

## FLYING AN AA1

In all my 30+ years of flying, I have always gotten a checkout before flying a new make and model of aircraft. Probably 20 years ago, the manager of the on-airport maintenance shop handed me the keys to a Piper Saratoga and asked me to fly it to the Owners airport. Having never flown a Saratoga, I refused, much to the consternation of said manager.

And so it came to be, that my first ever flight without a checkout, was an AA-1 to be ferried from Houston, TX to San Jose, CA. With 20+ years of AA5 & AA5B experience, coupled with the knowledge gained from extensive reading about the flight characteristics of the AA-1 over the years, I reasoned I could handle the flight. I had also previously flown a Van's RV-6 from San Diego, CA to Lancaster, PA – after the requisite checkout by the local Van's guru - Reuven Silberman. I adapted quickly to the RV-6 and the check ride consisted of little more than some air-work and 2 TOL.

From an Aviation Consumer report on the AA-1 series, *“But, the airplane had real problems. The airfoil produced an abrupt, sharp stall and wing drop. It also built up induced drag very rapidly at low airspeeds-getting behind the curve in a Yankee was a sure-fire way to make an unplanned arrival someplace other than on the runway. It didn't climb well, couldn't carry much of a load, and had short legs. But it was fast and fun to fly, as long as the speed was kept up.”*

In addition to the normal safety considerations, I opted to only use runways 6000'+ in length and be overly cautious and refuel often. I planned a mostly direct route to Las Vegas; then due west to avoid the Sierra Nevada mountain range; then north northwest to San Jose.

I arrived mid-afternoon to thoroughly check out the airplane. I had a nice dinner with my brother Don, who is a flight test director at NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston.

I arrived at Conroe (CXO) airport north of Houston at daybreak. Tucked in behind a few rows of hangars, I started the plane and called the tower. Sitting in the cockpit in CAVU conditions, I was advised by the Tower that the field was IFR. “IFR???” I taxied around the hangers and saw the mother of all fog banks slowly engulfing the main runway. It was like the wave at the beginning of a Hawaii Five-O episode. Talk about bad luck - I taxied to the FBO and delayed my departure until 10am as the fog lifted.

I lined up on the 7500-foot runway, confident yet cautious, for my first ever takeoff in an AA-1. I was fully prepared to walk away from the flight if I had any misgivings on takeoff. 7500 feet allowed me time to make that determination. At full throttle, I rolled down the runway; I rolled and rolled and rolled. Finally, at what seemed like 3000' down the runway, I finally lifted off. With full fuel and luggage, I was at gross weight. The climb seemed anemic, compared to my Tiger, but was adequate for the local topography. I took 35 minutes to manage a climb to 6500 feet; which appeared to be my maximum altitude in the Texas heat.

I quickly realized that all my preflight route preparation was out the window due to terrain restrictions. However, having flown the Van's along a southern route several years earlier, I

turned west and headed to El Paso. An overnight in El Paso would allow me time to properly evaluate new routing.

My first landing at Horseshoe Bay (6000'), went about as I expected. I knew the AA-1 has a propensity to sink fast if it gets slow, so I kept my airspeed up until over the runway & in ground effect. I just held it off the runway until it quit flying. My 1<sup>st</sup> landing was a non-event, so I relaxed considerably going forward. 6000 feet – even in an AA-1 - gives you plenty of options.

Equally annoying to the altitude restrictions were the funky fuel sight tubes and the need to stop for fuel every 2 hours to be on the safe side. Limiting myself to 6000-foot runways also curbed my fueling options.

Engine running and ready to roll as the first rays of daybreak peaked over the horizon at El Paso, I was off and climbing. In the lower morning temperatures, I climbed to 8500' msl; a much more comfortable altitude considering the hostile terrain for much of the flight through NM and Arizona.

Skirting Edwards Air Force Base and the Sierra Nevada's, the runways at San Jose International were a welcome sight. I had flown approximately 21 hours + fuel stops in 2 days. Exhausted, I treated myself to a steak at Morton's Steakhouse that night.

It was an interesting trip. I both loved and hated the AA-1. It's a great plane for the younger, thinner crowd. I decided to stick with my Tiger, or any AA-5, for future flights. Hence, I made my first, last and only flight in an AA-1.

To new or future AA-1 owners, membership in the AYA and a thorough checkout by one of our PFP designated instructors should be considered imperative. A few other notes:

- Climb performance is not great. It's absolutely critical to keep the airspeed up to keep clear of the induced-drag demon, and that means shallow climb angles.
- High density altitudes and high weights have a strong adverse effect on takeoff performance.
- Low-time pilots also need to be careful of the approach speeds. While they should be no problem for someone used to coming down final at 80-85 MPH, they're significantly higher than those for a Cessna 152.
- The electric flaps don't do a whole lot, on the original AA-1 they reduce the stall speed by all of one mile per hour, from 66 to 65. On the AA-1B, stall speeds are 62 and 60 MPH, respectively.