The Bath Air Force, Part Two:

Warren Smith

Gwen Alligood, Warren Smith, and Warren's Cessna 172

By

Gwen Alligood

How do you feel as you're gliding through the clouds in an airplane? I hope that you don't suffer from vertigo! To many an experienced airman, it's more than just an "uplifting" event. For
Bath resident Warren Smith, owner of three video rental stores in Washington, Kinston, and Wilson, his Cessna 172 is a more economical means of travel than the more familiar automobile.

On a warm but breezy October afternoon, Dr. Armstrong and I watched as Mr. Smith landed his small-engine plane in an old field, which serves as his runway. Inside the newly-built hanger and amid the hammering of workmen installing light fixtures, we asked him about his interest in flying.

Life: What we'd like to ask you first is what kind of plane is this, how you came to get it, and what you use it for?

Mr. Smith: This is a Cessna 172, which is a four-passenger, single-engine airplane. It's the most popular airplane in the world. There have been over 30,000 of them built. There's a lot of compromising [in building planes]. This seems to be about the best all-round set of compromises for most people's needs. I looked in a publication called Trade A Plane, which lists all of the aircraft in the country. After looking for several months and checking several different planes, I finally found this one in Raleigh. So I flew up to Raleigh, took a look at it, came to terms, and a fellow flew it down here. Bob Blade, who's a local mechanic out here, checked it over and said everything look good to him mechanically. So I bought it. I've been very, very satisfied with it.

Life: What power motor does it have?
Mr. Smith: This is 160 horsepower. That's pretty much standard for the smaller planes; anywhere from 130 to 160-170 horsepower is what most of them have.

Life: Mr. Smith explained that he bought his plane because he was spending so much time driving to his video rental stores in Kinston, Wilson, and Washington.

Mr. Smith: I was spending so much time driving back and forth that after driving over 40,000 miles per year, I decided there had to be a better way. So now instead of having an hour and a half ride or even longer, for example, to Wilson store, that's only 34 minutes in an airplane. So it's mostly a time saver.

Life: Your landing field here used to be a farm, right?

Mr. Smith: Right. This is all farm land. We used to farm all this; I just dedicated this to the use of the airplane.

Life: How do you work it with the cars? Do you leave a car here and then one in Wilson?

Mr. Smith: Yes. I have a car in Wilson at the airport there, and then I leave one at the airport in Kinston. Normally, if I'm going to Washington, I just drive.

Life: What about the safety of this plane?

Mr. Smith: That was another reason that I got the plane; it's a lot safer than driving a car.

Life: I've heard that that's really statistically true.

Mr. Smith: Especially on the Cessna 172. The safety record on that is within just a few hundredths of a percent of the safety record that commercial aviation has. It's a lot safer than a car.

Life: You were telling me one time about the real dangers with sudden wind coming up. What about the weather?

Mr. Smith: The number one killer in general aviation so far as airplanes are concerned is the weather. A good analogy could be made with a boat. On a day like today when the wind is calm and it's nice and pretty, you can just get in your boat and go and there's not much danger. But if you were to go out there when it's foggy or if the wind is blowing hard and the water's really rough—usually if it's a bad day to use the boat, it's a bad day to use the airplane. And on certain days you just can't go. But I've only been prevented from going, since last December when I got the plane, maybe three days.

Life: Do you have some source for the weather, or do you just watch TV like we do?

Mr. Smith: I watch the television very closely; and then if I have any doubts, I call the New Bern Flight Service. That's a weather service for general
aviation. I can call on an 800 number, and they can tell me what the weather conditions are at Wilson or Raleigh or wherever I'm going. If it's a long trip, they'll tell you the en route weather. They tell you about the winds aloft—what direction, what velocity, where you might encounter thunderstorms or anything that may be of a hazard. They also tell you whether or not there are any notifications to airmen. For example, they can tell you if a particular runway is out of service or if there's some construction going on at the airport or anything that can affect the safety of the flight.

Life: When did you build this hanger?

Mr. Smith: I built this this summer, and I'm just in the final stages of getting it completed.

Life: Do you think there is a real need to have one for your plane, or could you just leave it out?

Mr. Smith: You could leave it out, but the planes really deteriorate pretty badly from the sunlight, especially the avionics—navigational radios, communication radios. The radios will cost almost as much as the plane. In other words, the electronics is about a third of the cost, the plane itself is about a third, and the engine is about a third.

Life: What happens in the event that you get up there and you run out of gas because of a leaky fuel line, or something causes the motor to stop? What do you do?

