

Mountain Flying School

By Grant Besley, CFI

As the altimeter rounded 8,000, my student smiled at me and explained "I've never had her above 8,000 before." The pristine Cessna 170B chugged onward and upward. We were climbing at a solid 300 fpm in the rare New Mexico air. Fall had arrived and lots of the trees had turned just in time for the New Mexico Pilots Association Mountain Flying Seminar. The air was clear and mild. I pointed to the road below and reminded Gene that we fly IFR in the mountains; "I follow roads, rivers and railroads." Observing the dense forest beneath us it was obvious that this was no place to have to land. Yet, if one was observant, there were areas available that we could glide to and survive in the event of an engine failure. I coached my student to stay near the road, look for places to land, and keep in mind places we had just gone by.

Although the winds were light, I asked Gene to visualize the winds and pick a mountain side where we would get lift. He did so and we got an extra couple of hundred feet per minute added to the VSI. We reviewed the ridge crossing rules and discussed how altitude was our friend for the next forty miles. At 10,500 Gene smiled and shook his head. We were a comfortable distance above our pass and had never been out of gliding distance from a suitable emergency landing field. We reviewed the fact that the idea was to minimize our risk. Gene commented that he "wished he had done this years ago".

The flight was not to make Gene an experienced mountain pilot. It was to demonstrate and reinforce the principles we had discussed in the three hour ground school the evening before. Like a new instrument rating, Gene will go home with the tools to learn. We slid through several passes and valleys and let down into Taos where the temperatures already had the density altitudes at 9,000 feet. We did several take offs and landings. Gene had the taildragger wired. It was evident that we were at max gross for the temperature and altitude.

Gene passed up an intended landing airport and got an "A" for judgement. He nailed a gusty cross wind landing in Santa Fe. Gene went home Saturday with three hours of ground school, two hours of flight demonstration and experience, and a fresh Flight Review. The fear of the "rocks" was gone but with a new knowledge and respect for them, Gene was going to do more mountain flying.