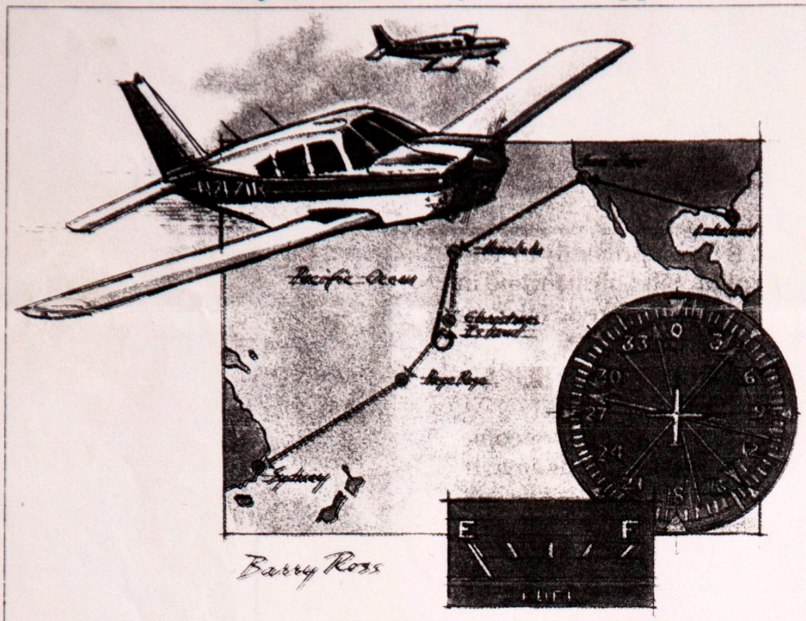
I LEARNED ABOUT FLYING FROM THAT BLIND LEADING THE BLIND

Lost over the Pacific/No. 543 by Bruce Copp



THE TRIP LOOKED simple. I'd done it many times before. Move a Piper Arrow from Lakeland, Florida, to Sydney, Australia. What happened in between was supposed to be up to me.

The first two legs (from Lakeland to San Jose, California, then to Honolulu) were uneventful. Company mechanics had put in an extra fuel tank to increase range beyond that of the ferry tanks. It also increased gross weight and moved the CG aft. I don't like being a test pilot, so that extra tank went empty all the way to Honolulu.

I met two pilots from our company in Honolulu. We were all headed to Sydney. Paul, a tall, wide-shouldered Paul Newman lookalike with prematurely graying hair, was flying a new Seneca, and Tim—medium build, blond curly hair—had a Cherokee Six. It helps, both psychologically and economically, to travel in a group. You may never see the others except on the ground, and might not even talk much to them, but you know they are out there. You have only to pick up the microphone for that reassurance.

Normal routing after Honolulu would take us directly to Pago Pago, American Samoa, 2,300 nm from Oahu. My compatriots suggested a stop at Christmas Island, 1,100 miles south of Honolulu, near the broiling equator and slightly out of our way. We could make a leisurely trip by day, try the succulent island lobster, spend the night at Christmas and depart the next day for Pago. None of us had been to Christmas Island before. We obtained permission to land at that remote atoll. Ferry pilots love to put exotic pins in their maps.

Still unsure of the extra tank in the belly of my tiny airborne whale, I had all tanks topped off except that one. It was partially filled. At cruise power I would have at least 18 hours of fuel.

By nine the next morning we were off on what should have been an easy eight-hour journey to Christmas. The weather was excellent, with the trade winds helping just a bit. Since the Seneca was the faster aircraft, Paul's eyes were our long-range radar. But we hadn't a clue to our pending problem until Paul called about 100 miles from Christmas. So far he hadn't picked up the nondirectional beacon that would lead us to this pinpoint in thousands of square miles of ocean.

