

THE DAY THE SKY FELL

Friday, September 27, 2024. An occluded weather front has been lying on a NE-SW line over the Blue Ridge mountains for days, dumping rain on the Western North Carolina region and particularly on the valleys of the French Broad River, the Pigeon River and the Swannanoah River. Weathercasters posted flash flood warnings. Some flooding has occurred but, by and large, rising water retreated quickly.

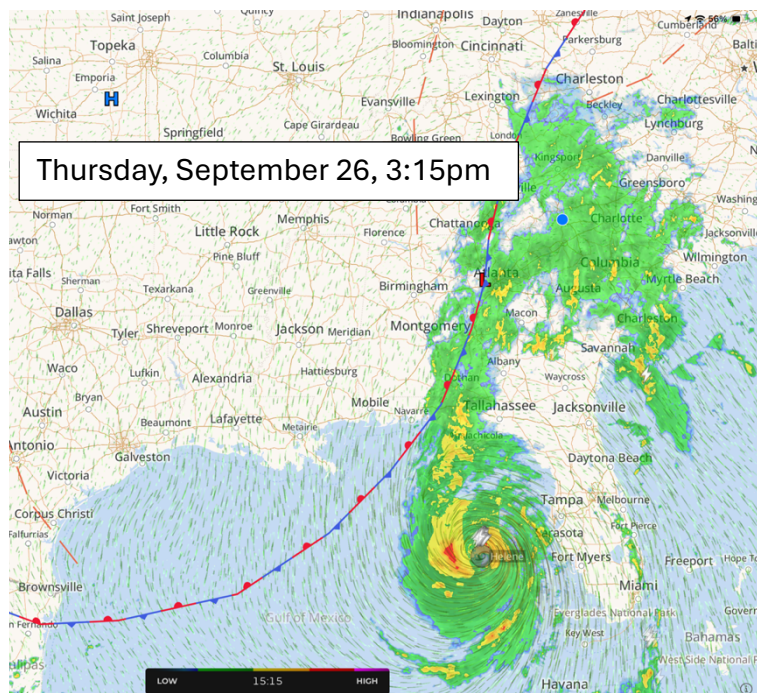
Pilots and aircraft owners at airports vulnerable to flooding gave a sigh of relief watching the morning news on Friday. We have experienced flooding before, usually during hurricane seasons when outer bands of storms in the Gulf of Mexico send an abundance of rain our way, but that has been more an annoyance than anything. Wheel bearings need to be cleaned and repacked, fairings and wheel pants cleaned off, that sort of thing; nothing major.



Friday, September 27, was different.

The tone and timbre of the weathercasters became more and more urgent. Emergency response officials were on TV and radio urging people to take notice: This was going to be a day unlike any seen in our lifetimes. A major hurricane, fueled by unusually warm water in the Gulf, was striking the west coast of Florida along a north-south frontal boundary that was sending it directly to the panhandle of the state and threatened to forward it northward to Georgia, South Carolina, Western North Carolina and Eastern Tennessee. Alerts went up all along that frontal line; people in Georgia began to take notice. People in Western North

Carolina yawned, put down their coffee cups or took them up again and went about their usual business, albeit with some annoying road closures in the lower lying areas.



At my airfield in Hendersonville, we saw a familiar line of flood water. The local pilots refer to our runway as “Lake Johnson” after the former owner. One joker posted photos a few years back of himself and his daughter kayaking on the runway. We thought that was fun and might warrant a regatta the next time.

Ha Ha.

My own concerns were the same as my friend, John, whose airplane is hangared at a private residence on the north end of our little airfield. John is a former Air Force weather observer who emailed me, asking about the local flood history. We were both wishing the track to move east. He wrote: “I hope the storm moves enough to lessen the amount of additional rain we get tomorrow....” I wrote him back: “It (drains) north, John. With the water over New Hope Road to the north, the concern is for blockages downstream - beaver dams, debris - if the flow can be maintained we should be right at high water, but there’s all that rain coming tonight .. uncharted territory around here.”

