

The Cross County Crustatian Caper - SP Fishers Island

Sometime in the 1970s I took up flying. A good friend, Joe, had purchased an ancient Cessna 150 and was always looking for someone to fly with him. Since I worked all kinds of odd hours, I was available when most people weren't and it worked well for both of us. Joe loved to teach and we practiced takeoffs, figure eights, slow flight, routine landings, crosswind landings, deadstick landings, stalls and even spins - which I really hated. Many days we also flew to some other airport so I could experience different terrains, right and left hand patterns, controlled fields and radio work. In theory I was also supposed to learn navigation on these trips, but I had been a member of the state police for about ten years, much of it in the Hudson Valley and Catskills region. In virtually all cases I already knew how to get where we were going and what landmarks we should see along the way. If I was anywhere in southeastern New York State and if I could see the ground, I could usually figure out where I was pretty quickly since I had probably been there by car at one time or another.

I even knew the location of many private or abandoned airstrips as well as straight sections of level roads and flat pastures. Why is that important? As a pilot, it's considered good form to land your plane in a manner which allows it to be used again on future occasions. Should you experience some sort of malfunction while flying, it's nice to know where you can put it down safely in a hurry. Of course if the malfunction is of the type where your aircraft instantly takes on the flying characteristics of a safe, knowing where one could land is kind of a mute point.

Every few weeks another friend who was a flight instructor would take me up see what I had learned, then sign off on it in my log book, giving me credit for the many hours I had spent with Joe. One day the instructor told me to fly south to New Jersey and Pennsylvania, a relatively short distance. I had never flown there before. I was shocked to discover that, unlike the giant map of the United States we had in the eighth grade social studies classroom, neither of these states was a different color. I couldn't even make out the little dotted lines that showed the state boundaries. I was lost.

The instructor suggested that perhaps I should spend more time learning to work with Aeronautical Charts, which are known as "sectionals". To me they looked kind of like there had been some sort

of glitch in the factory where they printed road maps, wherein maps of several states had been printed one atop the other on the same piece of paper, perhaps with a schematic diagram of a television set thrown in for good measure. To give you an example, here is a small portion of the sectional which covered the airport we flew out of. Keep in mind this is a pretty rural area.



The instructor also suggested that I get up to speed on using *VHF Omni Directional Range*, known as VOR. Without getting into great detail, VOR is somewhat like the GPS you have in your car, but it was invented long before the woman who argues with you in your car about the last turn you made was born. Instead of showing you a map, you set your VOR to the radio frequency of a specific transmitter, which you identified from your sectional, then you flew to or from that transmitter by watching the swing of a needle on a dial. If you turned up the VOR volume, instead of Siri talking to you, all you heard was a transmitter identifier in Morse Code .

Eventually the instructor suggested that I would learn a whole lot if I laid out a “cross country” course to a Long Island airport, then completed the flight. Long Island?! I asked him whether he wanted me to land at LaGuardia or JFK. Thankfully he said he was thinking of something a bit smaller, probably out in Suffolk County on the eastern half of the island. I took a look at the Long Island sectional.

Give me a break. Trying to read this thing with a magnifying glass while sitting at my dining room table was nearly impossible. Trying to read it at three thousand feet while also attempting to maintain straight and level flight would make texting a chapter of *War and Peace* while in the middle lane of the West Side Highway during rush hour look like a piece of cake.



I couldn't even find Suffolk County, much less a small airport, among the circles, lines and notes on the sectional. Then it came to me, Fishers Island.

Fishers Island? Fishers Island is a nine mile long island two miles off the Connecticut/Rhode Island coast. It's about fourteen miles east of the eastern tip of Long Island. For reasons lost in obscurity, Fishers Island belongs to New York State, specifically as a part of Suffolk County, even though it's closer to two other states. Hey, the instructor wanted me to fly to an airport in Suffolk County.

