

# Virginia Aviation History Project



## THE INCREDIBLE FLIGHT OF 95CHARLIE September 1963 by Alvin Lefleur

The front was moving in much faster than expected. The pilot's briefing room at North Philadelphia airport was filled with bad news. It was the morning of September 15, 1963. On September 16, I was due in Lynchburg VA for a very important meeting. The weather report was one that meant turn around, go back home, and crawl under the covers. A big storm was coming in from the ocean and it looked like the East Coast from New York to the Carolinas was going to be socked in. No way could I fly straight south to Lynchburg. The only way was to go west and then work my way south.

95Charlie was the abbreviation for N1695C. She was a 1953 Cessna 180 with a conventional gear (a tail dragger). We had over 300 hours together and we knew each other well. I could just set it down anywhere. On a sandy beach or the furrows of a farm field. With the huge wing flaps it was like having airbrakes in the air. If you knew how to do it you could just about hang in one place like a helicopter. I have astonished many a control tower operator when they would say "95Charlie make a go around; you are too close to the plane in front of you" on final. And down would come those huge flaps to the full flap position. In would go the throttle to the fire wall giving me full power. At the same time I would pull back on the control wheel. The plane would almost stand still on its tail. Holding it like this for 30 seconds would be enough to space out the planes and I would resume my final approach.

From the North Philadelphia ground control came the voice giving me the usual information before reaching the active runway "Active Runway 24, cross wind gusts up to 30 knots, and the altimeter setting. Tower frequency 121.3". After switching to the tower and waiting for the take off clearance, a strong gust spun the plane completely around. Tower asked in a very subtle way "95Charlie, are you having any difficulties?" "No, I replied. Your airport is so beautiful I just thought I would take another look around before I leave."

When the final take off clearance was given a light rain began to fall and I knew I had to go like hell to beat the front which was almost on top of me. Visibility was down to 5 miles and, as the wheels left the ground, a cold chill swept over my body and my hands were cold and clammy with perspiration. I was heading west for Harrisburg, PA, with an airspeed of 150 knots hoping I could make a southward turn at that point. Harrisburg weather advised me not to go south. I had a better chance if I went another 100 miles west to Altoona PA and then made my southward swing.

When I reached Altoona the weather was so bad I couldn't even land there. The only safe way was to go north about 50 miles to a town called Phillipsburg, PA. By the time I landed in Phillipsburg I had been flying almost 3 hours and I was happy to be on the ground.

Another front from the West was moving in and it was expected the weather would break up during the night. In the morning visibility was 7 miles with light rain, ceiling 2000 feet. It was more than I needed to make it down to Lynchburg, VA. With a good night's sleep and a hearty breakfast under my belt, I was high tailing it south to Lynchburg. 400 miles later at Winchester, VA, the weather started to close in again. I had to be careful - I was nearing mountain country.

I decided to land at Winchester for gas and more weather information. An old crop duster pilot came over to look at 95Charlie while she was being gassed. After trading a few whoppers and telling about the lousy trip I was having he took me into the pilot's ready room and said with a twinkle in his eyes "Sonny, your troubles are over." Pointing to the air map in the wall, it was as plain as the nose on my face. From Winchester straight down on a heading of 210 degrees was a river and a railroad track going straight into Lynchburg. Even though the cloud cover was only 1500 feet with about 5 miles visibility, I could make the rest of the trip flying by the seat of my pants (no instruments necessary) just looking over the side and following the tracks and river. So I would know exactly where I was during this last leg. I checked off some of the cities and towns along the way on my Huntington Sectional Aeronautical chart and made notes of the flying time between my land marks. There were some small airports along the way where I could land should the weather become impossible. With these thoughts in mind, I thanked the old crop duster for his advice. I felt real good as I put the plane through the take-off check list. The engine was purring like a mountain lion just waiting to leap off the ground. There was no radio communication at these small fields and when it was



**Alvin Lefleur**

time to take off you just used your own discretion.

I could see the old crop duster standing next to the hangar watching me. I could still see the twinkle in his eyes and I thought of what he said in the pilot's ready room - "Sonny, your troubles are over." With that in mind I said to 95Charlie "Let's show him a real short field take off." Holding both feet down on the brakes, I pushed the throttle flush against the panel and she reared and trembled and everything vibrated, but she didn't move an inch forward. Once I released the brakes she leaped forward like coming off a catapult, tearing and screaming her way down the runway. As the tail wheel rose from the ground she was gaining momentum by leaps and bounds, down came the giant wing flaps and up she went every nut and bolt straining and lurching forward. Looking out my side window I could see the old man hands on his hips standing completely motionless. I gave him a left hand farewell salute but he stood still.