A note at this point: water runs downhill; always has, always will. A corollary to that astute observation is that water also seeks its own level. If the flow is blocked by whatever impediment, it will rise to the top of the blockage, then overflow and continue its inexorable trip to lower ground. The backup is what gets us. We have a multiple whammy of beaver dams, roads, houses built in the flood plain and other constraints that might stop up the works. The water doesn’t care; it rises, then goes where it goes to find, eventually, the oceans of the world. From there it will evaporate, become vapor, clouds of a certain density to beget droplets of rain and the process starts all over again.

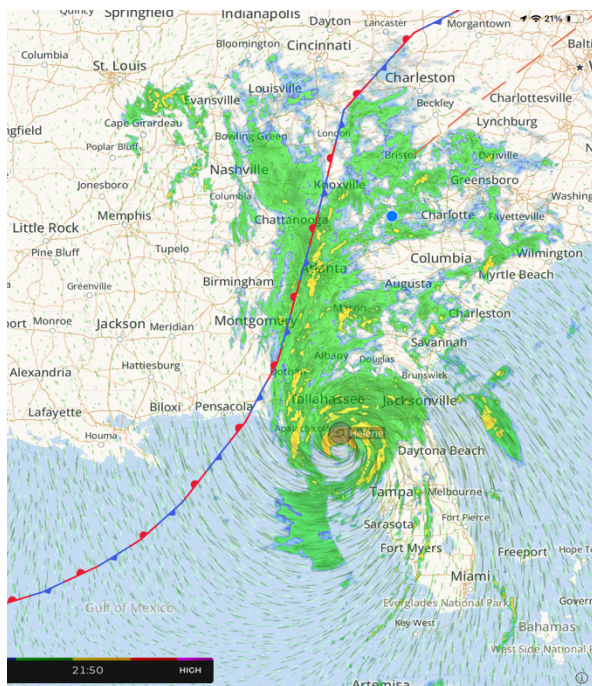
John wasn’t the only one worried. Friend MarkHo (we have several Marks on our field and keep them separate with last letter initials, sometimes an extra character) wrote: “How

much farther until it reaches the top of the museum hanger pad. Any ideas?" In 40+ years on the field I had never seen water that high and was fast running out of encouraging replies.



MarkHu (yet another Mark, Mark Huneycutt), is a paramotor enthusiast and instructor based on the field. He posted excellent videos to his YouTube channel throughout the event and gave us a preview of the coming storm with pictures from his kayak.

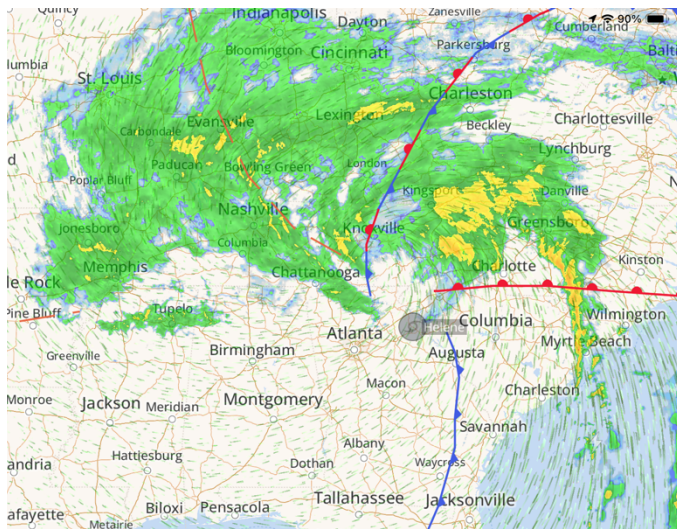
The Museum hangar is the building to the right with those nice EAA doors that has held up to many storms. I wrote back to MarkHo that if we saw another foot of rise, we might see water in his hangar.



