Weather Flying Over the Jungle

Life as a pilot here is seldom glamorous or easy. It is very challenging work demanding quick decisions at high stakes. It's almost always hot - really, really hot. Except in dry season, then it's just moderately hot. Fortunately, during the dry season, we don't have to deal with the weather as much, it's just hazy - really, really hazy. Sometimes the visibility drops to less than a mile in nothing but haze. Because the Congo is both in the northern and southern hemispheres, one part is always in dry season and on the opposite side of the equator is rainy season. Therefore, we frequently have days where both seasons are encountered.

We received a call on a Sunday regarding a man who was involved in an accident and needed to be evacuated to receive medical care. He was at one of the more remote strips, just at the outer edge of the range of our aircraft. A majority of the flight would be in dry season haze, but before I departed Kinshasa early Monday morning, satellite imagery had already indicated there were buildups and large storm systems billowing to the east of my destination. After a quick intermediate fuel stop, I continued northward. 347 miles to go. The closer I got to the equator, the more and more I could see the last hour of the trip would involve lots of twisting and turning to stay out of the clouds. Eventually, I could no longer avoid clouds and could only fly through. 80 Miles to go.

Not my picture, but it is what a trusty Cessna 206 looks like over vast jungle.

At first it wasn't too bad, very light rain, and little turbulence; but I began to spend more time inside clouds than outside them and they began to get angry… the downdrafts became significant, and the rain loudly pelted the windshield. Something needed to change. As I left one particularly rough cloud, I caught a glimpse of a hole down and began a steep spiraling turn. This allowed for a maximum descent rate while keeping the speed in check and also kept me in the center of the hole so I could see. The bottom of the clouds was about 3,000 feet above the thick jungle canopy. 30 miles to go. I continued on underneath the clouds and I could now see the rain shafts, and deduce where the turbulence and wind was going to be. But again, the clouds continued to get darker and darker and lower and lower…. 10 miles to go.

The clouds were higher to the west, the visibility was still decent, and I could see sunlight poking through and lighting up the trees, so I made a contingency plan to head towards that direction if things got too dicey on my current route and continued on. The bases of the clouds had forced me down to 500 feet above the trees, which I had set as my own personal minimum. Under no circumstances would I go any lower. 7 miles to go. I started seeing some dirt roads that looked familiar leading up to the airstrip, but my heart sank as I came upon a huge rain shaft, about 10 miles in diameter

centered where the tiny airstrip should have been. Many times, rain is only an inconvenience; we typically can fly through it with little issue and still be able to see what we need to (as long as we are not in the clouds). But this was - excuse my southernism - a real “frog drowner.” Visibility would have been nil no matter what techniques I would have employed had I flown into it. I flew around the rain shaft to the north to see if I could sneak in on the back side but all I saw was a seemingly solid wall of rain. The other potential issue with rain shafts is sometimes they are caused by microbursts, or very strong and very large downdrafts of air- also something you don't want to fly into at all---much less when you are low over the jungle.

This is not my picture, as I was a bit to occupied to take one. However, this is a good example of what a small rain shaft looks like from the air.

I had plenty of fuel, so loitering in the vicinity to wait out the storm could have been an option. However, to the east (weather here flows east to west typically, not west to east like it does in the states) it just looked even darker, lower clouds and more rain as far as I could see. I had no choice but to turn around turn around and fly the 3 hours back empty. The injured person would have to wait another day. I radioed one of our other planes to let them know my plan and see if maybe they had any other suggestions. They affirmed my decision. I had to return to the only place that had fuel for the airplane within a 350-mile radius. I pointed the nose south west towards higher ceilings and better visibility and began plotting my way back. It was still difficult work; I had to fly nearly 30 miles out of the way to avoid the massive (and still growing) cumulonimbus clouds before I could turn back on course. As I flew further south, rain gave way to dry season and I found myself once again in calm haze.

I crossed the Kasai River and began my descent and soon thereafter landed (my bladder was sooooo happy), and spent the night in one of the villages MAF used to call home. The next morning was clear and calm and I took off with a re-fueled airplane. The weather this time was much different. The system had rained itself out overnight, leaving a high overcast layer keeping the earth below much cooler. I landed with ease at Djolu, loaded the passengers, and was on my way back in no time. I apologized for not being able to retrieve them the previous day, and they graciously understood and applauded my decision to turn back. It had begun to rain very hard about 45 minutes prior to my arrival the previous day, and the rain didn’t let up until nearly 4 hours after I made the decision to head back - long after my fuel reserves would have been depleted.

After my return to Ndolo, our chief pilot congratulated me on a well-made decision, and setting an MAF Congo record for the most miles flown to get around weather (700 total). At this airstrip, and many, many others, MAF is the ONLY operation to go there. This is just another reason we are here.