Mr. Smith: This was my primary concern, and I guess it's most people's primary concern when they first start. The first thing is that the engines are extremely reliable. This particular engine has a failure rate somewhere in the neighborhood of about once every 80,000 hours. It runs out of fuel much more often than just a mechanical breakage on the engine. So they are very, very reliable, but occasionally they do stop. And when they do, you then make a forced landing. It's the same procedure, essentially, that I just did when I came in and landed [a few minutes earlier]. The only thing you need to do is to just fly the plane to wherever you're going. Obviously it can't stay up, so you have to come down and select a good landing site, which could be a highway or an open field. You wouldn't want to land in trees, for example. But other than that, you can just make a normal landing. And in all likelihood, as flat as the area is in Eastern North Carolina, there are just hundreds and hundreds of places that you could put it down.

Life: If worse came to worse, how would it be in the water? Would that be bad?

Mr. Smith: Well, it would be bad for the plane, but it wouldn't be bad for the occupants. I mean, you could total the plane and just walk away from it.

Life: The parachute stuff's out now?

Mr. Smith: Yes. You're much safer to fly the plane down.
Life: You know, you read about these plane accidents, but just think of how many car wrecks there are.

Mr. Smith: That's one of the reasons that when an airplane crashes, it makes the news because it is such an unusual occurrence. Usually what happens in the accidents is that the person gets committed to some particular course of action. The pilot decides that he wants to go from point A to point B. But when he gets to point B, the weather's getting bad, and he keeps trying to work it out. He usually proceeds much, much too long on that course. He should have taken an alternate--gone somewhere else, returned home. Occasionally we all put the blinders on--this is where we're trying to go--and just start violating good, reasonable judgement. Judgement is kind of hard to teach, but I think that experience, reading all the accident reports, and flying almost everyday, like I do, into various weather conditions, you see how all this works. And you decide there are certain things, like thunderstorms, that you just absolutely avoid like the plague.

Life: I guess in this day and time there are so many places you can land, you almost surely can find something.

Mr. Smith: If you were at a normal cruising altitude, say three, or four, 5,000 feet, and if the engine were to quit, from there with the engine stopped, the glide ratio is better than ten to one; in fact, on a lot of planes the ratio is as high as 20 to one. So that's 4,000 feet times 20 would be 80,000 feet. Divide that by 6,000 feet, and you have ten miles. So if you draw a ten-mile circle, there's a tremendous amount of area [in which to land]. For example, we could glide from here [Bath Creek] to Texasgulf; we could almost make it back to Washington. Look at this runway here; there're lots of little runways all over the place. And, besides, there's no law that says you have to land on a runway. In a time of emergency you could put it on a highway or one of the secondary dirt roads or a pasture.

Life: What about a farming field?

Mr. Smith: I would sure take that before I would the woods [laughs]! When the planes were smaller and traveled even slower, that was just routine, before there were so many airports, to land them in the fields.

Life: How much does the temperature drop up there?

Mr. Smith: On a standard day, your temperature will drop off three degrees Fahrenheit per thousand feet increase in elevation. So if you go up 4,000 feet, you would be looking at a 12-degree drop in the temperature.

Life: How high can you go?

Mr. Smith: I believe they list the ceiling on the plane at 12,000 or 13,000 feet. I've never had it over 8,000. Typically, on a short trip from here to Kinston, for example, I usually go at 2000 or 3000 feet.
Life: What about the other planes?

Mr. Smith: [Laughs] It pays to look out for them!

Life: Have you gone to Raleigh?

Mr. Smith: Oh, yes!

Life: And landed at the big airport?

Mr. Smith: Numbers of times.

Life: Do you have to radio in and get clearance?

Mr. Smith: Yes. Raleigh is a what they call an ARSER—it's an airport radar service area. Those fairly busy airports, such as Raleigh, require or mandate that you have radio communications with the air traffic controls.

Life: Mr. Smith told us that he wouldn't consider going to an airport larger than Raleigh.

Mr. Smith: I would not even consider flying my plane in there. They're just too busy, they're set up for commercial use only, they have very expensive landing fees, and everything costs.

Life: How much does it cost at Raleigh?

Mr. Smith: Nothing. Normally, you know, they figure that you have to buy your fuel somewhere, and they have a pretty healthy profit in the fuel.

Life: What's the longest trip you can take with your gas capacity?

Mr. Smith: You consider everything in a "no wind" situation so that the wind's not helping or hurting you. Of course, it depends on the power settings and how fast you want to go. The faster you go, the less range you have. Normally, at a standard cruise, I can travel around 450 miles one way.

Life: That's about as far as you're going to want to go.

Mr. Smith: That's about as far as your bladder can stand it!

Life: You don't have nice stewardesses and all that?

