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“The Longest Flight in History”

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The Longest Flight in History: Fred Martin

If a sampling of pilots or other aviation enthusiasts were quizzed on what was the longest endurance flight by an airplane in the history of the world, most might not know the correct answer. They might think of pioneering global military flights in aerial re-fueled bombers or transports. Or, they might guess that it was the epic non-stop, unrefueled, world-circling flight of the Rutan Voyager that is now displayed in the National Air and Space Museum in Washington D.C.

But the actual record holder is far more prosaic and unexpected. The longest flight in history was accomplished in the world's most popular personal airplane, a Cessna 172. From December, 1958 to February 7, 1959, Bob Timm and John Cook flew Cessna November Niner One Seven Two Bravo, without landing, for 64 days, 22 hours, and 19 minutes. The flight covered over 150,000 miles in nearly 1,559 continuous hours of operation on the airplane's 145 horse power Continental engine. It is a flight endurance record, set over sixty-five years ago, that has never been broken.

The flight was sponsored by the Hacienda Hotel in Las Vegas as a publicity and fund-raising event. Daily refueling was accomplished by lowering a hose to a truck driving beneath the Cessna at 80 miles per hour on a remote stretch of road in the California desert, and refueling took about three minutes. In all, 128 refuelings were required. Food, water and other provisions were attached to the line as it was winched back up. All but the pilot's seat were removed to make space for a foam sleeping mat and small wash basin. Timm and Cook traded four hour shifts at the controls. When the Cessna finally landed after well over two months aloft, it was grimy and oil-streaked. The generator, fuel pump, tachometer, autopilot, cabin heater, landing lights and fuel gauges had all failed, but the engine struggled on, cylinders and spark plugs fouled with carbon deposits.

The publicity stunt faded in popular consciousness and the airplane was sold off to a Canadian pilot who flew it as his personal airplane long after. Years later, Seven-Two Bravo was recovered from a farm in Carrot River,

Saskatchewan, returned to Las Vegas and restored to original condition. This world record was accomplished not in an exotic experimental aircraft beyond the reach of average pilots, but rather in the Cessna 172 that so many pilots have known as their own personal airplane. Seven-Two Bravo can thus be a touchstone that connects the everyday prosaic flights of so many to a world record achievement in aviation. It was a record set by average aviators in a common airplane.



Cessna N9172B, the One Seventy-Two that holds the world's flight endurance record of 64 days, 22 hours, 19 minutes. The airplane is on permanent display at the Harry Reid Airport passenger terminal in Las Vegas, Nevada. Fred Martin 2010



Fred with a 172 Skyhawk at Cowboy Aviation in Laramie. Note the windsock -upper right- that always seemed stuck in the same position at most Wyoming airports.