

# Missouri mission

*A landscape photographer takes to the air to follow the trail of two American heroes.*

*Story by Philip Andrew Davey Photos by Richard Mack*

**H**ERE'S THE FORMULA. Start with three good friends, one pristine, fuel-injected 2001 Cessna 172 with new digital radios, moving map GPS and various other bells and whistles, and minimal baggage. Then forget about work, bills, and life's problems for eight days.

The mission: photograph the Missouri from north-west North Dakota to the headwaters at Three Forks, Montana. Then follow the Yellowstone River up to Miles City, Montana, before returning to northern Illinois. No sweat. Is there

anything there that three, forty-something dads can't handle?

What brought all of this about? My lifelong friend, Richard Mack, a professional photographer, was wrapping up a book of photographs commemorating the 200th anniversary of the Lewis and Clark expedition.

Before 1804, virtually everything west of the Mississippi River was unknown territory. President Thomas Jefferson hoped the Missouri would prove to be a route to transport goods from the Atlantic to the Pacific. He initiated an

expedition which began on 21 May 1804, near St Louis, Missouri, and covered 8,000 miles in 28 months. The explorers were called the Corps of Discovery, 30 to 45 soldiers and frontiersmen led by Captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark.

Richard had been working on the book for some time. Now he needed his last few photographs from the air. Would I fly him and another friend out to Montana in a 172? I didn't even stop to think. "Book it!"

Flying north-west from the Chicago area out to Williston, North

Dakota, we saw the only significant weather of the week-long trip. A narrow band of storms had shown up that morning on NEXRAD radar and we expected we would have to land in Minnesota to wait them out. By Prairie du Chien, however, the line was dissipating and the enormous Mississippi River came into view, rolling slowly beneath us. In exchange for my pilot report on the conditions we were experiencing, a helpful Flight Watch specialist gave us an extensive, detailed update on weather that confirmed VFR conditions ahead.

Cruising steadily in the 172, we began to appreciate that the newer model is a totally different airplane than the 172s produced prior to Cessna's restart. The latest 172 has a rock solid, heavy feel in the ailerons, and the plane leapt off the ground with 10° of flaps. When checked against fuel receipts, the fuel gauges proved accurate. The separate fuel-flow gauge, not present on the older 172s, was useful not only in confirming fuel management plans, but assisted in accurate leaning as well. Crisp flip-flop, digital radios and a built-in intercom were part of

an avionics package that included a GPS that could be coupled to the autopilot. There was no ADF, mercifully rendering NDB approaches an academic issue... but how do you tune in a ballgame or Country and Western station?

And music we could have used. The north-western states are huge! We flew VFR from point-to-point always asking for and getting flight following with one exception. There was a stretch in north-west North Dakota where even at 10,500 feet we were not on radar. A female controller caringly admonished us, →

Three forty-somethings rented a Cessna 172 to follow and photograph the trail of a 19th century U.S. expedition, led by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. The hangar door mural in Williston, North Dakota, depicts Lewis, Clark, a young Sacagawea (and Lewis's dog) standing beside the Missouri. It was painted by a local pilot who couldn't pay for his aircraft's Annual.



like a mother to a child, to call in after passing a checkpoint. With nothing but nature's rough beauty below us, it was reassuring and comforting to hear that gentle voice.

Fierce headwinds prevented us from making it to Williston and we landed at a small airport. The friendly FBO operator volunteered that if we couldn't fly on we were welcome to stay at the airport. Behind a door, to what we assumed was a storage area, was a tidy bedroom complete with nightstand, lamp, rug, TV, shower, and towels. The room was free for stranded pilots.

He tossed us the keys to the courtesy car (a concept that astonishes every non-pilot I tell) and we drove into town. Main Street sported a barbershop with pole, a Rexall Drugstore, and Suzy's Cafe. After several hours in the saddle, we were ready for a slice of homemade fruit pie (\$1.30) and coffee (50 cents).

People saw the courtesy car, realized we were out-of-towners and introduced themselves to us—not to sell us anything, but to see if we were enjoying ourselves and knew the local history. Lewis and Clark had stopped in this area on their way upriver and had the good fortune to hire a French fur trapper, Toussaint Charbonneau, and his young Indian wife Sacagawea, to join the expedition.

The winds died down and we flew on to Williston. The views of the Missouri from 6,500 feet were spectacular and we witnessed a slowly-changing landscape. Visibility was unlimited to a sharp horizon.

Did Meriwether Lewis ever dream of flying up this river instead of slogging upstream, foot by foot, day by day, through all its twists and turns, dragging a heavily-laden keelboat? I daydreamed about meeting him. The internal combustion engine would need some explaining; the Cessna I believe he would have intuitively understood.

Slough International Airport in Williston, North Dakota, is a non-

tower field, with approach lights, an ILS, and a 1984 Ford doing hard time as a courtesy car. As with all good courtesy cars, it shakes and rattles a bit before it rolls.