Mr. Smith: No, [laughing] I don't have the stewardesses and the bathrooms.

Life: You can carry two people?

Mr. Smith: Four.

Life: At one time you could only fly with another licensed flyer. Can you fly other people now?

Mr. Smith: Right. That's when I had a student pilot's license; now I have a private license. So as long as I'm not carrying for hire, I could take both of you and fly around as long as I didn't charge you for it. They do have a kind of a gray area here where they do allow the pilot to charge the expenses.

Life: Where did you go to get your license?

Mr. Smith: Of course, the licenses are
from the FAA, and there are several ways of doing it. I took a home-study course, and then I took flight lessons from several of the local instructors. Larry Lee was my first instructor, and Robby Walker was my second instructor. Robby's the one who recommended me to the FAA and said that I had performed certain things and performed certain skills. Then you have to go and take a check ride--kind of like getting your driver's license, except there's a little more to it than just getting your driver's license.

Life: What kind of price range are you talking about for a plane like this?

Mr. Smith: Well, since they're no longer making any more small single-engine airplanes...

Life: They don't make them anymore?

Mr. Smith: For all practical purposes, no. There's one or two very small companies that are making a few, but Cessna is at present making no single-engine, small single-engine, or piston-engine airplanes. I think someone told me the other day that Cessna is going to go back into production, so that has kept the price of the used market up. But you're basically looking at anywhere from the $10,000 to $25,000 range.

Life: It seems that these things would go up in value; these little planes that they quit making.

Mr. Smith: They are. I probably paid more for this plane used, when it was ten years old, than it sold for new.

Life: You seem sold on flying as the way to go.

Mr. Smith: Oh, I think it's great if you have a need. As recreation I think it's fairly expensive. I mean, if you just want to fly just because you enjoy flying, you can figure that it would probably cost between $3,000 and $4,000 equipment rental and hiring instructors. I think a plane such as this rents for about $60 per hour, and it takes a minimum of 40 hours of instruction.

Life: But you use yours for business primarily?

Mr. Smith: Strictly business.

Life: And, as such, it really is more economical, I guess, in the long run?

Mr. Smith: It really is. If you discounted the high price of the fuel and just looked at it on a gallons per mile basis since you are going in a straight line rather than crooking all around, it's about as economical as a car. But the airplane has a lot of fixed costs that a car doesn't have. Insurance is very expensive. You have to have an annual inspection done every year.

Life: Who's your mechanic?

Mr. Smith: Bob Blake. I think he's an exceptionally good one. It's kind of like getting your car inspected, except that they really inspect it. And that could be anywhere
from $700 to $1,500 per year just for the inspection. So if you don't fly fairly much, it's cheaper to rent the airplane.

Life: What about flying at night with instruments? Can you do this?

Mr. Smith: The plane has all the instruments. Flying at night can be done under visual flight rules, and I've done a lot of that. In fact, that is required.

Life: Could you land here at night?

Mr. Smith: Yes, I've landed here several times at night.

Life: Without lights?

Mr. Smith: Yes.

Life: You do have lights on the plane?

Mr. Smith: Yes. I've got lights on the plane, and I have lights on my house. So I can line up with my house, and I can see the silhouette of the creek and the outline there and the reflectors in here. With the lights of the plane I can see it. I don't like to do it and I don't recommend it but the only reason that I can do it is that I'm very, very familiar with this particular area. I would never try to come in here at night if it were a first-time airport because you have an excellent chance of getting yourself killed. Anyway, I'm in the process now of putting lights in.

Life: We walked over to the plane.
Warren Smith taking off in his Cessna 172

That thing's not as heavy as a big car, is it?

Mr. Smith: Oh, no! I think 1350 pounds or so.

Life: Mr. Smith explained that the design of planes hasn't changed much.

Mr. Smith: Wings are wings, and engines are engines. Airplanes like this have not changed much, really, in the last 50 years. The big improvements in aviation have come from the electronics, the navigation aids, the radio beacons. People used to use their watches; they used their compass and some rough map or chart. We still are required to be able to do that. Last week I went down to...
Georgia on the airplane. Went down to Moultrie, Georgia, to look at another airplane. It's just a question of looking at the big map and looking at the radio stations--what frequencies--and dial in the numbers and then fly to this radio station and then fly to the next one. There's really nothing to it.

Coming in for a landing, Bath Creek in background

CONCLUSION

Upon our leaving the field, what came to my mind most of all was the enthusiasm that Mr. Smith has for flying and yet the seriousness with which he accepts the dangers that this method of transportation might present. Mr. Smith was very informative about his hobby and in an easy-going, humorous manner, was eager to share with us his love for flying and for the Bath area.