

Tanks for nothing

Colin Dibdin

With 70-knot westerly winds

forecast, I calculated a longer-than-usual flight from Bankstown to Griffith in NSW. It would also be turbulent over the ranges, but with the ceiling and visibility fine, I was keen to take my future wife to meet my parents and also to impress her with my ability to pilot an aeroplane – a Grumman Lynx. It was her first time in a light aircraft.

Although I had more than 100 hours logged in Piper, Cessna and Grumman four-seaters, I had less than one hour – a check-ride the day before – on the Lynx. The Lynx could not carry more than two people and minimal luggage, but I was attracted by its sporty appearance, relatively high cruise speed and the fact that it would consume only around 4 gallons per hour during the cruise.

There was a fuel shortage at Bankstown, so we headed first to Camden. Camden Tower advised that the main runway was not available, and cleared us for the shorter one. We landed uneventfully and I filled one tank to capacity and the other to half full. On the wing beside each fuel cap, the capacity was listed as 22 gallons.

Normally I would have filled both tanks, but taking into account our take-off weight and the shorter runway, I didn't want to risk the aircraft being too



Grumman Lynx VH-SZO and future wife Yung at Camden airport 1980 (Colin Dibdin)

heavy to leave the ground. Besides, I had already determined that with more than 30 gallons on board, and a low consumption rate, I had more than enough to reach Griffith in the headwind with adequate reserves.

The flight was predictably rough over the ranges as we tracked via Mittagong and Yass. Once clear of the ranges it became smoother but the groundspeed was still slow as we continued towards our next turning point, Cootamundra. My passenger wasn't saying much, but I imagined the increasing esteem in which she undoubtedly held me.

We had been flying nearly three hours since our departure from Camden. The fuel gauges read less than I expected, so I started keeping an eye on them and thinking about my fuel situation. However, my calculations reassured me that all was going to plan.

While passing Cootamundra and turning towards Griffith, I became a little concerned that one of the gauges was now indicating close to empty. Was it faulty? I thought a little more, looked at the fuel cap, and suddenly realised that 22 gallons was the Lynx's total fuel capacity, not the capacity in each wing.

Complacency over. Whatever fuel I had left, it wouldn't get me to Griffith.

Wagga Wagga was in sight on my left-hand side, and I was confident that fuel would be available there. I turned to make it my new destination, and leaned the mixture to conserve the remaining fuel while keeping an eye open for suitable forced-landing sites in case the engine stopped. The engine kept running. We touched down at Wagga and taxied to the fuel bowser. My passenger seemed happy to be on the ground. I looked in the tanks but didn't see much.

We had an hour's wait for the refueller and I took the opportunity to visit Flight Service and re-plan the last leg – from Wagga to Griffith – thoroughly and with the benefit of a more accurate knowledge of my aircraft's fuel capacity. I found that we could safely depart with full tanks. I wondered how much fuel I would need to add.

The gentleman who refuelled the Lynx for us wasn't

very expressive. He simply said, 'It took 22 gallons,' and accepted my payment.

It's nice to be able to live and learn from our mistakes, and I clearly made a few on that day. I'm more careful now with aircraft familiarisation and pre-flight planning, and less relaxed in-flight, even if all seems to be going well. I also recognise that Cootamundra aerodrome, which was right beneath me, would have been a sensible place to land and assess my situation instead of risking fuel exhaustion.

We reached Griffith and I entertained my family with tales of turbulence and unexpected landings en route. I made no mention of my questionable airmanship. My passenger was made to feel part of the family. A couple of days later, we had a smooth and easy flight back to Bankstown.

I am pleased to report that my passenger and I have now been happily married for 27 years. For some reason, though, she has not flown with me again. ■



Advertise in **Flight Safety Australia**
and reach over **85,000 aviation**
professionals who are looking
for your products and services.

For bookings, call **131 757** – limited advertising space available.