Tim and I dialed the beacon's frequency. *Nothing.*

You've got to be pretty lucky to hit a place as small as Christmas without the help of an NDB. We considered the problem. Maybe the beacon was not very strong. Perhaps our groundspeed was lower than expected. We contacted Honolulu Center to see if they had an answer. In the meantime, we pressed on according to the flight plan.

By that afternoon, we should have been landlubbers sipping cold brewskis. But we hadn't made contact, electronic or visual, with anything. With precious little reserve fuel, the Seneca moved on to an alternate. Paul made his best southwesterly guess for a heading to Pago Pago and wished us luck. He needed it as much as we. Finding an island at night can be difficult and hazardous. Our standard operating procedures dictated daylight arrivals, when ADFs are most reliable. By sunup the following day, the Seneca would be out of fuel. Pago Pago Airport has a vortac on the field, but because of the terrain it's usable only to the south. For Paul to use it he'd have to miss the island—but not by much.

By this time, Honolulu Center was aware of our predicament. The controllers made several attempts at an HF-DF steer based on bearings from Honolulu and Fiji. I didn't believe it was possible, and I still don't. The process took 20 minutes and just wasn't accurate; one fix put us north of Christmas when in fact we were hundreds of miles farther south. After several attempts we had to give up and try something else. It was dark now, so Tim and I calculated a heading to Canton Island, 800 miles to the west. There's nothing there except a runway, a quonset hut, a few military personnel, a strong AM broadcasting station and some big fish in the lagoon. To our knowledge, avgas would have to be shipped in for us to leave Canton.

Honolulu had another idea. The controllers called the Coast Guard and convinced us to remain where we were until a C-130 could arrive four hours later. In the meantime, Tim and I kept up a visual scan for island lights, ships, any kind of clue.

The night was beautiful. A few scattered clouds, clear air and an array of stars unseen except by those who view the heavens from mountaintops. It was easier for Tim and I to keep track of each other visually with strobe lights on. We'd stayed close since takeoff 10 hours earlier. It would be best to stay together.

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The C-130 arrived on time and quickly established HF and VHF communication. The plan was simple. DF equipment on board the Coast Guard aircraft would pinpoint our position and give us headings to the island. Alternatively, the C-130 could join us and lead the way to terra firma. After several VHF and HF-DF attempts, it became apparent that there was a problem aboard the C-130. The radio operator admitted technical difficulties with the DF equipment. All the headings they had given us were useless. We were lost.

The C-130 was low on fuel and had to return to Hickam Field. I had about three hours of cruise fuel left, and the Six maybe a bit more. We were out of options. The C-130 crew turned back, promising to radio for a second C-130 to be dispatched immediately with working DF equipment. That meant another four-hour wait at our position. Tim and I made tentative plans for ditching.

Power settings were for extreme cruise, with the speed just above stall. We weren't going anywhere. Nothing to do but think. I should have been scared but I wasn't. The idea of a night ditching was foreboding, but we had a lot of survival gear. My life vest was open and in the next seat, ready for immediate application. Tim and I concentrated on flying circles at slightly different altitudes, staying close enough to be in visual contact.

After orbiting for hours, we felt it was time for a decision. Stay and wait for the next C-130, or move on? The old seat of the pants told us we were well south of Christmas Island, and if ditching was imminent it would be better to be closer to land or an approaching aircraft. If we were to survive, *we* had to do something.

The critical decision. We headed north.

Suddenly, the ADF indicator came to life, responding to the weak but usable transmissions of the Christmas NDB. This was the first shred of evidence of our position since noon. We excitedly continued north, staring at a wandering needle on the panel and a black ocean below.

Twenty minutes later, the beacon died. The ADF needle just spun lazily telling us to fly in all directions. All we could do was press on to the north, not knowing if the island was one, 10 or 100 or more miles ahead.

Early in the morning, while it was still dark, Paul found Pago Pago. After landing he checked with local flight service about our status, heard nothing and went to bed. When he got up, FSS still had no news of our fate. We were still airborne.

