

August 27, 2010 - A "Ring of Fire"

Someone recently e-mailed me asking just what it was that I do during my almost daily flights in and around Custer, SD. Well, much of the time it is simply local sightseeing over to the nearby mini-mountains and unusual rock outcroppings, which seem to jut skyward out of the beautiful surrounding hills. Some of these flights are for practice take-off and landings. Even though I have 53 years and almost 5,300 logged hours of flying, tackling landings with a tail wheeled airplane is always a challenge. Trying to perfect the technique is an ongoing battle, yet I never tire of simply remaining in the airport pattern as I do my obligatory 6 take offs and landings during a typical 30 minute flying session.

Today, as I departed off of runway 08, immediately upon lift-off, I noticed a plume of heavy smoke off to my right. Intrigued I headed in that direction and discovered a hillside afire just 6 miles outside of downtown Custer. Now, as I pointed out in a previous article, we have a based fire helicopter right here on our airport, along with a compliment of US Forestry Service fire-fighters. However, when I was preparing my airplane for today's flight, I noticed neither around. When I first saw this fresh smoke plume, I immediately thought that this must be where the crews were...out fighting the fire. As I cautiously approached the hillside for a closer look (constantly scanning for other aircraft and helicopters, but finding none), I noticed that there were not even any ground based crews on the road adjacent to the blazing hillside, let alone the helicopter deployed bucket team.

What I did find, instead, was a fairly spread out conflagration which was being whipped along by the winds. Flying directly over the rising smoke produced a few turbulent bumps and the acrid smell of burning brush and trees. I took a few quick photos (I always fly with my camera aboard, since you never know when you will see something interesting), and then headed back to the airport to resume my regimen of take-offs and landings.

Upon finishing up and after tying the plane back down on the ramp, I went inside of the pilots lounge and attempted to phone the Forest Service to see if they were aware of the blaze. As it was a fairly new fire, and well after normal business hours, and since I didn't see any manpower or equipment on site, I thought that it might not even yet be known. I couldn't find a viable local phone number to call, so I dialed 911 and told the operator about my sighting and asked for a phone number for the Forest Service. She replied that she was sure that they were well aware of all of the fires out there, so I thanked her and hung up.

Our fire fighting crews look forward to these forest fires in order to make their hazardous duty and overtime pay, so I figured that by morning this blaze would have taken off to the point that some serious taxpayer money could be made by all concerned. No interest by the 911 operator...no skin off of my behind.

Meanwhile I will continue along with my almost daily exercises of practice "touch and goes", hopefully getting better with each and every one. However, for the non professional, as is the case in golf, for every good shot, there are 2 or 3 less stellar ones. It is much the same with landings in a tail wheeled airplane.



One of our based fire fighting helicopters



My view as I approached the hillside blaze



I could see flames through the dense smoke



An interesting "Ring of Fire" (or is it "Farr"?)