



REMINISCING WITH BIG NICK

MY 35-YEAR LOVE AFFAIR (PART II)

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All Photos Courtesy the Nick Rezich Collection

My favorite story about the Cadet is a chapter in aviation history. This particular flight didn't receive the publicity it warranted, but believe-you-me, it was historic.

It was February 16, 1941, when Dr. Cecil Smith and fellow dentist Dr. Joseph Lorenz of Burlingame, California, took off from Mills Field, San Francisco, California, in a Continental 75 powered Culver Cadet called the *Twerp*. They were headed for a tour of Central and South America. Smith had owned six different lightplanes before buying the Cadet. He bought the *Twerp* for this trip because of its performance and range. The only optional equipment bought with the airplane was the 15-gallon auxiliary tank, which gave them a cruise range of 1,051 miles, a Kollsman sensitive altimeter, rate of climb, and a turn and bank indicator.

Their cargo consisted of 12

pounds of maps and papers, emergency tools, tire pump, tie-down ropes, floatation gear, machete, gun and ammunition, 2 gallons of water, 15 pounds of beef jerky, plus personal luggage consisting of toilet articles, socks, underwear, and cameras . . . yes! All that went into the Cadet! Oh yes! I almost forgot—Smith and Lorenz wore glasses, so a spare pair of each was also carried.

Now get out your world atlas and ruler and follow this little jewel. The first stop out of Frisco was San Diego for their clearance. The *Twerp* was cleared the same as a steamship—Port Bill of Health, Cargo Manifest, etc. The passenger list was eliminated by signing Lorenz on as a crewmember. The next stop was Hermosillo, Mexico, where they spent the night.

The next morning it was on to Mazatlan. They covered that leg of 590 miles on 17 gallons of gas.

Guadalajara was made by nightfall. They spent two days each in Mexico City, Mexico, Guatemala City, Guatemala, and Managua, Nicaragua, and then flew on to David, Panama. The next morning after landing there, they phoned (at 7:00 a.m.) for permission to enter the Panama Canal Zone. They received instructions on how to enter the zone and were given an explicit route to fly into France Field.

It was good that they flew as instructed, as they were met at the channel by interceptors and guided into France Field, landing at 9:30 a.m. There they were checked thoroughly and granted permission to fly without cameras over any part of the Zone. They left Panama at 2:00 p.m. and landed at Turbo, Columbia, at 4:30 p.m.

At Turbo they landed at an emergency field washed by the spray of the Gulf of Uraba and protected



Big Nick poses in front of his Culver, and a friend does likewise with his Monocoupe 90A in the background. All the photos are from the 1940-44 era.

from high tides by a dike. The only building was a mission where they spent the night as guests of the Catholic fathers. Supper that night consisted of two cans of sausages, crackers, and beer. They did not get much sleep because half the night was spent checking the tiedowns on the *Twerp* because a raging storm was in progress.

The rain belt extended the length of the continent, and Smith and Lorenz's concern was to get to Cali, Columbia, flying over 300 miles of the worst jungle in South America where there was, at least, a hangar for the *Twerp*. With no weather report from Cali, they took off at 10:00 a.m. the next morning, following the Atrato River until it disappeared below the cloud layer they were forced to overfly to clear the fast-rising Andes ahead of them. After five hours they broke out and followed a railroad to a narrow notch in the Andes to Cali.

The next leg was to Quito, Ecuador. When the *Twerp* left Cali, the pilots had been warned not to land outside of military fields. To enforce the warning, the Cadet was escorted to the border.

At Quito the airport was fogged in, so they flew on . . . IFR, VFR, IFR, VFR . . . with compass and altimeter as their only means of successfully threading their way through narrow canyons in a blinding rain. They pushed on for 500 miles and landed at Guayaquil where the *Twerp* took on 18 gallons of gas—not bad gas mileage for 500 miles.

It was still raining, and it appeared that another big storm would hit Guayaquil's airport, so

the Cadet roared off for Talara, Peru, where they spent the night. On February 27 the dentists took off for Lima. This leg was covered in five-and-a-half hours; then it was on to Arica, Chile, a 690-mile leg flown in five hours and 45 minutes. After 11.25 hours of Culver time that day, a night's rest and some sightseeing were well earned.

The next day, however, Smith

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and Lorenz headed southward again, down the Pacific Coast of Chile to Antofagasta...where they encountered their first maintenance problem, an oil leak. They spent two hours trying to locate the source of the leak, but failed to find it. They tightened everything in sight and took off for Vallenar, site of a Pan-American emergency strip, where they spent the night.

The following morning saw further attempts to stop the oil leak and a takeoff for Santiago. There, Pan-American mechanics washed down the engine and found the

leak—it was coming from a crack in the oil radiator. The mechanics soldered the crack, and by noon the next day the Cadet was off for Mendoza, Argentina.

