

# Across the Country in the DA20

## Part 4

*By Gwen Graham*

**Dear Friends,**

The plan had been good...too bad the weather didn't cooperate as advertised.

I got to the Rapid City airport and then waited...and waited...and waited. The clouds hung low although the visibility was 10 miles. I had written the phone numbers of the Gillette, Sheridan and Billings ASOS's on my kneeboard since I'd been calling them so often. I paced the FBO, then called all the ASOSs again; I looked out the windows, paced a bit more, made my phone calls again. That was the pattern for about three hours.

Finally, at least 3000 foot ceilings at enroute locations, a little better at Billings. I had already preflighted so I slung the two bags I had been carrying around the country into the plane, the line guys at RAP pulled it out of the hangar and we left.

Ellsworth Approach is part of the AFB located just north of the airport. As I was on a downwind departure at RAP, I asked for frequency change and called them for flight following. As the plane and I rose to meet the clouds, there wasn't enough room between them and the Black Hills for me to feel comfortable going across them so I decided to follow the highway north around the Hills. I past the Sturgis Airport (for you motorcycle types reading this) and Spearfish at the north. I had barely passed Sturgis when Ellsworth dropped me from flight following in a garbled transmission. I was too low for them to see and apparently for anyone else to see either.

So I motored on. I started my turn down the west side of the Black Hills but the hills on my right and my magenta line of the GPS started sending out mixed signals to me. About five minutes into following the road I had planned to do (around those hills), I turned and started into the pass on the north. Another five or so minutes and I almost turned back again.

I had clouds above me (I was somewhere around 6500 most of the time, although my altitude varied with the clouds and terrain) and I guess I was getting confused because of unfamiliar territory and not having the "pilot's" eye view from above that I'm used to in order to sort out where I needed/wanted/should be.

About half way through the valley, I saw a green line appear diagonally across the top of the map. An airport graphic was on its border. I picked up the map again and suddenly realized that the green line was the edge of the MOA. That's why I didn't want to go that direction! Duh. I should have stuck to my plan and plotted more intermediate waypoints into the GPS. I altered course slightly to the south to parallel the MOA border.

The cloud layer above me wasn't too thick, maybe 500 feet. Occasionally, the breaks in the layer allowed me to see the thunderstorm heads building. Just like Flight Service said. Great. It accounted for the few burples and thankfully all seemed to stay south of my course near the Big Horn Mountains.

I hadn't been able to reach any Flight Service Station or Flight Watch for much of the trip in the mountains because I was too low. But I wanted, no needed, to make sure the weather hadn't changed drastically at Billings. Since there was no way to contact anyone, I did the next best thing under the circumstances. I fished my cell phone out of my pocket, turned it on and since I had those ASOS phone numbers right on my clipboard, I called Billings from the air and listened. The ceilings were about 4000 overcast (AGL) so it would work.

I finally came into the valley where the city of Billings sits...but then I couldn't spot the airport. Quick,

recheck the maps and GPS; compare it to the ground. I was already talking with them but I was supposed to be getting lined up on a right downwind for the east runway.

I thought that Billings Airport set on top a bluff because I remember coming off it early one morning on the way to OSH. The group of us left very early as the sun lit up the eastern horizon and the runway fell away to the green trees, river and city below.

So where was it now. I widened my search and yep, there it was. On that same bluff!

It was an overnight for us -- KB got a hangar and I got a shuttle to Boothill Inn at the base of that bluff.

## Trying to Get to Missoula

I have had Missoula (KMSO) as a target for the last several days. I guess it was because it signaled I had made it through the Rockies. But my goal was being stymied by this rotten weather.

While in Brookings, there had been the tornadoes to the west; rough weather filled in behind me as I left the Wisconsin/Chicago area, while in Rapid City, general rotten weather was all over and now thunderstorm build-up was marring the skies of the Rockies. Never, in all my cross country flying, have I had such a rough time with weather.

I was up at 5am and on the phone with FSS. Looking out the window, I had hopes. Today, Thursday, was the day. I would conquer the Rockies and be so much closer to home.

Billings looked great. Nearly CAVU skies. Based on the low that was moving from the southwest, I figured I would go up to Great Falls then back down into Missoula. Weather got a tad lower as I got closer to Missoula but it sounded reasonable.

I got to the airport and as I was going through a last look at a big chart the FBO had on a table, one of the corporate pilots asked where I was going.

"Missoula today, eventually Salem, Oregon," I said.

We chatted about my route and he suggested going through Bozeman and Butte as a more direct route. I didn't like the altitudes represented on the chart, especially with the ceilings being lower than I'd like. He also added that the mountain range that I'd pass through just west of Great Falls had weather that was more unpredictable than the route he suggested. I asked him how long he'd been flying around here. He said since the late 60s. Okay, so maybe I'd follow the local knowledge. I certainly don't know the "habits" around here.

He printed out some weather for me for the areas we discussed. They looked at least as good as the Great Falls weather, so I decided to head to Bozeman.

My plan was to go IFR, you know, "I follow roads" for the lowest crossings even into Bozeman. Butte still had me concerned. Their altitudes were quite high. Maybe I'd land at Bozeman and refresh my weather.

I left Billings and climbed out, at least to 6500. It was all I could get, again, due to the clouds above me. That put me about 3000 above the lowest terrain. I ended up paralleling my intended course as there was low fog and clouds over the interstate I had wanted to follow. Staying a bit north I had plenty of altitude (as "plenty" as I could get under the circumstances" as well as many options for emergency landings, if needed.)