This was beginning to worry me. The storm kept moving north, as John and I feared. By Thursday night, Helene was making landfall on one of the most the most vulnerable parts of Florida. Low-lying and sparsely populated, the natural beauty of this place was about to be churned up once again and dealt a terrible blow to swampland, forests, man and wildlife alike. The most intense part of the storm would ravage hamlets like Cedar Key and Mayo and leave a trail of death and destruction as it continued its inexorable track northward.



Norm sent pictures on Thursday afternoon taken from the deck of his airport house, high above the flood plain. The rain from the occluded front was still falling but the waterline was not rising as quickly as it had earlier in the day. We thought we might yet be spared the full fury of the storm.

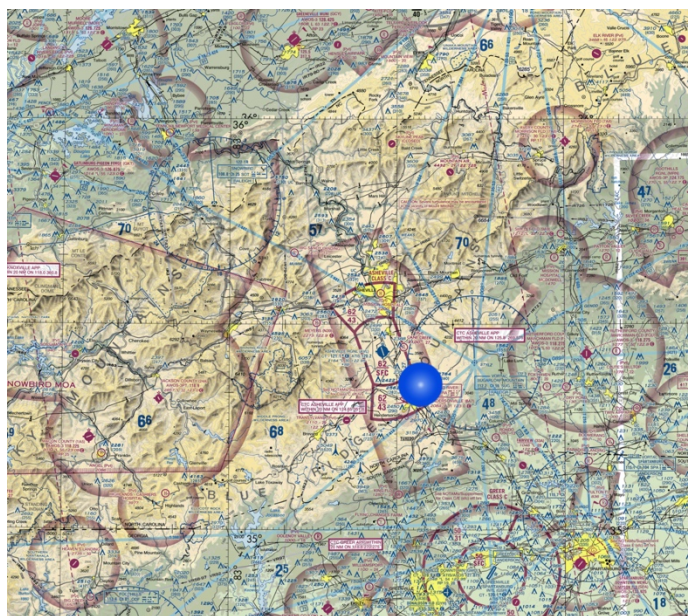


Then, early Friday morning, the front that had been slowly pushing the most dangerous quadrant east of us fractured, broke apart and left a pathway for the wrath of Helene to concentrate on a part of the country that has enjoyed shelter from so many weather events in the past. Had it been the diagram of a land battle, a military tactician would have been delighted to be on the offense.

The wind began in earnest at about 3am, just as forecast. Warm, moisture laden air was pumped up from Florida, striking the escarpment of foothills just south of Hendersonville and Asheville which lifted it, cooled it and formed precipitation so heavy that visibility was measured in feet, not miles. Wind gusts approached hurricane force; cyclonic activity tore around the hills and mountains, ripping trees from the ground, roofs and siding from

buildings, and overwhelming the drainage paths, now blocked or impeded in many places. Flash floods swept away homes and people in or on them, villages established over 200 years in mountain gaps were obliterated and flood gates in dams opened in an attempt to relieve the pressure of water that kept coming. Our little airport didn't have a chance.

A pause for a geography lesson and a little local lore. Hendersonville actually has two airports, both privately owned. There is a 50' wide, paved runway that lies NW-SE and carries the identifier 0A7. The other airfield was established by a former tenant of 0A7 (and successor owners) to get away from the flooding there and is now owned by the Western North Carolina Air Museum. The two runways run parallel, aligned almost perfectly with the prevailing wind in the French Broad River valley and are separated by a line of hangars on 0A7 and a drainage ditch. Crossover points allow aircraft owners on either side to use the other runway. The Museum airfield (8NC9) is not part of the National Airspace System and is not charted.



The chart at the right shows the higher ground of the Blue Ridge and Smoky Mountains. Asheville and Hendersonville lie in a plateau at 2000-2300 feet MSL, hardly hurricane territory, but flooding can be a problem as heavy rains are not readily absorbed in the soil, which is a mix of clay, sand and loam interspersed with granite. The loose stuff washes away creating pathways in the rock, channels that launch fierce torrents water onto lower lying ground. Whitewater enthusiasts come from miles around to challenge the rivers around here, some come out the other end triumphant, some do not.