This short leg of only about 150 miles between Santiago and Mendoza would be the ultimate test of the Culver's performance, for it involved crossing the backbone of the Andes, past the 23,834-foot peak of Aconcagua, the tallest mountain in South America, and through the Uspallata Pass. This involved the little over-grossed Cadet climbing to 17,000 feet for safe passage through the pass. The Uspallata is probably the windiest and roughest pass in the world—test balloons have recorded winds to 200 mph.

Smith and Lorenz received a weather report from Pan-Am that the pass was clear, but winds up to 50 mph were blowing and were predicted to increase even more. They were advised not to go. The two were anxious to try it, however, so they fired up the *Twerp* and were on their way.

After circling the field to 10,000 feet, they headed the Cadet for the pass. The ride through was one Smith and Lorenz will never forget. It was slam-bam all the way, but they made it. The Culver Cadet was one of the first production lightplanes to cross the Andes and undoubtedly the first ever to make the crossing in a "touring" configuration, that is, with a full load of gasoline, baggage, and both seats occupied. When they landed at Mendoza, the Cadet was awarded a free hangar for the night in recognition by the local people of the awesomeness of their feat.



Big Nick, left, and Larry Low, the present owner of Nick's old Culver Cadet. Larry has done a super restoration on the bird. The registration number is now N281W rather than NC20926 as when new.



Chud Hanell, a race driver who worked at Howard Aircraft, and Big Nick in his Culver.

At noon on March 4, the Cadet zipped across the Rio de la Plata headed for Porto Alegre, Brazil. After five hours of bucking 60 mph head winds, however, they landed at the Air France field at Pelotas, Brazil, for the night. The next morning they were off for Porto Alegre where they filled up on gas and water and went on to Rio. There, they again had the oil radiator soldered and, as an added precaution, wired the United States for a new one to be air expressed to Para, Brazil.

Leaving Rio, they headed into the state of Bahia. Rio had wired ahead for a supply of gas, and at their next stop, a tanker with 350 gallons of gas was waiting. When they ordered 30 gallons, the attendant refused, saying the gas was for a Pan-Am airliner. Smith and Lorenz tried to explain that the fuel was for the *Twerp*, but all the guy would do was shout, "Pan-American! Pan-American!" No one ever heard of a lightplane being

able to fly from Rio into Bahia and only needing 30 gallons of gas!

By now the oil radiator had developed a really bad leak—and there were no facilities to fix it. The dentists took off anyway, oil leak and all. Two hours out over Pernambuco state at 6,500 feet—over the jungle—the engine started to go. Twenty minutes later it froze. The ocean was too distant, so they headed for the jungle and its headhunters. Frantically looking for a clearing, they spotted a sand bar in the distance that looked promising and headed for it, wheels up for max glide. As they approached the clearing, it looked like they could put it in wheels down—so they tried it.

The Cadet sailed over the edge of the clearing by a mere 35 feet and settled in on the sand. The wheels dug a 4-inch trench for about 50 feet before the left strut broke and the left wing dug into the sand, bringing

the bird to an instant halt.

Smith and Lorenz sat for a few minutes, dazed but unhurt. Finally, Lorenz said, "I believe we have arrived." When they climbed out, natives appeared from everywhere—no, not headhunters, but friendly natives. Next came the sign language, which eventually resulted in the dentists spending the next several days on horseback and nights in native huts until they reached Barreirinha, where a chartered plane flew them back to civilization.

Today a monument of wood and fabric lays on a sand bar in South America—a tribute to a great airplane, the Culver Cadet.

Up to the point of the forced landing, the doctors had covered some 12,000 miles, averaging 30 miles to a gallon for a total flying cost of \$300!

Hey! Piper, Beech, Cessna—Can you top that on 75 hp? Progress? Bah!

Al Mooney . . . genius!

How about you Culver owners in the Bay area see if these two fine pilots are still around and invite them to the next Culver Club get-together. I promise two most interesting speakers. In fact, I'd like to see some sort of recognition for these two men...maybe in the form of a plaque. I would be willing to throw in 20 bucks toward it—how about it, Culver owners?

Remember, there are those that have and those that haven't . . . yet!

Editor's Note: We'd be curious to know if anyone ever found Lorenz or Smith, the touring dentists. If Big Nick has any of you Culver enthusiasts stirred up as a result of his article, you might want to join one of the Culver type clubs. 2005 contact info:

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Culver Club, 641-938-2773 or antiqueairfield@sirisonline.com

Culver Dart Club, 419-734-6685 or washlloydburn@cros.net

Culver PQ-14 Association, 949-495-4540

