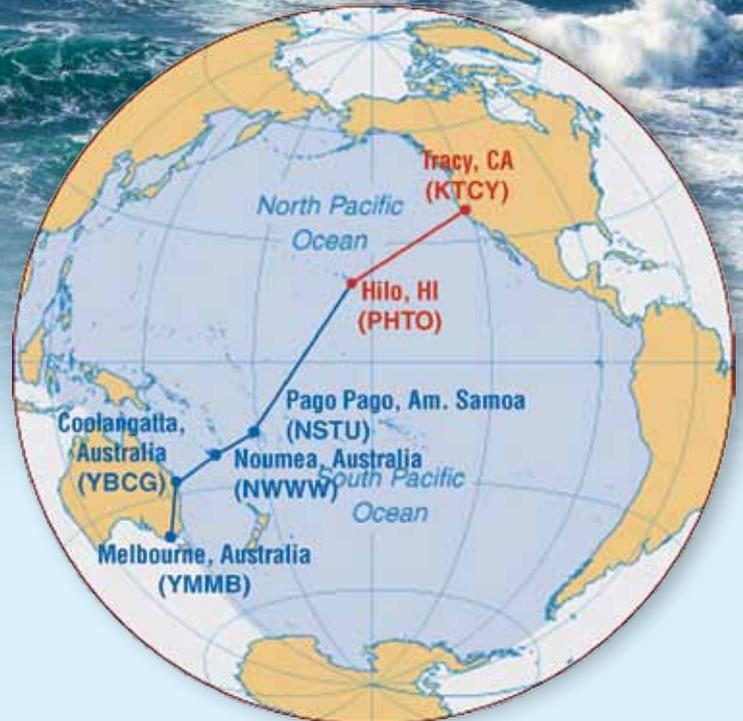
by Luke Lysen

The spot I had marked on my chart showed I had 1,028 miles to go. I was over halfway to Hilo, Hawaii and had another six-plus hours of flying ahead. Heck, I still had 28 miles to go before I could range in the MFD one click and see my destination on the 1,000 nm scale. The ocean was hidden in all directions, as far as the eye could see by a low cloud layer.

Chase Friesen was about 50 miles behind on the same route in another Cirrus SR22. The turbo I was piloting was slowly pulling away from its normally aspirated brother. All systems were a go on the longest flight I had ever taken (a short-lived record, broken on the next leg!). I adjusted myself in my seat, checked the engine gauges, did *another* fuel calculation that would have made Gordon Feingold proud, and set in for the second half of the flight.

Seven hours earlier, Chase and I had departed Tracy, Calif. on our mission to deliver both of these aircraft to Australia. One was going to be dropped off in Coolangata, at Gold Coast Airport, and eventually would make its way to Perth, while the other plane was on its way to Morrabin Field near Melbourne. The total flight would be 7,192 nm and take almost 52 flight hours, while using 738 gallons of fuel per plane.

The flight required some significant refitting of the airplane and a number of extra items for safety. I needed tanks that would allow an additional 150 gallons of fuel to be brought along, so the right front seat and both back seats were removed to make room. An overweight permit was issued from the FAA that allowed the airplanes to be flown at 1,000 pounds over normal max gross weight. An



HF radio was installed for making contact with ATC out over the Pacific. Including the PLB, life vest, strobe light, knife, raft, water, rations, dry bag, pee-bags, iPod, and books ... there was barely any room left for a pilot!

I was excited for this adventure. I had flown airplanes to Europe over the Atlantic, to South America and Africa, but I had yet to fly over the Pacific. This would also be the first time using auxiliary tanks. We were as ready as we



The two SR22s in the pre-dawn hours before their cross-Pacific tour began.



Chase and Luke (right) in their gear and ready for the long haul to Hilo, Hawaii, their first stop.

could be with the proper gear, the route mapped out, and a forecast of good weather; but the night before the flight I had “that” feeling. The one I had as a kid when I climbed up the ladder to the high dive board for the first time. Gulp. No turning back and walking down the ladder now. We were going to make a long jump out over the water, but unlike when I was a kid on the high dive, I hoped this experience would not result in a splash.

Like all things in flying, the day before the flight took much longer than anticipated. It was our job to test the tanks and HF radios while making sure we understood how to operate them. It sounded simple enough, we figured it would take about two hours and then we’d spend the rest of the day just taking our time getting ready. Ah, the folly of youth.

First, understand that the G3 and G2 Cirrus aircraft operate differently with auxiliary tanks. The G3 has a ferry nipple in the fuel line that the auxiliary tank plugs into. The pilot operates the fuel like normal and when the wing tanks get low you open the auxiliary tanks and refill the wing tanks. On the G2, the fuel line needed to be cut and a T-connection added to allow the auxiliary tanks to supply fuel directly to the engine. Needless to say, this is a bit more work. Adding to the fun, the auxiliary tanks don’t have fuel gauges on them so there’s no way to know how much fuel was left in them. I had only the analog fuel gauges down by the fuel selector to tell how much

fuel I had added. We all know how accurate those things can be. The fuel flow rate on the engine allowed me to know how much total fuel I had used and a simple math problem would let me know how much was remaining. How would I know if I overfilled the wing tanks and it vented out? How would I know how much fuel was being returned? I wouldn’t.

The HF testing was simple; they basically don’t work over land. Well, they don’t work if you’re trying to contact a receiver that is positioned to receive signals coming from over the ocean. I had to rely on the expertise of my mechanics to make sure it would work.