There's an airport on Fishers Island. Fishers Island is part of Suffolk County. Better yet, there was a trooper whom I knew, Don, stationed on Fishers Island. I could do this.

I called up Don and asked if he was receiving visitors. He was. I offered to bring him something from the mainland, but I got the drift that being the only police officer, plus being a bachelor, on a very affluent island wasn't tough duty. Don was not in need of anything.

Back to my flight plan. Junior pilots fly VFR, *Visual Flight Rules*. Unless one obtains an Instrument Rating, one has to be able to see the ground and other aircraft which might be in the area in order to fly from Point A to Point B. Even then, one usually uses the VOR to fly long distances rather than just looking at the ground. But it's always a good idea to have identified a few important landmarks along the way to make sure you're going in the right direction. I picked out two which I was pretty sure I could find.

The first one was the Atlantic Ocean. I figured it would be pretty hard to miss if I was headed remotely in the correct direction.

When we finally made the flight, sure enough, as soon as we had climbed to about twenty five hundred feet and had crossed the New York/Connecticut border, there it was. Not only was it there, unlike Connecticut, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, it was the same color as the Atlantic Ocean had been on the eighth grade map.

My second landmark was Long Island. Given that the island is 120 miles long and not all that wide and was surrounded by blue water, it kind of stood out. Furthermore, since one end was part of one of the largest cities in the world and the other end was rural and was forked like a serpent's tongue, it was pretty easy to figure out which end was which. I wanted the forked end part.

When I reached the North Shore of Long Island I turned left and flew to the North Fork, which points directly at two islands. The first one was Plum Island.

There are at least three reasons why one doesn't want to land on Plum Island. The first is that there are rumors that the government conducts all kinds of biological warfare experiments on Plum Island, the second is it is a restricted area and the third - and probably most important - is that there's no landing strip there.

The second island should be Fishers Island and, in fact, it turned out to be just where it was supposed



to be on the sectional. There was a World War Two vintage airstrip, Elizabeth Field, on the western end of the island. The runway ran from water's edge to water's edge, making it about as close to landing on an aircraft carrier as I'd be likely to experience.

(There was one difference; the runway was nine feet above sea level. If one approached the deck of an aircraft carrier in a Cessna 150 at nine feet above the water line, one would become a minor blemish on the aft paint work.)

We landed without incident, taxied up to the only hanger, parked and went into the Ops Shack. The sole occupant was an eightyish year old woman who was knitting. I asked her where we should tie

down the airplane and asked if she could call the state police for us. She looked over the counter at my feet, looking for gray socks. Apparently she had been through this drill before. She picked up the phone, dialed a number and, when it was answered, said “Don, I’m being molested. Take your time getting here.” That was the entire conversation.

While we were waiting, I looked into the hanger. There were no planes in there but there were a couple of dozen gas powered mowers in various states of disrepair. Maybe Grannie was taking an adult education course in small engine repair.

A short time later a marked Blue and Gold showed up at the airfield and the driver got out. But it wasn’t Don, it was a zone sergeant from SP Hawthorne whom I knew. Although Hawthorne was probably more than a hundred miles away - cross lots - SP Fishers Island was part of Troop K’s Zone Four. The zonie was wearing dungarees and a tee shirt.

We piled into the car and headed back to the barracks, which turned out to be a two story house in an attractive residential area. Then again, everything in sight was an attractive residential area. En route to the barracks/house, the zonie explained that he was out here inspecting the operation and he had driven down to the airfield because Don was busy cleaning two striped bass which they had caught while the zonie was accompanying Don on patrol earlier in the day. Sure enough, when we got the barracks/house, Don came out from the back yard in similar attire, covered with scales and smelling of fish.



Apparently the zonie was performing a very thorough inspection, because he had brought help in the form of his wife and two kids.

We talked with Don about policing on Fishers Island. It certainly wasn't anything like what had been covered in the Academy. There were three things in particular which were especially unique to his assignment.

