

Book Excerpt:

Lost in Oscar Hotel | There is *Something* in the Air

By Gordon Murray, Photographs by Gary Harwood | Mirabilis Books, 2013.

*In **Lost in Oscar Hotel**, J3 pilot and author Gordon Murray chronicles: “The first, longest, slowest and most peculiar flight to Wright Brothers Airport ever made in an antique airplane.” The flight was a real world record—albeit a strange one. Yet, it was won alongside an accounting of odd discoveries; beautifully captured images by master photographer, Gary Harwood; and the spinning of flying tales.*

***Lost in Oscar Hotel** reveals a hidden universe of people involved in that other kind of flying and another kind of life, and distills the stories and pictures to document an existence in a world that stands apart from what the public commonly knows. It is a story of love, and the nearly forgotten secret that airplanes were the original Internet—invented to bring people in this world together.*

There’s an old saying in flying that you are, “Good enough—or, you’re no damn good.” In spring 2012, I flew a 1946 Piper J3 Cub from Kent, Ohio to Dayton Wright Brothers Airport—the place where aviation began. On my wing for the entire route, and flying in a second Piper Cub, was Ron Siwik—a man who just a few years earlier, piloted a Beechcraft Bonanza solo around the world. This was going to be a special flight, in a special year.

Only 159 nautical miles separate Kent from Dayton. In a car, it would take about four hours to get there via Interstate 71. But Ron and I were not planning to fly direct, nor did we ever consider driving. Before we’d think about sailing over the Huffman Prairie where the Wrights once catapulted their flying machines into the air, we were first going to land in every one of Ohio’s counties.

No one had ever done it. Probably for a good reason—Ohio has 88 counties, spread neatly across nearly 41,860 square miles. As far as I was concerned, any excuse to fly was a good one. And this was the *best* excuse to fly that I was ever going to have. With a wink, I christened the adventure, “The first, longest, slowest and most peculiar flight to Wright Brothers Airport ever made in an antique airplane.”



WITH THE SUN RISING BEHIND THEM, Joe Murray, flying N5MB, and Ron Siwik flying NC6949H prepare to depart runway 27 at Portage County Airport on a historic flight to honor the 75th Anniversary of the Piper J3 Cub in Ohio, the Birthplace of Aviation. (Photo: Gary Harwood)



PILOTS JOE MURRAY AND RON SIWIK pause on the ramp at Wright Brothers Airport in Dayton Ohio to watch a replica of the Wright B Flyer land on Runway 2. (Photo: Sam Verbulecz)

Though not as magnificent as Orville and Wilbur inventing the *Flyer*, nor quite as extraordinary as Ron's solo circumnavigation – the flight is unique in the history of Ohio aviation. It was made all the more noteworthy because 2012 marked the 75th Anniversary of the venerable Piper J3 Cub, an airplane that taught almost a half-million World War II veterans to fly.

A few years earlier, I had partnered with Tom Mindzak and my brother Mike to purchase the Cub. It was a

dream come true, and we began hangaring it at Portage County Airport. It was here that I met Ron. He told me once, that not long after his 70th birthday, he walked into the office of his medical practice, looked briefly around and said to himself, "I'm done." The next day, he came out to the airport and has been here ever since.

A former flight surgeon during the Vietnam War, Ron's not one to shy away from challenge, or miss an opportunity to make a difference. When he heard about my plan, he quickly announced, "I'm coming with you." I checked my list of eager volunteer pilots who wanted to spend several weeks to fly a couple thousand miles in a two-seat trainer, yet, never leave Ohio. Not finding anyone finer, I figured Ron should have the job. "OK, you are in," I said.

Ron has flown and instructed in everything from Stearmans to floatplanes, and he does it better than anyone I know. I barely had 100 hours in the J3 and was itching to learn more. I had planned to go it alone. I sensed there would probably be a few who would call me, "the nutty professor." Instead, radio calls I would make on the Unicom before landing at airfields over all of Ohio would now include the words, "flight of two." I was delighted.