We expected to hear from the second-issue rescuers at two a.m. That time came and went. We plodded north, hoping. At normal cruise power, gas would have already been used up. At our reduced settings we weren't sure how long until flameout.

Then, over the radio, a sound. Weak, but we could hear it. It had to be the Coast Guard. The anonymous voice grew steadily stronger as our three aircraft converged over unknown numbers of miles. It took another hour before we were close enough for the C-130's radio gear to assist. And assist it did. Our intuition proved right because we were south of Christmas and slightly west. For the first time, I felt we had a real chance to make it—if only the fuel would hold out.

We were holding a northeasterly heading, taking several DF steers. About 30 miles from the atoll, the C-130's gear could no longer help.

On our own again, but we were elated. All we had to do was hold the heading for 20 minutes. In the excitement, Tim and I circumnavigated opposite sides of a cloud, and he was gone.

Damn. After 24 hours of continuous visual contact, I lost him.

So not a drop of usable fuel would be wasted, I stayed at altitude until the last minute. I couldn't wait any longer. The cloud layer was becoming more than scattered, which made it hard to see anything at sea level. I started the descent. The clouds were getting thinner, and soon I was through them with excellent visibility. A hard scan showed *nothing*. No atoll. I couldn't see the Cherokee Six, and all the fuel gauges read empty. There was no way for the C-130 to find both of us. But we had gotten so far without panic that we weren't going to give up now. I started a square search pattern and had made four circuits when, suddenly, the ADF needle snapped back to life. Christmas Island at 045 degrees.

My attention was torn between the windshield, the fuel gauges, which were pegged to the left, and the telltale sound of an engine gasping for energy. If only I hadn't left that 20 gallons in the fuel truck in Honolulu.

The minutes and miles went by at an agonizingly slow pace. Still no sign of the destination.

Then, *there it was.*

Only a bit longer, five minutes at the most. A quick call to Tim. No, he hadn't seen it yet but was still tracking the beacon. He must be right behind me.

Closer, closer...lined up with the runway and...touchdown. Then a quick taxi to the empty shack of a terminal, and shut the workhorse down. Total flight time: 25 hours, 10 minutes. As I popped open the door, the oppressive heat of the equator melted what was left of an exhausted body. My legs ached. That was the longest I'd ever piloted an aircraft solo. I knew how Lindbergh felt. But where was Tim?

A glance around the empty ramp revealed nothing. I looked toward the sky—still nothing. Then a large aircraft came into view. The Coast Guard C-130 approached the airport then turned back out to sea.

My heart sank. I was afraid for Tim. Why did the C-130 head southwest? Then another large aircraft flew overhead and also turned to the southwest. An unknown P-3 was also in the search. All I could do was wait. Five minutes...10 minutes...15. We hadn't been that far apart.

"Bruce!"

I quickly turned and there was Tim. And there was his airplane, on the other side of the ramp, near the runway.

"Tim, where in heck have you been? I didn't hear you come in."

Tim smiled. "That's because the engine quit on final...."

The C-130 landed, we met the crew and signed the logbook. After refueling (the Arrow took more than I thought it could hold), we pieced together what went wrong. Even though our request to land on the atoll was granted for a certain day, it was not considered official until the island received a teletype copy of the flight plan with an actual departure time. They hadn't received that copy until 10:30 p.m., six hours after our proposed arrival time. That's why the beacon suddenly came on at 10:40. It went off at 11 because the island electrical generator is shut down every night at that time. To top it off, VHF contact wasn't possible because their one radio was down for repairs. When electrical power was restored the next morning, and realizing that we still hadn't arrived, they turned on the beacon. But for phenomenal timing and our trust in intuition, Tim and I would have had to learn the art of naval survival.

That afternoon we ate an early supper and collapsed for a long-overdue night's rest in the small but hospitable hotel. The next morning found us winging to Pago, and the rest of the trip went without a hitch. □