Before I knew it the first check point was in view. It was Front Royal, VA, with the railroad tracks and the river snaking its way southward. I was flying right under the clouds at 2500 feet. My next check point was Elkton. According to the distance and my map reference I flew over Elkton exactly on time. Waynesboro was the next and last check point for the Huntington chart, and I could see that the river and tracks took a westward heading of 270 degrees coming out of Waynesboro. This went about 5 miles before turning south again. My ETA at Waynesboro was also exactly on time and at this moment Waynesboro wasn't too far away.

As I completed the westward portion and was following the tracks south again a funny thing happened. It appeared that the tracks were getting closer to me. Looking at my altimeter it still read 2500 feet. I was skimming along underneath the clouds but the ground was getting closer. A quick glance at the map showed no reason for this to happen and there wasn't any time to study the situation as the ground and tracks were steadily getting closer. Now the trees appeared to be getting closer to my side vision. My airspeed indicator read 140 knots. The closer the ground and the trees on the side appeared the faster it seemed I was flying. Yet I was holding my altitude and the airspeed remained constant. The plane was performing but something was happening out side. Something unexplainable, some crazy thing was going on and my brain could not compute what was happening. I wanted to look at the map again but things were happening so fast I dared not take my eyes from the window.

OH MY GOD! I'm in a canyon! The adrenalin in my body exploded. The first thought was to turn around, make a 180 degree turn, and get the hell out of there. A quick glance at my wing tips showed that a turn in either direction was impossible. The walls of the canyon were practically touching the wing tips. There were beautiful pine trees stalking the plane. "Hit the airbrakes" my mind was screaming like I do if I am too close to another plane during final approach. I try it but it is no good. It puts the nose too high and almost lifts me into the clouds. How much time do I have before the road and the railroad tracks disappear into the clouds?

The ground is getting higher and higher. There is a man kneeling beside a car on the side of the road with a flat tire. I am so close to him as I pass I can see the lug wrench in his hand. I also see the lugs he took off laying on the ground next to the hub cap. He looks up at me over his shoulder and I never see him again.

I am now flying just above stalling speed. With full flaps I can hold it in the air at around 40 knots. On the back seat I have floatation gear and seat pads so I reach back and surround myself with what ever protection I can find. The road and railroad tracks give me no relief to try and land because of poles and high tension lines. The will to survive keeps me just out of the clouds enough to see until the very end.

And now it comes. To keep from knowingly hitting the trees as the railroad tracks and road climb higher and higher, I must pull back on the control and fly higher. My body is drenched with perspiration. There are no thoughts of goodbye to family and friends.

It's all happening too fast. Just a few moments ago I was on my way to Lynchburg, VA. Now I am in the midst of another journey. The clouds engulf the plane. I feel very peaceful. I cannot even see my wings. The plane seems to be suspended in a bottle of milk and I am suspended in the plane. Even the motor seems quiet as it is cushioned in the cotton web of the clouds. Time seems to have stopped. My eyes are transfixed out the window - the plane seems to be flying by itself. I didn't hear or feel any crash. I'm not dead, but then you never hear the shot or feel the bullet that kills you.

Only when my eyes come back to the instrument panel do I realize I am still alive. My compass heading is still around 270 degrees and my altimeter shows I have climbed to 3,500 feet. My turn and bank shows I am flying straight and level. I am at least 1,000 feet into the clouds and am still in the canyon. All of a sudden I see something black, it's getting bigger. It's an opening. I aim for it like an eagle swooping down on its prey. It's a valley surrounded by mountains whose tops go into the

clouds. Then I spot the road and tracks again. As I fly around the valley I see no entrance or exit - it is a solid wall of mountains going into the clouds.

I decide to land in one of the farm fields below. There is one that appears to be friendly. I can see car tracks in the dirt alongside the furrows. I knew I was in the Montebello omni range area west of Waynesboro. Never before have I had to use the emergency MAYDAY frequency 121.5. In case I crashed while attempting to land, I thought it would be a good idea to let someone know what was happening. I rehearsed in my mind what I was going to say. I finally put my story together and started transmitting. "MAYDAY- MAYDAY- MAYDAY. This is Cessna 1695Charlie about 25 miles southwest of Waynesboro. Do you read me?" I repeated this three times and waited for an answer. I expected a rash of answers, but all was quiet. Again I repeated my MAYDAY message - again all was quiet. I checked my radio but all was working. I said to myself "the hell with it; we are going down." I scanned the field for a final look and was satisfied there were no hidden obstructions. It was a beautiful short field landing. There no words to describe my feelings when I cut the motor and all was quiet. I was alive, the plane was in one piece and I didn't know or care where I was.