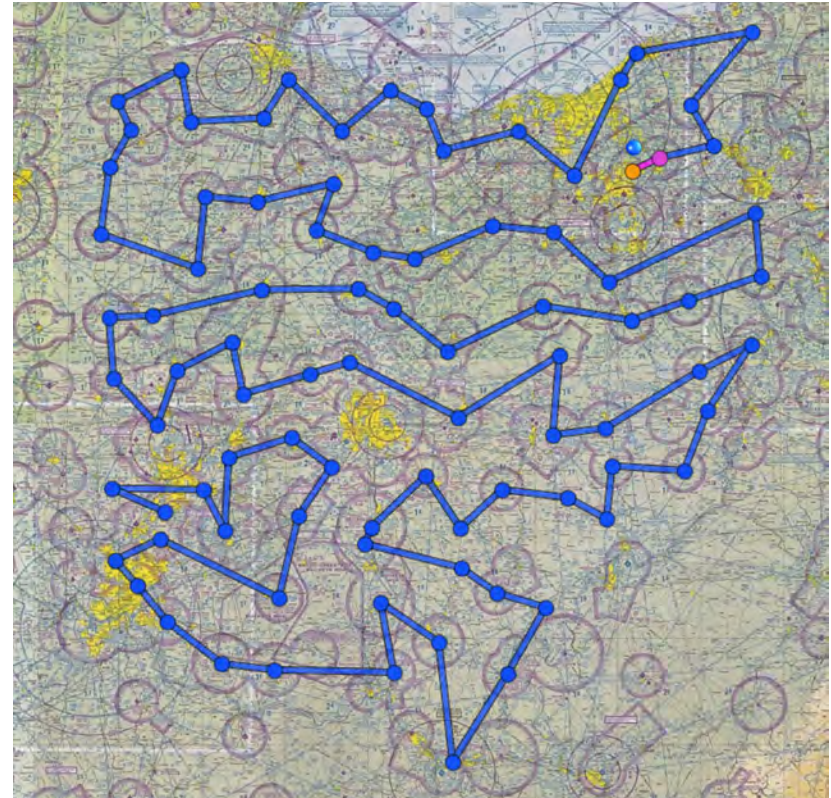
I plotted what would appear to be the most meandering and unintentional course imaginable. Even when our plans to fly to Dayton were certain, I reckoned most sane people would think the two little yellow airplanes crisscrossing in the sky above must surely be, “lost in Ohio.” But, pilots sometimes talk funny, and it wasn’t long before Ohio’s abbreviation, “O-H,” became “Oscar Hotel.” Thus, the flight took on the moniker, “Lost in Oscar Hotel.”

So, instead of flying the short and straight line to Wright Brothers Airport, we first took off in the *opposite* direction, on a course to Ohio’s most northeastern county, Ashtabula. We would miss the strong thunderstorms that were blanketing the state to the south and our journey’s end.

For a couple of days we would *zig* west along Ohio’s north coast with Lake Erie on the right wing. Upon reaching the Ohio-Indiana state line, we would *zag* back east again for a few more days with Lake Erie on the left, until we got to Pennsylvania.

From there, we’d turn the airplanes around and fly west again—covering approximately 200 miles in a day and averaging 19 takeoffs and landings, while slowly progressing south toward our final destination.

We would repeat this several more times in as many days. Early on, I guessed if the weather was favorable after nearly 20 hours aloft, and having just flown to all of



LOST IN OSCAR HOTEL. The route of flight from Andrew W. Paton Airport in Kent to Dayton Wright Brothers Airport with landings in all of Ohio’s 88 counties. The pilots flew for nine days covering 1,809 miles in 36 hours and 6 minutes.

the counties along Ohio's border with Kentucky and West Virginia, we would catch our first glimpse of Dayton from the south in Warren County.

What I didn't know when I planned this caper during an attack of cabin fever back in November, was how much more I would come to see and understand about flying, nor how the flight could possibly have been any better than the one I first imagined.

We arrived in Warren County with 79 consecutive county landings behind us. We would still need to fly a crooked path around the compass to land in nine more — only 260 more miles to go. Without a fresh tailwind, and with looming thunderstorms in the forecast, it would mean another day of flying in the underpowered Cubs where, for the past week, we had spent all of our daylight hours.

