

# J3 TO THE BAHAMAS AN ODYSSEY OF FUN AND FLYING

AS TOLD TO PAT BARBER BY BEN MULLEN 1973

(With credit to AIR FACTS MAGAZINE which paid for this article but never got it published before they went out of business.)

**By Pat Barber 3/25/2005**

## IN THE BEGINNING

Thirty-two years ago a little yellow J3, N38341, rolled out of Mr. Piper's factory in Lock Haven, PA. It has been kept in perfect condition all these years and still looks just the way Mr. Piper intended, bright yellow with a black lightning stripe from cowl to tail. A teddy bear decal on the vertical fin is the final touch. Other than a metal prop, 90 channel Bayside and battery pack, few refinements have been added. The sturdy airframe has outlasted several engines, the present one being the traditional 65 horsepower Continental. The only gauges on board are the original modest array. N38341 has never had more "TLC" or provided more happiness than now with its present owner, Ben Mullen. Any nice day will find Ben and his Cub airport hopping, usually with a neighborhood youngster grinning with delight in the front seat. Cleanup day often finds these same youngsters on hand, eager to help with the wash and wax chores.

## A FOOLHARDY ENDEAVOR?

The Cub's previous owner, Bill Walton, and Ben are close flying friends. Their J3 fun and travels would fill a book. One of their best and furthest adventures was a flight to the Bahamas one Thanksgiving weekend. At first the very idea of flying a little J3 across all that water seemed outlandish. Bill and Ben very casually began to ask some of the senior local pilots what they thought of the idea and were delighted to get the answers they wanted to hear, "Why not!", "Wish I could go along", "If I had to ditch, I'd rather be in a J3 than any other airplane", etc. Cheered on by all this enthusiasm, Ben and Bill began to plan the flight in earnest. One detail not to be overlooked was to have the aircraft insurance policy endorsed with a territorial extension to include the Bahamas Islands. Their friend and insurance agent, Pat Barber, soon reported a green light from the insurance company. The only hurdles remaining were the weather and that of telling their wives that they would be absent from the traditional family Thanksgiving gatherings. Assured that this was not a foolhardy endeavor at all, the ladies began to share the excitement of flight planning and packing for the trip.

## THANKSGIVING ON THE WING

As there were only four days available to complete the flight from Winston-Salem to the Bahamas and back, the weather would really have to cooperate. The possibility of being weathered in along the way was a dismal prospect.

The Cub carries three hours of fuel, a range of about 180 miles, so fuel stops were planned every 120 to 150 miles along the way. The only special equipment added for this flight was the ELT, secured in the baggage space, and a duplicate set of sectional charts. The extra charts eliminated having to pass the unwieldy things back and forth in the small cockpit. Our intrepid aviators took turns flying but both were always navigating. It is nice to have a backup navigator when there is no navigation equipment on board other than a magnetic compass and a line on the chart.

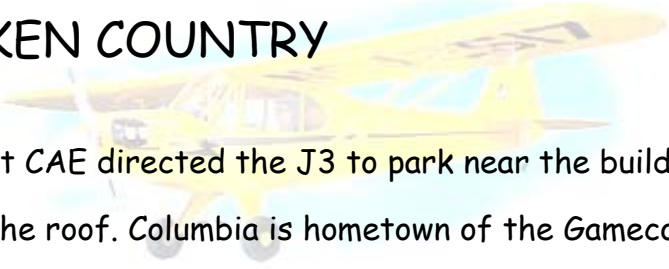
Freezing rain and snow put a definite stop on plans to depart INT the day before Thanksgiving. This was all for the best though, as the next day dawned clear and cold, with what promised to be spanking tailwind all the way. Adventure began at daybreak on Thanksgiving Day. The final weather check with Hickory FSS confirmed clear skies and a good tailwind for the long haul to Florida. Jotting down the flight plan for N38341, the FSS people did a double take, as flight plans on J3s bound for Florida are a little rare in this age of fast and sophisticated aircraft.