At 11:00 p.m., we had finished filing our flight plans, satisfied our curiosity about the weather, and laid down for a restless night’s sleep. We were up at 4:00 a.m. and at the airport by 4:45. We pre-flighted and took off. The climb out was 500 feet per minute for the first 2,500 feet ... then I slowed it down to 200 feet per minute and inched the rest of the way up to 6,000 feet.

Chase was in the lead and about 45 minutes into the flight, he discovered that he had a leak in one of his fuel hoses going to the selector valves. We had to turn around and live to fly another day. By the time we landed after burning off some fuel and resolving the problem, it was too late to depart for Hilo. So it was off to the San Francisco Giants game for us.



Auxiliary fuel tanks inside the aircraft.

The next day we did the same departure but this time without incident. The departure has you turn west over the San Francisco Bay and directly over SFO. At this time of the morning the entire bay was covered in a blanket of fog with the spires of the Golden Gate Bridge breaking through – a beautiful sendoff. Shortly after that, we were over the water but still communicating on the normal VHF frequencies. After a few hundred miles, we flew out of VHF range and they wanted to talk to us on the HF. You are required to report your waypoints in standard non-radar format as well as make a top of hour ops normal call.

As we were at 6,000 and 8,000 feet and well below any airliners, we were given direct to Hilo ... only it wasn’t a direct clearance like I’ve ever been given before. It was





Luke inside with the fuel tanks, raft and other required survival equipment.

direct to every 10 degrees of longitude with the corresponding latitude for a direct flight. The read-back took a while but it was worth it as it saved over an hour from flying the airway.

The worldwide air-to-air frequency is 123.45 and talking with the other pilots is one of the perks of the trip. It's a great way to pass the time, and fortunately there were two of us to keep ourselves company. At one point, I was talking with Chase when a United pilot chimed in,

"Let me understand this, you're both taking single engine planes across the Pacific? How much fuel are you carrying?"

"You got it," I said. "We departed with 231 gallons and 242 gallons. It should get us to Hawaii."

"Hell, I took off out of Shanghai this morning with four engines and 230,000 pounds of fuel and felt funny about it. You guys are nuts," he said.

And so it went. We were running about 60/40 in our unofficial poll. Sixty percent of the pilots said they thought it was cool, forty percent thought we were out of our minds. I had to laugh at that ... but it was the kind of laugh that ends with a gulp.

The cockpit is a bit cramped and stretching out was difficult. Using a pee bag is part yoga move, part pulled muscle, part wet wipe. There are other physiological things to worry about too. Thanks to the shrewd advice of Dr. Erickson about taking a few aspirin a couple of days prior to the trip to reduce the chance of blood clots.

Thirteen hours is a long time in an airplane but it was amazing how fast the time passed. The fuel at destination being a large red number on the MFD was a constant and disconcerting reminder of just how long I'd be out there. The frequency that I was doing fuel calculations was a bit OCD but I think it was justified.



The MFD showed the fuel (in red) at -110 gallons remaining.

Before you do a trip like this you read up all you can on ditching. There are some great stories packed with wisdom (Bing or Google for "Ray Clamback" if you're bored). Before you go you think, "If I go down, I'll ditch close to a boat." I saw one boat on the whole 13-hour leg. You think, "If I go down, they'll scramble some jets for me." Then you land in Pago Pago and realize the jets would be more like a canoe.

The flying was mostly uneventful. Every hour I made my top of the hour call to San Francisco AirInc to let them know I was okay and to update my position. This way they would know a bit more about where in the 64-million square miles of water that is the Pacific Ocean to look for me if something went wrong. You try not to think about it.

As a side note, the farther away from land the better the HF gets. At 1,000 nm out to sea it sounded like they were



Getting closer to the ground at Hilo, Hawaii – a great feeling.

sitting next to me, but it was just me and Winslow, my friend the life raft.

As the time ticked away and the airplane became lighter, the rations and water for the leg were digested and I started to get a bit antsy. Then, when I heard the Hawaiian controllers and saw the Hawaiian Islands, I breathed a sigh of relief: just under two hours to go.

Landing on terra firma after a trip like that is a huge relief. Getting my fiftieth state in the Cirrus was a nice cherry on top as well. The crew in Hilo was great – they filled up the plane with 100 green (I guess the EPA doesn't get out to Hilo often) and helped sort out a hotel. Finally, they pointed us in the right direction for proper refreshment.

There will be export customs, GPS database downloads, flight planning, and weather to do tomorrow; but for now we would toast the success of our safe crossing to Hilo with fruity drinks with umbrellas. One leg down and three more – Pago Pago, New Caledonia, and Australia – to go. 



The view out the hotel window in Hilo.

Editor's Note: Read about Luke's experiences flying to the next destination in the upcoming two issues of Cirrus Pilot.

About the Author: Luke Lysen has over 6,000 hours flying and teaching in Cirrus aircraft and is a CFI, CFII, MEI and Platinum CSIP. He has flown to Europe, South America, Africa and all over North America, and recently over the Pacific to Australia. Luke would like to remind you to fly somewhere fun, like Alaska.

AIRCRAFT SALES & PURCHASE KNOWLEDGE

can save you time, dollars & peace of mind.

TRUSTED • EXPERIENCED • DEPENDABLE



PAC
PACIFIC AIR CENTER

480.363.0058

Brian Mackin
Aircraft Sales Director
brian@pacaircenter.com

Specializing in Pre-owned Cirrus
and new Cessna Aircraft

SEE OUR QUALITY PRE-OWNED INVENTORY AT
PACAIRCENTER.COM