It seems the biggest problem on the island was on Friday and Saturday evenings when rowdy kids from Connecticut would come in by boat to take advantage of New York's eighteen year old drinking laws. If Don got word - how I don't know, but that's what troopers do - that there was a particularly infamous group headed his way he would gather together some Suffolk County Bay Constables, some Coast Guardsmen and maybe a passing Conservation Officer and deputize them. Under what authority I have no idea - maybe some little known Eighteenth Century anti-piracy act.

They would then go down to the docks and “repel boarders” as though they were on some Galleon. Perhaps Don had a John Paul Jones costume he wore during the Halloween evolutions.

Another thing he had to deal with on a regular basis was complaints from residents that other residents were speeding on their bucolic lanes . Unfortunately four fifths of the island, including the roads, was private property so Don couldn't issue traffic tickets for speed limits which had not been official established. But he came up with a solution which pleased everybody; well, almost everybody, the violators weren't all that happy. Don would stop the hapless motorists, obtain their names and pass them on to the powers that be at the country club, who would promptly suspend their privileges for some appropriate length of time. It was probably a worse penalty for some of the more affluent violators than a stiff fine would have been.

The third problem was prisoners. From time to time it was actually necessary to take someone into custody. Both the courts and the jail were on Long Island proper. There was regular ferry service from Fishers Island to New London, Connecticut and from New London to Long Island, but none directly from Fishers Island to Long Island. There could be some legal problems taking an un-arraigned prisoner through some other state. So Don would commandeer a Coast Guard cutter and transport the prisoner directly. (I suspect assignment to Fishers Island was as much of a plum assignment for the coast guardsmen as it was for Don.) I had this image in my mind of the prisoner lashed to the yardarm and Don standing on the open bridge next to the captain, perhaps with his hand tucked in his jacket like Napoleon.

Don wasn't done with the fish yet and had some other things to do, so the zonie, a good friend, offered to give us the grand tour of the island. We hopped back in the Blue and Gold and were about to take off when the zonie, still wearing jeans and a tee shirt, stopped the car and said “I probably should have a gun, just in case.” He called out to Don “Do you have a gun?” Don replied, with a note of concern, “It isn't in the glove compartment?” It was.

We got the grand tour which included the vestiges of some World War Two coastal artillery emplacements, the country club, an Osprey's nest - a rare sight during the era of DDT - and the home where Admiral Bull Halsey had died in 1959.

We ended the tour on the fishing docks where the lobster boats were just coming in. After picking up a large cardboard box from a local market we purchased four lobsters right off the boat, threw them in the box and into the troop car trunk and headed back to the airport.

I now got to do my first and only “carrier takeoff”. I was a little disappointed that they didn’t swing the island into the wind like they do with a carrier and that there was no steam catapult, but then taking a fifteen hundred pound Cessna 150 off on a 2,000 foot runway is a bit different than taking a twenty ton Tom Cat off a much shorter flight deck.

We began the slow climb to twenty five hundred feet and headed more or less west towards the Huguenot VOR. We had just about reached altitude when one of the lobsters got out of the box.

Bear in mind that these lobsters, much like the Pilgrims three hundred and sixty years earlier and not all that far away, were right off the boat. Nothing had yet been done to eliminate the lobsters’ ability to administer an extremely painful and possibly debilitating pinch. (I don’t recall reading that anything along these lines had been necessary with the Pilgrims, although it is possible that John Alden had said to Miles Standish, in a very un-Pilgrimly way, “Miles, keepest thine mitts off yonder Priscilla, lest I smite the living be-jesus out of you!”)

Just about the time the lobster came wandering up between the seats, Boston Center called us on the radio instructing us to change frequencies. At this point we running out of hands, so Joe asked Boston if they could “ ‘standby one’ since we have a minor issue to deal with”. Boston inquired whether we wished to declare an emergency. Joe advised that we did not wish to declare an emergency and went on to explain exactly what the problem was. This transmission was immediately followed by a number of suggestions, all anonymous, from what seemed like every other aircraft within radio range.