Then I realized nobody was around. Someone should have heard the plane flying around before I landed. I noticed a wisp of smoke over the hill and looked in that direction. It was a very old farm house and as I approached the front yard, an elderly lady came out on the front porch with a shot gun aimed in my direction. I came too far to be shot by some crazy old lady so I stopped dead in my tracks and raised my hands over my head. She asked me who I was and what I was doing there. I replied "I am an aviator. I just landed my airplane in the field on the other side of this field. Didn't you hear me or see me flying before I landed?" She didn't answer and I wondered to myself why I used the word 'aviator' instead of 'pilot'. Maybe, I thought, she wouldn't know what the word 'pilot' meant. She told me that the radio said two convicts had escaped from a nearby prison and she thought I might be one of

them. I told her to keep calm and just follow me down the road and over the hill so she could see the airplane. As she walked behind me, my hands still in the air, with that big shot gun aimed at my back, my mind played back the incidents of the last hour and I just couldn't believe what was happening. I still had no idea what caused me to fly into the canyon. It was 10 miracles in one that I flew out in one piece, and now here I am just a few minutes away from a forced landing in some mountain farm field with hands in the air and a shot gun in my back. It was just too much. Just too much of too much. Once she spotted the plane it was all over. She took me back to the farm house, gave me some food and before I knew it I was sound asleep on the couch on the porch.

Hours later I awoke to the most astonishing sight of my life. The sun was shining, not a cloud in the sky and the mountains formed a solid wall all around the valley going thousands of feet up in the sky. Thanking the old lady I hurried back to 95 Charlie. I had another surprise. There were at least 10 kids climbing all over the plane and there were a few of them inside playing with the controls. There were also a few adults around taking it all in. There was no damage to the plane or landing gear and with the help of everybody I cleared a path to use as a runway for my takeoff. My luck still held out; there was a slight wind blowing in the direction I was going to take off. I needed all the help I could get and I knew it would be a one shot try. I only had a short distance to get off the ground and then I would have to make a sharp turning climb to get altitude.

Back in the plane I gave it plenty of time to warm up. After going thru what I did I wasn't about to let anything happen now. We had pushed 95Charlie way back into a corner of the field. Every foot counted. As I prepared for a very very short field takeoff I thought I saw the old crop duster from Winchester standing in the crowd watching me with that twinkle in his eyes and I could hear his voice saying "Sonny, your troubles are over."

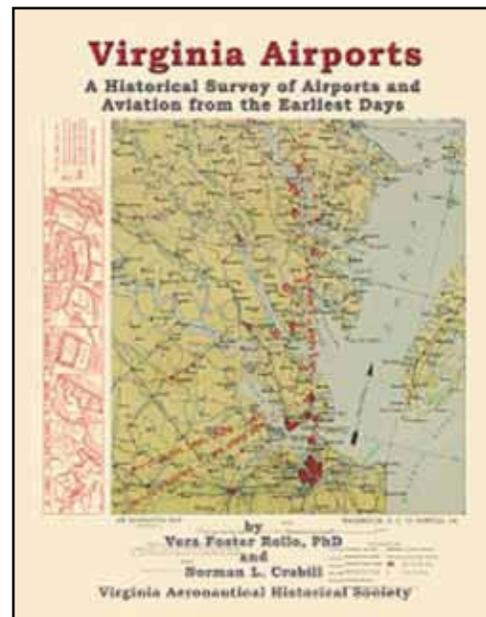
I know it was my imagination but it made me feel nothing bad could happen and I held the brakes with my legs and rammed the throttle to the wall.

This time the dirt and rocks started to fly back from the propwash and I held her back until I felt every part of the plane trying to leap forward. When I released the brakes it wasn't the same as taking off from hard concrete. The dirt and furrows absorbed a lot of the power and at first she lumbered slowly forward taking a little hop and skip and a jump as she gathered speed. I waited until the last second I had, to gather enough airspeed before I helped her with the big wing flaps. The flaps would give me more lift but they would also slow me down. As she came off the ground the stall warning indicator was screaming. At about 100 feet I raised the flaps to get more airspeed and pushed the nose down. The stall indicator went quiet and she dropped about 50 feet, but it worked. I had enough airspeed to make a turning climb. Again, my hands were wet from sweat. The sun was shining, the sky was clear, and we were climbing and turning. The altimeter read 5000 feet as I neared the top of the mountain peaks. I tried to find the canyon that took me into the valley, but to no avail.

"Some day, I'll come back and find you," I said to myself as I tuned into the Montebello omni range and set a heading for Lynchburg. In the back of my mind I heard the words "Sonny, your troubles are over." Only this time, the twinkle was in my eyes.

An incredible similarity of two flying routes from Winchester Airport south to Waynesboro was the cause for the incredible flight of 95Charlie. The canyon that 95Charlie flew through was 100 feet wide, 6 miles long, and 4,458 feet high. The flight altitude was between 2500 and 3500 feet and three miles of this odyssey through the canyon was flown in the clouds with no visibility whatsoever.

Note: As chronicled in the Winter 2013 issue of the VAHS Eagle, on March 1, 1964, 18 months after 95Charlie's incredible flight through the canyon, 95Charlie and Al Lefleur made history by flying to Cuba and back to rescue a friend.



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