0A7 and 8NC9 lie in a flood plain as they have for over 90 years. Before development started blocking the natural flow of water, before the beaver huggers stopped the “relocation” of the dam builders, most heavy rain ran off easily via Bat’s Fork and Mud

Creek join the French Broad River. That is not so today. On September 27, all the follies of man and beaver served to stop up the flow. The airports and every airplane on them were covered with muddy runoff in a couple of hours.

Norm chronicled the event, sharing photos with the airplane owners until his internet gave up the ghost. Steve's new-to-him Bonanza gradually turned submarine. When his vertical prop tip disappeared, I knew for a fact we, at 8NC9, were in trouble.



The door to Hangar 7 was still half visible early Friday morning. When the storm cleared and rain and wind gave way to a nice layer of blue sky and clouds on Friday afternoon, water covered the door to 7; an Excalibur inside floated and settled on top of a Mooney. All the hangars had flotsam rearranging themselves, contents were strewn to unlikely places. Ballpoint pens seemed to float best and landed like so many pickup sticks, everywhere.

As hard as it was for Hendersonville's airplane owners and pilots to imagine, those at Shiflet Field, down the mountain at Marion NC, fared worse. Shiflet (9A9) lies in a flood plain bounded on three sides by the Catawba River. Its flat, alluvial plain is a delight to fly in and out of, smooth for tailwheel and tricycle gear alike. When the Catawba overflowed on September 27, it made a rapidly flowing shortcut right across the runway, trapping two people in a car which ended up at the east end of the field, the occupants drowned. Damage to hangars, homes, airplanes, vehicles was complete and unrelenting; personal belongings were simply swept away.



Shiflet field, Marion NC, looking east. There are no words to describe the utter devastation to persons and property there. One man lost three airplanes, his home and his vehicles. His two business locations lie along rivers in Western North Carolina and were severely damaged as well.

The aftermath began to sink in on Saturday, September 28. Roads were blocked by fallen trees and power lines all over Western North Carolina. People began pitching in to help their neighbors, chain saws appeared from garages and put into action. Local businesses selling useful equipment had to rely on cash only unless the customer was known and reliable; there was no price gouging that I saw or heard about. People here don't do things like that. A group of radio stations pooled their resources and rebroadcast the same news feed to cover the hills and hollows, providing a lifeline for people unaccustomed to tuning in an AM or FM station in the internet age. Batteries became important, as did basics like food and water. Telling the story is reliving it, and seeing the best of other people is a light in an often confused and confusing world.

Help came and it came in abundance, whether material or moral support. Friends on a mountain top needed water and oil for their generator. When roads couldn't be navigated to reach them, the Sheriff's office promised to make a wellness check and a helicopter pilot volunteered to fly over at his own expense to try to reach them. That failed for want of a suitable landing spot and lack of communication, but the attempt was made and

appreciated. Supplies were eventually delivered to them and all was well. There are hundreds of stories just like that one and a few that strain the imagination, such as a local official turning away help, then rethinking his position when the story went viral.

Our little airfield and Museum, today, hosts helicopter relief operations. Food and supplies are stored in the museum building among antique and classic airplanes and people come to pick up the things they need. Out on the airfield, hangars are airing out and crumpled doors are waiting to be removed or repaired.



I am writing 12 days after Helene, fresh off a supportive round of conversations with my aviation insurance company. The adjusters are making the rounds, adjusting. The salvage companies will begin clearing airframes that were declared total losses later this week. Our pilots and airplane owners are making plans to get back in the game.

There are plans afoot among some of our pilots to form a flying club, first with a simple machine like a Champ or a Cub, to keep on flying. Some of us used our airplanes to travel, declaring, as an English internet friend writes, that “a mile of road will take you a mile and a mile of runway can take you anywhere”. Most of us like to go up to look down and that’s fine, too. The scenery is nice around here, especially in the fall of the year. One way or another, for one reason or another, we are optimistic. After all, we are pilots. The waypoints behind us are of no concern; the waypoints ahead are what we look forward to.