This was my first taste of being "sandwiched."

I had headwinds plus my circuitous route took me a bit longer than a direct flight would have. I landed at

Bozeman and taxiied up to Yellowstone Jet Center. I just needed weather and a nature break. Even though I didn't buy any fuel, they were gracious and helpful. If I get a chance to go back, I'll try to make it a fuel stop next time.

I updated my weather and reviewed the charts. Definitely had some high terrain to cover but, again, following the roads looked like the best plan. There was no way I could go direct anyway. Clouds would see to that.

I also changed my route. Instead of Butte -- that terrain was just too high for me to be comfortable -- I decided to go northwest to Helena then track west through the highest part of the trip to Missoula.

I departed and followed the highway out of the town as well as a radial off the VOR at the field to ensure I was heading between the "right" set of foothills. I spotted the huge lake that was east of Helena and tuned in to ATIS then the tower. I was going to call them for transition approval, then realized I was above their airspace. I monitored instead.

On the west side of Helena the road v-ed. I took the southerly route into the most menacing looking set of mountains I've ever flown across, especially at 6500 feet. I strayed up to and around 7000 as I could to put more air between me and some of those peaks.

I wasn't more than 15 miles from Helena when I almost turned around. I had told myself that if things didn't look reasonable, I would do a 180 and land at Helena and reassess my options. But after a few seconds of indecision, I determined that I had enough room between clouds and peaks, that I could do it safely and legally.

Thank goodness for the terrain feature of the Garmin 430. One click to the right of the small knob brought the mountains into yellow and a bit of red perspective. Obviously, I could see everything in front of me but when the GPS started sounding terrain alarms, I decided I needed the extra data input of what it was seeing. I had to make course adjustments, go up in altitude mostly as the clouds allowed and got as familiar of a view of a couple peaks as I ever want.

That was the first set.

I had cut the corner on the road I was following originally to avoid some lower clouds then picked up the larger interstate in the distance. So far so good. I knew right where I was, even an airport up ahead.

I noticed a particularly ugly looking build-up that looked like it was at my altitude ahead so I powered back a bit and started descending. I figured if I was going to get bounced due to the instability of the air, this one would do it. It looked like a baby thunderstorm in the making.

I looked back out on the view -- Montana is quite a pretty state -- the various peaks and valleys and rivers. Some peaks even had bits of snow on them. Then I noticed a movement coming out of one of the valleys on my right. Probably another bird. I had seen a few fly by me.

Definitely not a bird. It was a plane. Probably about 2000 feet below me. Was he going to climb? Was he going to land at that unpaved strip a few miles ahead? He hugged the mountains and didn't seem to be changing altitude. Yep, he's going to land at that airport. So that would mean that he'd probably turn in front of me to get to the other side of the interstate. I tuned to the CTAF for the airport. Maybe I'd hear him report.

I powered back as it seemed like I was going faster than him. Definitely a high wing; he didn't even know I was behind and above him. I kept him in sight, adjusting my power to his. He flew past the airport. Then I noticed the powerlines along the foothills. Perhaps he was inspecting them.

I was approaching a bend in the road. I looked back at the plane. Where did he go? I dipped the wing but he wasn't there. Ahead, there was a jagged ridge that the road curved around to the south. The clouds had lifted a bit, so I took the opportunity to climb and turn south, over that ridge and away from the last known

position of the aircraft. At least it would put additional distance between us.

I checked my map again and compared it to the GPS. I was within 40 miles. The mountains loomed and the road disappeared within them. Clouds came back down again. I descended back to my trusty 6500.

The last set of mountains between me and Missoula lay ahead. They were the highest. The road snaked around them. I was at the lowest altitude to date compared to those mountains.

Only a burple or two, thankfully. Winds aloft were fairly light otherwise there could have been much more turbulence and potential risk.

I flew the valley, over the road and between the mountain peaks east of Missoula. I picked up ATIS -- calm winds and a 4100 measured overcast ceiling. I flipped to tower and started listening about 30 miles out. Some of it was clear, other transmissions were not. There were several aircraft in and around the airport, even a jump plane high above the overcast about to call jumpers away. (I learned later they were probably smoke jumpers practicing because I saw them come through the cloud layer and land in the mountains to the east of the airport.)

The tower and other aircraft were calling unfamiliar local names. I called tower. I needed to let them know I was coming from the east. But the tower couldn't read me. I was still behind a couple mountains that wouldn't allow clear transmission.

I rounded the pentultimate bend in the road. I could hear tower perfectly and called again. He gave me a straight-in for runway 29. One last 3500 ridge stood between me and flat land of Missoula. I had descended to 5300 and stayed there as I crossed the ridge. It was about a thousand feet above pattern altitude.

I landed, finally, at Missoula. It was as close to marginal VFR flying as I ever want to get. Especially in the mountains. Not something I would recommend and the only time I've ever done it.

Tomorrow is Friday and I hope to go from Missoula to Lewiston to Walla Walla or Pendleton then home. Either going through Central Oregon or the Gorge will depend on weather. But I'm getting closer. It will be eight days of flying (albeit a couple days on the ground for weather) plus the two days getting to London and getting ready for the flight back.

I hope there's only one installment left in this series.