

LESSONS LEARND FROM A SLOPPY VFR/IFR APPROACH

Flying with two close friends from the Minneapolis area to Branson, Missouri, taught me a flying lesson which lingers in my conversation and memory several days beyond the landing. It happened like this.

A few couples from spots in the northern and southern US planned to meet in Branson for a week of adult fun and frolic. While others were traveling by car, my choice was my sweet, little 1968 M20C Mooney with two passengers on board. The drivers left a day prior to my flight.



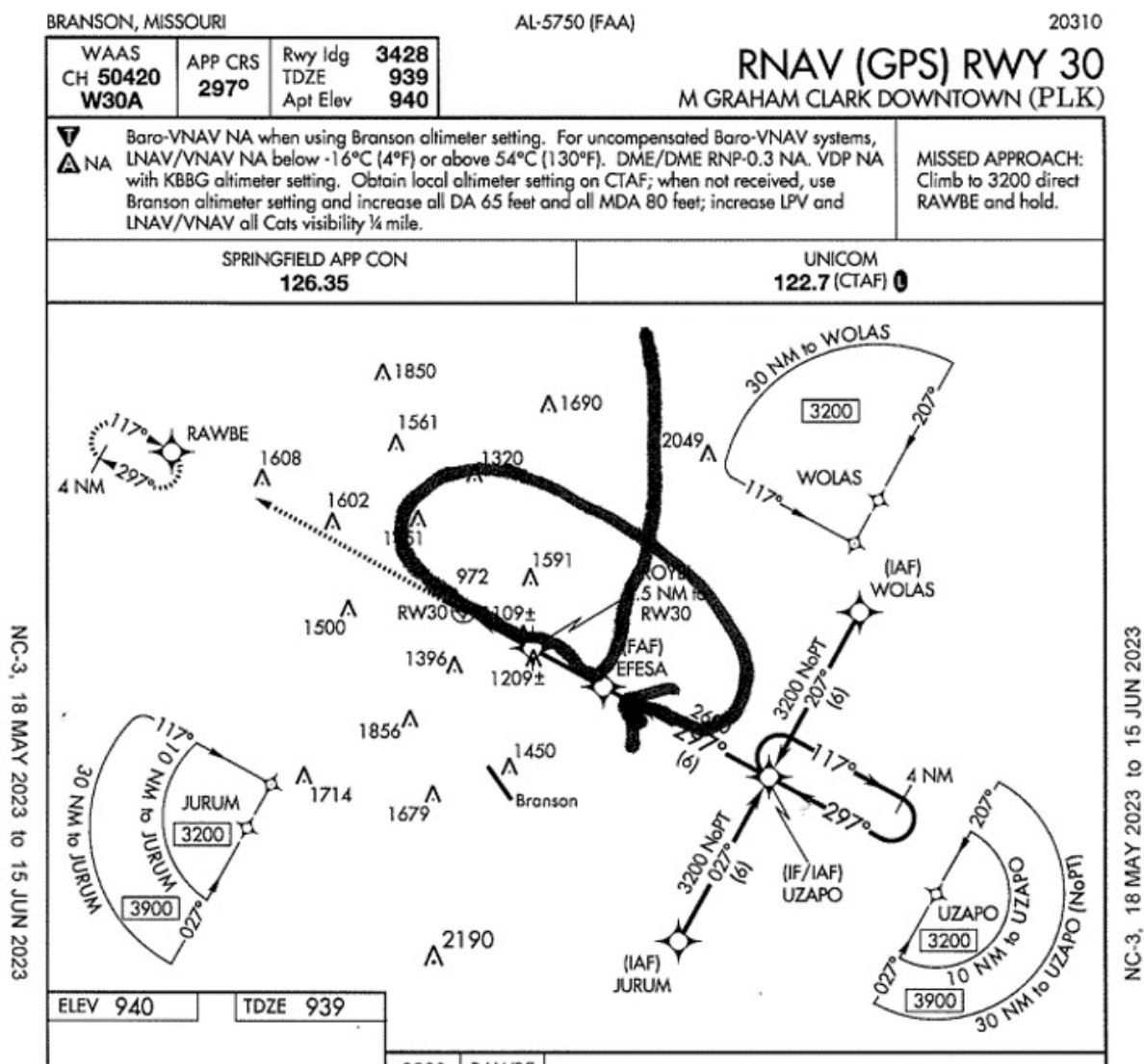
Standing with friend, Steve Olson (right) outside my sweet 1968 M20C Mooney.

