

Sometimes You Gotta Overcome Those *Bêtes Noires* and Go for It!



by Kurt Lightfoot

To me, past issues of *Pilot Getaways* are great sources of inspiration. The Winter 2000/2001 issue inspired and focused my imagination on Monument Valley for a cross-country flight from San Diego. From author Greg Illes' article, I learned Utah's Monument Valley is a beautiful and mystical place where a pilot can fly among nature's red-rock monuments. As Illes wrote: "From any direction, the first glimpse of Monument Valley is almost unbelievable...The towering rock columns jut against the skyline at a seemingly impossible angularity and scale. As the distant spires grow to massive proportions, the sense of the three-dimensionality of flight becomes overpowering."

After 12 months of inspiration, why hadn't I made the trip? More than the red dirt airstrip at Goulding's Lodge in Monument Valley intimidated me. That thing about *three-dimensionality of flight overpowering a pilot* couldn't be any worse than my IFR training, could it? Perhaps it was *Pilot Getaways'* caution about the airstrip's three-dimensionality: "800-ft. cliff adjacent south and west. No go-around from short final." No go-around from short final? The first time I took my wife up, I had to go around twice before I landed

the 172 I'd been trained in! Could I land a Bonanza on a narrow red dirt ribbon while racing toward those cliffs at 100 mph, without embarrassment...or worse? Those cliffs are 800-ft. walls of Utah's finest red rock. I started imagining executing go-arounds from base. I kept putting off the trip.



In November 2001, I finally silenced my *bêtes noires*—those nagging fears that keep us from our dreams—and departed for Monument Valley. I landed at Grand Canyon (GCN) for gas and a current Grand Canyon VFR Aeronautical Chart. San Diego to the Grand Canyon is interesting, but I'd been to GCN before, so the new adventure hadn't yet begun.

I departed Grand Canyon toward Monument Valley via Tuba City VOR and the southeastern edge of Lake Powell. Suddenly, I felt I had been ejected from civilization and into bush pilots' world. I hadn't expected the exhilarating feeling of adventure mixed with awe. The red rock world is indeed unspeakably beautiful, specially

Left: The hogan in the foreground was built by Navajos; the monuments in the background were formed by Mother Nature.
Right: The author's Bonanza at Goulding's.



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created, and isolated. Somehow the act of flight also makes it personal. It's the feeling conveyed in the 1910 poster (right) of a pilot celebrating flight over Nice, France from the book *Looping the Loop: Posters of Flight*.



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Flying solo above this beauty,

I lived one of the passages from William Langewiesche's *Inside The Sky*: "I yearned for ordinary human company, while at the same time silently exulting the extremes of my solitude." Perhaps you've experienced similar moments, when you give thanks for the luck and grace that brought you the privilege of this experience. Then I entered Monument Valley.

Controlling the Bonanza competed against experiencing the awe of this incredible place and snapping photographs. Tricky business, this



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solo aerial photography in a low wing plane. You have to setup the shot for a turn so you can drop the wing to get the tip tank out of the photo. Instead of your instructor's old saw, "aviate, navigate, communicate," it's aviate, navigate, compose, photograph, communicate, repeat.

All that remained was quelling the remaining *bête noire*: Goulding's red dirt airstrip. Out of a sheer desire to match the scenery, I executed a picture perfect landing. I stepped out of the Bonanza and into the reality of the vision I'd held for a year. An ethereal rainbow stretched from the red earth into the sky, as if to congratulate me. What a sight!

My visit to Monument Valley started in the pages of a magazine. Nothing could compare, however, to the feeling of conquering my fears and flying there myself.

Best regards from one pilot who got away.

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