## DOWNWIND DASH

As soon as the tower came to life at 7 AM, the first project was to taxi very cautiously to runway 33 as the surface wind was exceedingly gusty. Combined with icy taxiways, the mile long trek to 33 required the utmost skill and dexterity and it created some anxious moments before the flight was airborne.

The controller on duty at INT was Frank Barber, a friend who had been a source of advice and encouragement from the time the venture was just an idea. After clearing the little yellow Cub for takeoff, Frank watched it leap into the headwind, climbing at an amazing rate but with very little progress over the length of the 6700 ft. runway into the stiff breeze. The Cub was quickly cleared to turn on course with nearly 1000 ft. altitude at mid-field. Turning tail to the wind, the J3 sped off like a yellow rocket, a downwind dash to CAE. In soaring terminology, this is known as a "vulgar downwind dash". The tailwind was to last all the way to West Palm Beach, a kind assist from Mother Nature.

## BIG CHICKEN COUNTRY



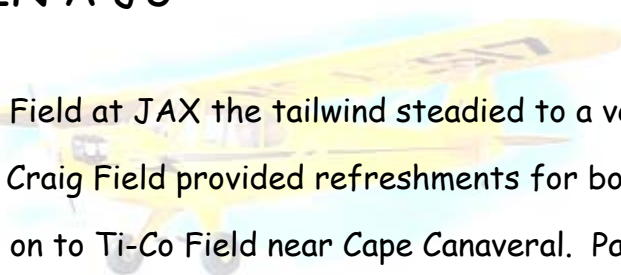
The controller at CAE directed the J3 to park near the building with the "Gamecock" on the roof. Columbia is hometown of the Gamecocks, University of South Carolina's football team. The gamecock symbol is sometimes referred to as the "big chicken" depending on one's university affiliation and loyalties.

The Columbia FBO people were enchanted by the neat little J3, offering to buy or trade on the spot. They were quickly advised that the "Little Jewel" was not for sale.

## NO TURKEY IN SAVANNAH

It was bumpy enroute from CAE to SAV but a small price to pay for the tailwind and crystal clear skies. The J3 stopped long enough to refuel and allow the pilots time for a cup of coffee. A casual encounter with a young couple flying northbound from West Palm Beach to INT confirmed the favorable winds for the rest of the trip. The possibility of having to RON at this stop with turkey and dressing far from the planned destination was quickly forgotten.

## TROLLING IN A J3



From SAV to Craig Field at JAX the tailwind steadied to a velvety smooth but still firm push. Craig Field provided refreshments for both the J3 and its two pilots, then on to Ti-Co Field near Cape Canaveral. Part of this leg fell into the Daytona Beach airport traffic area as the Cub followed the coastline. A call-up to Daytona tower produced only silence from the Bayside. For some reason, the dry cell wasn't putting out as usual. A helpful Cessna pilot relayed the message to Daytona tower, that a J3 was "trolling down the beach" at 1500 feet and wanted permission to pass through the area headed south. The request was approved and relayed back to the J3. Another call, a little closer in, found the Bayside coming through loud and clear. Ti-Co was a pleasant place to refuel and had another would-be buyer for the J3.

## A LONG SHADOW

Finally, only one leg remained, from Ii-Co to West Palm Beach. Passing over Vero Beach, the FSS there assured our pilots of continuing perfect weather with the tailwind bonus all the way to West Palm Beach. Identified as J3 type aircraft, the FSS questioned again in disbelief. The Bayside was blasting through clear and quite loud. Touchdown at West Palm Beach came at 5:05 PM. The little Cub had cast its shadow on 700 miles of landscape since leaving INT at daybreak that day. It was carefully bedded down while our pilots headed for food and bed after a long day in the air. The people at Tilford efficiently arranged for the over-water leg to the Bahamas the next day, including customs papers and reservations for a two-man life raft.