Those of you who have sat in the cockpit of a Cessna 150 may not believe that it is possible to raise your feet high enough to rest them against the instrument panel, but I can assure you that, given proper motivation, one can make a pretty credible effort. With some experimentation we discovered that it was possible to skid the lobster around the metal deck like a pinball by either heading up into

a stall, cutting the throttle and dropping the nose or slewing him from one side to the other by making uncoordinated turns (not hard to do when your feet are not on the rudder pedals.) If someone was watching from the ground, they were probably sure they were about to witness their first plane crash. By employing a mixture of these maneuvers, I was able within a minute or so to grab the lobster behind his claws.

I gave serious thought to popping the window open and introducing the lobster to sky-diving. Then I looked down and realized that we were over a pretty populated part of Connecticut. I could see the headlines:

LITCHFIELD MAN FOUND IN DEAD IN POOL - Connecticut Troopers report finding a Litchfield man, Larry Lewis, proprietor of *Litchfield Lawns and Landscapes*, floating face down in a residential pool. Troopers surmise that Lewis had somehow sustained a serious head laceration which caused him to lose consciousness and drive his mower, which was found at the bottom of the pool, into the water. Troopers are still investigating to determine the cause of the initial injury.

Worse, if the lobster was still imbedded in Larry's cranium, the story would have achieved national circulation. Among the many people and organizations responding to the scene would have been representatives from *The Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution*, Geraldo Rivera and the entire investigative team of *The National Inquirer*. Dan Rather would probably be reporting from a seafood store in downtown Hartford.

Furthermore, given our recent conversation with Boston Center, the list of suspects would have been pretty small, *National Inquirer* theories notwithstanding.

I managed to stuff the escapee back in the box and secure it more thoroughly, whereupon we resumed our flight westward. Soon a large north/south river appeared, disappearing over the horizon in both directions. Based on my steel trap grasp of southern New York State geography, I immediately identified it as the Hudson River and reverted to my state police navigation system. I

looked for a bridge, any of which I would recognize and which would allow me to follow Route 209, Route 44/55, Route 17K, the Long Mountain Parkway or the Thruway back to Wurtsboro.

That evening there was a seafood dinner for four celebrating my successful cross-country flight. The recently imported crustaceans were guests of honor.

ADDENDUM

Following the distribution of this story, I received replies from two former zone commanders who had at one time overseen the Fishers Island detail, one while it was still part of Troop K and one when it was part of Troop L (as it is now).

Retired Captain Ed Whalen wrote:

I can verify it is a true story. When I was the Zone Commander of the Troop K zone headquartered at SP Hawthorne, Fishers Island was mine and a unique experience. I would fly out once a month while the troopers were in residence. It is a seasonal thing. Don Campbell was the resident trooper and the zone sergeant was Bob Dwyer.

Aviation unit pilots would fight over the the job since we always went in good weather and were treated to a great sea food meal. The troopers on the detail did a great job and were loved by the residents.

I took my family out there while on vacation for four days and got invited to a community meeting and the local Town Justice took us fishing.

Retired Captain Dan Carlson wrote:

The piece about Fisher's Island also brought back lots of memories. When I was the Zone Commander on Long Island, the Fisher's Island seasonal station was in my zone so, naturally, I was forced to inspect upon occasion.

This was after Don Campbell had retired, but the living was still just as you described it. We had dinner courtesy of the State Police lobster trap, dug some clams on the beach ... even stopped at the Pequot for a cold one ... well, you know the rest.

The Coast Guard team on the island was excellent ... on one trip, I took my son with me, and they could not have been nicer and cooler. Took us out on a patrol. The island is also the home of the original Boroleum factory (a Vicks-like product that is still available), and (according to the Coast Guard), the place that submarines coming out of New London triangulated their navigational gear before heading out to sea.