Our gracious FBO host inquired about our trip. "Funny," he said. "We had a pilot who couldn't pay for his annual. But he was a mural artist. You might enjoy this." He switched on the electric motor to close the big hangar doors, revealing a painting of Meriwether Lewis, along with his Newfoundland dog (Seaman), William Clark and Sacagawea standing watch over the Missouri River.

The next morning we flew into Montana, a State one-and-a-half times the size of Great Britain. Golden plains and purple mountains replaced the green corn and soybean fields of Illinois. We were sharing views that Lewis described 200 years earlier when he wrote, 'I had a most pleasing view of the country particularly of the wide and fertile vallies formed by the missouri and the yellowstone rivers.'

He and his men were consuming as much as nine or ten pounds of meat per day to fuel themselves as they worked their way upriver. We were viewing those same plains as we zipped along in smooth air at 8,500 feet, comforted by the hum of the engine, drinking a can of soda and munching our favorite snacks.

That soda caught up with us and we landed at a small airfield in the midst of one of those massive Montana wheatfields. Yellow is not the color of those fields when the sun is setting; they're as gold as the ring on my left hand.

I was doing my rain dance in front of the locked door to the pilot's shack, a clean building, freshly painted, with a satellite TV. Looking through the plate glass windows, we could see the coffee machine and keys to the courtesy car on the desk. But the door was locked! The sign on the door read, 'Squawk VFR. Please lock door when leaving.'

Huh? It then dawned on me. I pressed 1-2-0-0 on the lock's touch

Some of the photos shot by Richard Mack for his new book, *The Lewis & Clark Trail American Landscapes*. Top left: Missouri headwaters near Three Forks, Montana, where the Jefferson, Madison and Gallatin Rivers converge to form the mighty Missouri. Bottom left: also shot during the photographer's 'magic hour' just before sunset, the Missouri Breaks. Other photos (from top): Yellowstone River near Miles City in the heart of Custer country, close to the site of the infamous Battle of Little Bighorn; confluence of the Yellowstone and Missouri Rivers; inhospitable Montana Badlands; towering white cliffs of the Missouri Breaks, inaccessible by road. The photos were all shot from the open window of a Cessna 172, flying a racetrack circuit at 65 knots.



Photographer Richard Mack, pilot and writer Philip Davey, and friend Rob Beader at Pelican Point on the Missouri River, about 30 miles west of Great Falls, Montana along the Lewis and Clark Trail. The Corps of Discovery passed by this spot on July 16, 1805.

pad and the door opened! Ten minutes later we were in the airport's 1979 Cadillac headed into town to savor a sandwich piled high with turkey, at a riverside cafe, enjoying a ground view of a river that had enchanted us from the air. As always, we dutifully topped off the car's gas tank before returning it.

The Missouri Breaks are towering white cliffs along the Missouri, to be viewed either by boat or by air. There are no roads. Our procedures for photographing this stretch of the Missouri River were the same as other photo shoots on the trip. We pored over sectionals to visualize elevations and obstacles we would face. Sunset times were reviewed. We waited on the ground by the plane for the sun to lower for that warm, yellow light you get right before sunset. At that moment, we took off and flew in silence at cruise speed to the photo scene looking forward to the work.

At the photo scene, the intercom was turned down, the right window opened, the plane slowed to 65 knots, and we started flying the slow racetracks that work best. It is tough for a photographer looking through a small viewfinder, the lens jostled by 65-knot winds. We communicate with simple hand signals; we both know what can be done and what is needed. Richard is not a temperamental genius; he's just a

genius.

After shooting the Missouri Breaks, we flew to Great Falls. The next day we prepared to fly to the headwaters of the Missouri River at Three Forks. This was my first experience in any type of mountain flying and I waited for the coolness of the late afternoon. Drawing on all sources of information, I rechecked weather with FSS, spoke with a pilot who'd just landed, and chatted with a local CFI before departing. We knew we could always come back to Great Falls. As I found out, getting off the ground was not the challenge, but climbing was.

Our pre-flight efforts paid off. Although the climb was slow, we were well above any peaks along the route. There were only light winds, visibility was acceptable, though diminished in the haze of the Montana forest fires, and Great Falls provided flight following for a good distance. We contacted and monitored Helena Tower before safely landing at Three Forks airport.

The FBO was closed at Three Forks. The owner had posted instructions on how to pump gas and in a light-hearted gesture had left a bat and ball by the locked door for entertainment.

While we tied down the plane, the town's former mayor came by on his four-wheeler and told us the story behind the naming of Pogreba Field.

Colonel Dean A Pogreba was a seasoned combat pilot when he was shot down on 5 October 1965 and became a POW in Vietnam. There were alleged sightings of him years after the war ended, but no confirmation of what happened to him.