## LIFE RAFT VERSUS WHISKERS

Baggage space in a J3 is limited, to say the least. The necessity of the life raft overruled taking along even one change of clothes and shaving kits. The plan was to be back in West Palm Beach before dark so it didn't matter that personal accouterments were left behind.

After checking the weather and filing a flight plan for the voyage to Freeport, the J3 broke ground at daylight carrying a full tank of fuel, one life raft, the ELT and two happy souls. A course of 095 for 1:20 was to bring the J3 just south of the airport at West End in the Bahamas. One hint of advice in planning the flight was to aim a little to the right of the direct course; toward the middle of the island, instead of the northern end, to lessen the risk of flying right past the tip of the island should poor visibility be encountered. This turned out to be a good plan as the scattered clouds became almost solid about halfway across.

For a brief period it appeared that the Cub would have to make a classic "180" and run back to West Palm Beach. Once again though, Mother Nature looked with favor on the J3 flight and the island appeared through some large breaks in the "cu". Flying the coastline to West End airport was a long awaited thrill. A lineman at the airport expressed amazement that the pilots had flown all the way from North Carolina to Florida then across the water to West End in "that little airplane".

## THE BEST LAID PLANS.....

Clearing customs at West End was a simple and quick matter with no luggage. The J3 was secured while Ben and Bill took a swift tour of the island in a rental car. After a look at the tourist attractions it was back to the Cub with a cruising permit to see Treasure Cay on Abaco Island.

The charts show Treasure Cay about 80 miles from West End and promised the availability of fuel. Upon arrival, there was a customs agent but no fuel. Thus a problem began to develop. For those not familiar with a J3, the fuel indicator is a simple contraption, a wire running through the filler cap and connected to a cork which floats on the gasoline in the tank. The wire indicator is prominent in the pilot's field of vision, right in front of the windshield on top of the cowling. When the wire rides low to the point where the cork is no longer bobbing on fuel, it is long since time to put down for refueling.

Crisscrossing Grand Bahama Island, sightseeing enroute to Treasure Cay, plus a headwind, had made inroads on the fuel supply. It thus developed that the nearest fuel available was at Marsh Harbor, several miles southeast of Treasure Cay. The cork was still bouncing a little, with enough wire showing to promise another half hour of flight, so the J3 was promptly aimed at Marsh Harbor International Airport. Marsh Harbor was the end of the road as the Cub had to have fuel before going any further. Sure enough, there was a lovely fuel truck on the ramp but the proprietor, who was also the local taxi driver, was nowhere on the scene. Eventually he appeared and topped off the J3's main and only tank. Daylight instead of fuel was now the problem and main concern. The J3 was not equipped for night flying and the chances of returning to West Palm Beach before sundown were diminishing rapidly.

## WHISKERS

Heading back to Freeport in lowering visibility, it became clearly apparent that the return flight to West Palm Beach would have to wait until the next day. Resigned to an overnight stay in Freeport, the J3 once again took time to enjoy the tropical scenery, flying low along the coastline.

After landing at Freeport, the Cub was secured for the night and the Bayside radio and ELT were stashed in a locker at the terminal. Sans luggage, not even a toothbrush, Ben and Bill were pleasantly surprised to find hotel accommodations without a reservation even though it was the peak of the tourist season. The prospect of a really good meal was a happy thought after living mostly on soft drinks and vending machine fare enroute. An evening in Freeport, touring the casinos and people watching was a treat for the tired J3 pilots. Their money was the right color even though their chins were becoming stubbly and their clothes were a bit wrinkled from long hours in the cramped cockpit.

## A SLOW MOVING OBJECT

The next dawn found only a lone air traffic controller on duty at West End airport. FSS was not yet open. The local surface wind was the only weather information available but prospects appeared good, eyeballing to the west, so the J3 began its homeward flight.