Before the sun set, we'd aim the J3s west toward a landing at Morningstar North, a small grass airfield in Preble County to spend the night. The next day, when we departed Morningstar, we would take up a final heading of southeast, and in 16 miles, land where aviation was born. The journey would be complete.

I knew when I hand-propped the J3's engine on the very first day, that this flight was a once-in-a-lifetime thing. I

like to think the old flying machines that served us so well for 176 takeoffs and landings, and sailed us so slowly and spectacularly through the thermals above Ohio's cities, fields and farms, will still be flying on their 100th anniversary in 2037.

There are only two seats in a Piper Cub, but people from all over the state and the Internet flew with us. When



AS HIS GRANDAUGHTER WATCHES, David Hirt adds his name to the aircraft fabric that the pilots carried with them on the flight to each county. They joined others at Carl Keller Airport to welcome the Piper Cubs to Port Clinton on Ohio's north coast.

word got out about what we were doing; nearly 50,000 people began tracking the flight online. We were stunned.

A smartphone on my front seat was dutifully sending speed, altitude, latitude and longitude to a small, live map on the Web that slowly traced our path over Ohio. It was like a powerful magnet, and it seemed to draw people out to Ohio's airports and interest them in flight like they hadn't been for a long while – maybe ever?

Some people didn't know fabric-covered airplanes could still fly with wooden propellers in these modern times, or navigate without 21st century avionics and instruments. Others weren't sure there was a county airport so close to where they lived, until they read about us in their hometown newspaper.

I overheard Ron tell a local reporter who met us at the airport, "I've been flying 45 years, and aviation is one of the few things in life that's not over-rated." He said, "It always exceeds expectations. Just when you've thought that you'd done something that was really fun, the next thing is even more fun" – this, coming from the man who flew an airplane around the planet Earth.

Considering all of the people who came out to greet us, no one ever asked why we chose to fly the most indirect

route to Dayton that one could imagine. Everyone "got" the flight – understood it immediately, and shared in the joy. Like children in a pick-up game of kickball or tag, all that mattered was the game, the time together and an opportunity to participate.

On the ground, people we had only just met generously provided fuel, a meal, a ride, and a place to stay overnight. They made ice cream and asked us to sign autographs. They took photos of themselves with us and the airplanes. Kids asked to sit in the cockpit before we took off for the next stop on the route.

Pilots in other airplanes would appear out of thin air, asking to join us for a few legs. They would leave with a handshake or a dip of the wing; wishing us a safe flight back home. Our conversations with complete strangers didn't last long, because they quickly became new friends.

We met all of the airport dogs and cats; had a few visits with the Ohio State Highway Patrol; brakes failed, but mechanics succeeded; Ron went hitchhiking; a new controller discovered that flight is possible without transponders; and Neil Armstrong had to forgive us for a landing in Wapakoneta. We raced a tractor downwind at Checkpoint Charlie and shook hands with a dead man; went looking for a beach and found a DC-3; we hid for a

few hours at Bud's, and now know the secret to making Ohio's best pie.

For nine days, from sunrise to sunset, we flew. We spent 36 hours and six minutes in the air, tracing a 1,809 nautical mile route over Ohio's countryside at a thousand feet above the treetops. Sometimes, we would fly low and slow enough to shout a greeting to farmers waving at us from the fields below.

For a short while Ron and I, along with photographer Gary Harwood, brother Mike, old Tom and a handful of family, friends and students, all unwittingly became Ohio's good will ambassadors of flight—honoring the legacy of the Wrights in the Birthplace of Aviation.

We were good enough.



THIS BARN AT GRAHAM FLYING FIELD in Coshocton County has an Ohio automobile license plate painted on it from the Centennial of Flight in 2003. Across the street is Graham Flying Field's 3,000 ft. grass runway. (Photo: Laura Fong)

*Online preorders of hardcover and Kindle editions of
Lost in Oscar Hotel: There is Something in the Air
will help to support student scholarships. See www.lostinoscarhotel.com*