I topped off my bird's two wing fuel tanks which provided four hours and 40 minutes of usable fuel on board. Planning on a cruising speed of 140 knots at 9,000 feet MSL, the tailwind should work out just right, leaving ample fuel reserve. A projected three hour and 35-minute trip calculated from my Foreflight software generated the IFR flight plan I filed.

I was delayed by a funeral that my passengers, Val and his wife Lynn, planned to attend. Lifting off around 3:30pm from Anoka Airport (KANE) direct to the M Graham Clark Downtown Airport (KPLK), I anticipated a routine flight of blue sky VFR. Canadian forest fire smoke had drifted into the United States over the prior few days, creating a haze that was visible up to 8,000 feet. I appreciated the Mooney waste gate turbo boost climbing to altitude, and eliminated the turbo boost once we were cruising at 9,000 feet. Val copiloted in the right seat while Lynn enjoyed solitude in the back seat throughout the flight.

We were handed off to a couple of control centers enroute to Branson. Springfield Approach assigned lower altitudes as we approached Downtown Airport, while the sun settled lower in the sky, giving off a smokey red hue to everything. Struggling to maintain my assigned 3,000 feet, ATC had to remind me I had slipped down to 2,600 feet.

Now the workload was increasing. I was becoming frustrated at not having identified the actual runway 30. Climbing back to 3,000 feet, I responded to Springfield Approach that while I planned a visual approach, I could not actually identify the runway with the restricted forward visibility. But no worries. I had landed at this airport in prior trips, so I knew the terrain. However, in the past I had landed runway 12 rather than 30. Amazing how different things looked from the opposite direction with smoky air restricting visibility looking into the setting sun.



A view of my ill-advised attempt at joining the approach under at the final approach fix and subsequent missed approach.

I loaded the RNAV 30 approach procedure into my Garmin 430 GPS and pasted it to the moving map display which was also connected via bluetooth to my iPad moving map. Identifying the final approach fix (EFESA) on the glideslope with an intercept altitude at 2,600 feet tempted me to again drift down to 2,600 feet as we were getting close to the airport. This irritated the controller. He reminded me again of the 3,000 feet assigned altitude, but I was distracted by the visual search for the airport runway. Val identified the airport runway 30 as, “just below the Mooney’s nose.”

Lowering the Mooney’s nose for descent enabled me to finally see the runway. However, when my bird’s nose is lowered, she is so slippery I accelerate quickly at the very time I need to be slowing. I intercepted the approach course of 297 degrees and then flew through it. Springfield Approach was most assuredly glad to be relieved of my sloppy altitude hold as I cancelled the IFR flight plan, reminding me once more that they wanted a minimum 3,000 feet in the Branson area until established on the glideslope.

At once I realized that I was too high and off of the final approach course, and worse yet, the rest of our friends were standing on the ramp at the airport watching this clumsy landing. Announcing to my copilot and passenger that I would initiate a ‘missed approach,’ I entered full throttle and cleaned up the airplane as I started the climb back to altitude while taking off the carb heat and trimming for climb. I wanted to make haste but not be careless because the fuel burn and this end of flight ‘landing dance’ was burning the fuel down to minimum IFR fuel reserves.



Soon I was circling to intercept the final approach course and glideslope once again, this time

at the proper altitude, speed, and angle to make a standard VFR landing approach. I greased the touchdown, much to my satisfaction.

I was relieved to have the Mooney tied down after a clumsy IFR/VFR approach.

Lesson learned.

I will be more definitive in planning and communicate more clearly my intentions for an approach to landing. Also, I will avoid in the future blending my IFR flying plan and clearances for a visual approach when I am not established on the intended glideslope on the approach to landing.

In retrospect, I could have eliminated any confusion by planning to intercept the RNAV 30 approach at an initial approach fix rather than the final approach fix. I could then clearly identify the runway and airport, then cancel IFR with the controller. I then could have continued on the glideslope while squawking VFR and announcing my intentions on the newly selected CTAF/UNICOM frequency 122.7 before gently touching down.

All was well and we were soon tied down and heading for a fantastic adult fun week. And to top it off, I got to fly the Mooney home at week's end.