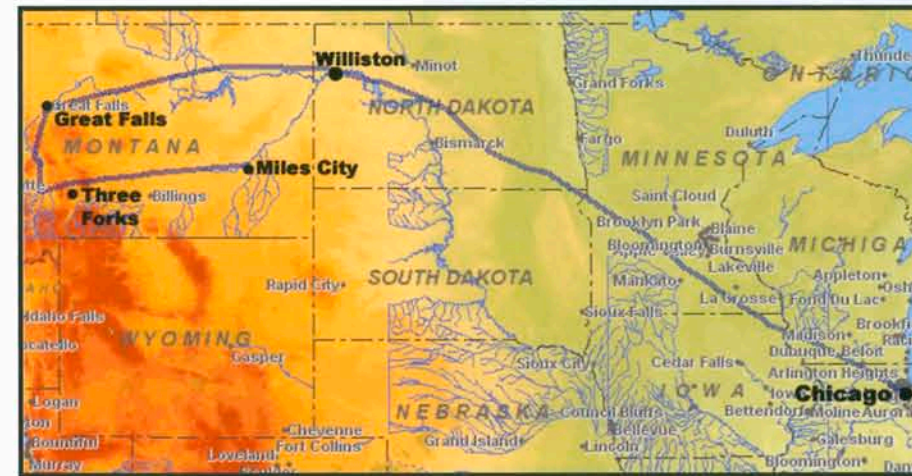
The 100-year-old Sacagawea Hotel, with its broad apron of a front porch, was home for the night. A dozen rocking chairs lined the porch for guests to read the day's paper or just watch the limited traffic go by. Inside, we noticed that overalls and corn seed baseball caps had been replaced by oversized belt buckles, cowboy boots and cowboy hats. A hot shower was followed by a cold beer that never tasted better.

At dusk, Richard photographed the confluence of the Jefferson, Madison and Gallatin Rivers that form the Missouri River. Forest fires resulted in TFRs dotting the area. The smoke had reduced visibility to eight miles and gave his photos a unique, surreal look.

Taking off the next morning, we climbed slowly in the thin mountain air and safely threaded our way through the Bozeman Pass to Miles City. Along the way, the Bighorn River meets the Yellowstone.

Further south is the Little Bighorn River, the scene of an infamous battle still years in the future when Clark passed by.

Map created using FliteStar, one of the many functions of this IFR/VFR flight planning software.



Flying to Miles City afforded spectacular views not only of the Yellowstone River, but also the barren, vast areas north of the river, which in late afternoon were a photographer's paradise. After that day's photo shoot, as we landed a crescent moon rose. A light, warm breeze gently blew over the field and we savored the moment.

The next morning in the hotel restaurant, pilots battling forest fires shuffled in for an early breakfast. They had been away from home for a long time. Required to be at the airport from 9 am to 6 pm, they must be airborne within 15 minutes of a call. Their planes and tanker trucks were pulled out and ready to go well before nine. The aircraft—large, low-wing, single-engine planes swinging a four-bladed prop in front of a 1,000 hp radial—reminded me of WWII

Corsairs.

Miles City marked our "R.T.B." point. We had traced the Yellowstone as far as we were going to and reluctantly headed south-east for home. 200 years ago, Clark followed the Yellowstone River to the Missouri River to wait for his lifelong friend Lewis. The Corps of Discovery enjoyed a quicker trip down river to a warm welcome and celebrations in St. Louis.

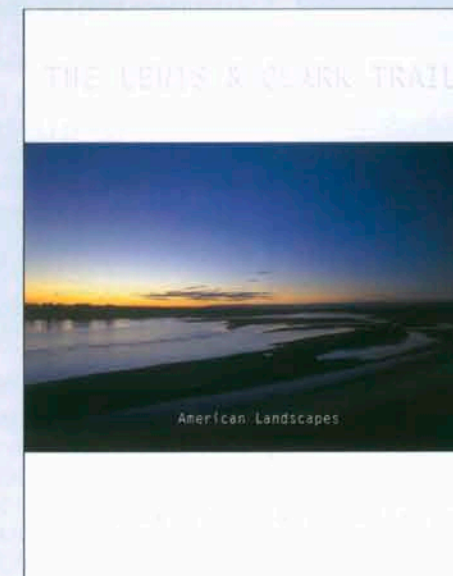
We, too, were on our way to wives and children awaiting our return. The land was gradually changing from endless prairies of yellow and gold to the familiar criss-cross of roads bisecting green fields, dotted with red barns and white farmhouses. The sectional charts were appropriately changing color as well. When the Mississippi River came into view and the radio chatter increased, we knew the trip

**Mr Mack & his book**

Richard Mack has been a commercial photographer, based in Chicago, since 1980. His clients have been many of the Fortune 500 companies and he has worked in all fifty States and many countries. While shooting advertising and corporate assignments his love has always been landscapes. He can be reached through his website at [www.mackphoto.com](http://www.mackphoto.com)

*The Lewis & Clark Trail American Landscapes* is due to be published early summer. To order, go online or contact the publisher at Quiet Light Publishing Ltd, 2144 Ashland, Suite 2, Evanston, Illinois 60201.

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