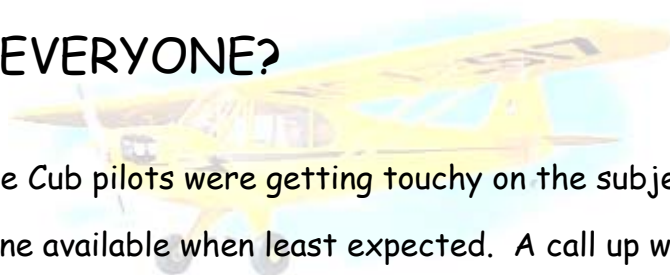
There was no way to miss the Florida coast, just hold a west heading and wait for land to appear. Cu began to develop enroute. The Cub skimmed over the tops at 8,500 feet, getting occasional glimpses of water below through breaks in the clouds. After 1:10 enroute and still no land in sight, the Bayside began putting out rather anxious calls to Miami approach control. The first transmission heard in the J3 was Miami ATC telling an airline flight that traffic was a "slow moving object" five miles east of the coast. The Cub pilots thought, "that has to be us", believing that they were probably the only slow moving traffic in that neighborhood. Their next call-up was acknowledged by ATC with a request to change heading for radar identification. The few "goodies" on board did not include a transponder. Suddenly, the Florida coastline appeared and West Palm Beach was soon in sight. There had been a headwind which slowed the Cub's sedate pace even more but landfall had been made with plenty of fuel reserve in hand. The Bahamas adventure had been fun in spite of the unplanned overnight stay. The life raft was returned unused, the J3 was refueled and pointed northward, homeward bound to INT.

## ON THE CORK AGAIN

The weather was a pleasant repeat of the sparkling clear skies of the southbound trip but without any help from the winds aloft. St. Simons Island was to be an overnight stop after a low level tour of the coastline with a stop at Vero Beach.

Who would think that finding fuel would be a problem on a beautiful clear Sunday morning? Things were right on schedule, departing St. Simons to SAV for a pit stop then on to Camden SC. By the time Camden was in sight, the J3 was close to running on the cork and it had to have fuel before flying any further. The fuel pumps were locked tight at Camden, no service was available this sunny Sunday morning. A local Cessna owner agreed to drain fuel from his airplane to help the J3 on its way. Using empty oil cans, it took a long time to transfer 18 quarts of fuel from the Cessna 150 to the J3. Grateful for the kind assist from a fellow flyer, the flight was soon on the way to Monroe NC, next to last stop.

## DOESN'T EVERYONE?



By this time, the Cub pilots were getting touchy on the subject of fuel, having found none available when least expected. A call up was made to Monroe Unicom while still in position to pick an alternate fuel stop in necessary. Asked if Monroe had fuel for the J3, the reply was "Of course, doesn't everyone?" This was one of the best stops of all, a splendid paved airport with an impressive circular terminal building adjacent to the FBO area and they did indeed have fuel for the J3.

## STILL THERE, FAMILIAR AND FRIENDLY

Homeward bound on the final leg to INT, the J3 seemed eager to finish the job, like a horse headed for the barn at the end of a long ride. The Bayside had been running on the lantern battery for four days. A call to the INT tower from 70 miles out brought an immediate response from a familiar and friendly voice, that of Frank Barber, who had cleared them for takeoff at the beginning of the adventure.

The little Cub had performed without a fault; the faithful Continental never once went into "automatic rough" that is sometimes imagined when flying over water or unfriendly terrain. Ben and Bill could chalk up one more fun flight in the J3, this one truly outstanding. This true tale proves that a fast and sophisticated airplane is not a prerequisite for having fun in flying. In fact, it is a little sad that some pilots miss the sheer joy of flying along a line on the chart with time to absorb the beauty and wonder of it all. The next time clear weather finds you speeding along from point A to point B in your fast, expensive, late model time machine, take along a sectional chart to supplement the RF chart. Look down and see what you have been missing.

## A SEQUEL

Since the Bahamas odyssey, Ben, Bill and the Cub have flown to Canada and back, a fun filled three -day adventure. But that is another story...