

Crossing the Grand Canyon

By Ric Lynch

I had flown across the Grand Canyon half a dozen times before, but the butterflies in my stomach felt like this was the first time. When crossing the Canyon below 18,000 feet, precise flight rules must be followed to comply with FAA Visual Flight Rules. At my flight level of 10,500 feet, I entered the Canyon about 4,000 feet above the rim following a narrow corridor from the north rim to the south rim. With a glide ratio of 9 to 1, the fifteen-mile distance needed to get safely across the gap in the earth resulted in a decision point of 7 miles where I might have a chance to turn back and glide to the north rim. Past the 7 mile mark I had sixty seconds where an engine failure would leave me unable to escape the Canyon jaws.

I nervously looked over my shoulder as the north Canyon rim grew smaller, committed now to reaching the south rim. Then, suddenly, the steady purring of the 250-horse powered engine went inexplicably silent. The aircraft owner's manual has specific procedures for an engine out situation, but I was embarrassed that my first action was pulling the headset from my right ear, because I was unbelieving that this explosive silence was filling my ears.

I punched the nearest airport button on my GPS and saw KGCN 8.9 miles 200 degrees light up my screen. I slowed the Comanche to best glide of 95 MPH, turned slightly to the west to a heading of 200 degrees. and tried to restart the engine. With the engine restart unsuccessful and altitude down to 10,000 feet, I set the transponder to emergence frequency 7700 and transmitted to Prescott Flight Service, "Prescott Flight Service, Comanche 527P declaring an emergency, engine out over the Grand Canyon, 10,000 feet, 9 miles northeast KGCN on a 20 radial, engine restart unsuccessful, over." The response was, " 527P , Prescott Flight Service, copy declaring emergency, state souls on board, fuel, and intentions."

I tried to not sound as petrified as I was, and responded, "Prescott Flight Service, If I can make it over the rim, I think Grand Canyon Airport is my best shot." They responded quickly. "Roger Comanche 527P, Grand Canyon Airport 200 degrees, 7 miles, sky clear, altimeter 29.92. Tower frequency 119.0. We are going to lose you on radar soon. Good luck. Call us on a land line after you land."

"Optimistic fellow," I thought to myself. I felt sweat dripping into my eyes, tasted the salty fluid on my lips, and tried to ignore the knot in my stomach and attempted one more restart. The tall pines seemed to be reaching up for me from a couple of hundred feet below. The engine coughed, caught to some bit of life, and the propellor lifted the aircraft to about 1,000 feet before the engine quit again.

"I tuned into 119.0 and called the Grand Canyon tower, "Grand Canyon Tower, Comanche 527P, two miles north inbound engine out, declaring emergency and request immediate landing for 200."

They promptly replied, “Comanche 527P, cleared for 200, Flight Service advised us of your emergency, and we have cleared traffic for you. We have you in sight. Cleared to land any runway.”

I landed on the numbers, a feeling of relief overcame me, as I felt immediately exhausted, but grateful to have dodged a bullet so to speak.