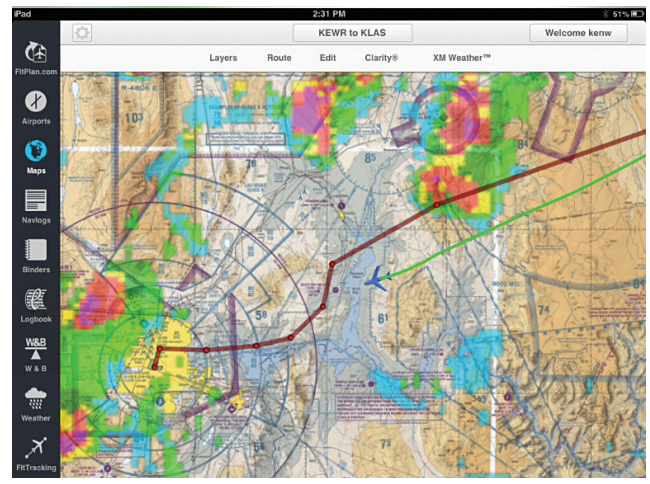
FltPlan growing, adding services

by Matt Thurber

For Ken Wilson, who grew up hanging around Danbury Airport and the family aviation business, the timing couldn't have been better. By the time the Internet became more than just a science experiment and turned into a real business opportunity, Wilson's college project, a flight-planning program with a useful navlog, had been tested by many users and was ready to go online. The program was the progenitor of what became the popular free FltPlan.com flight-planning service.

At first, Wilson shared the program via the tried-and-true "sneakernet," passing it around on floppy disks, then in the late 1980s he posted it on the CompuServe and AOL networks. "Then the 'net came out," he said, and with the program online it was much easier to keep the airport and navaid data current. "It kept growing," he recalled, and after the Internet took off "we were one of the first with a free website," well before the concept of "freemium" products with free basic services and paid high-level products became the popular way to launch new technology companies.



Weather overlays in the FltPlan Go app show Nexrad weather, also available using an ADS-B receiver.

FltPlan is much more than a basic free service and has since grown to support more than 140,000 pilots who use the system to file some 2.4 million flight plans per year or 6,500 per day. FltPlan offers free flight planning for North America, from Canada to the Caribbean and throughout Central America. Other free services include a weight-and-balance calculator with graphical display, fuel prices and an online pilot logbook.

FltPlan's paid services include handling, certified eApis for border crossing, including the new Mexico Apis, IS-BAO-compliant safety management system development and auditing, flight tracking, runway analysis (with Aircraft Performance Group) and the untrackable DCM (Dotcom) callsign service. The latter allows FltPlan customers to pay to use FltPlan's Dotcom callsign, which can't be tracked by flight-tracking companies.

The Market for Mobile Devices

As it did with the Internet, FltPlan was an early adopter with mobile devices, offering apps for the iPad, Android and BlackBerry devices. Wilson believes that Android tablets are quickly surpassing the capabilities of Apple's iPads and bring competition into the tablet market as the number of Android aviation apps grows. To that end, FltPlan paid for rapid decompression testing for four Android tablet types, ensuring that they meet the recommended standards in FAA Advisory Circular 120-76B for RTCA DO-160 testing. The four tablets are the Samsung Galaxy Note 10 and Tab 3, Google's Nexus 10 and the Asus Memo Pad HD7.

FltPlan's new moving-map Go app also runs on both the iPad 2 (and later) and on most Android devices, and FltPlan is even testing Go on Amazon's Kindle Fire tablet (which runs a version of the Android operating system). "The days of the iPad being the exclusive in-flight device are on the way out," Wilson said.

For app developers, Android offers a huge advantage, according to Wilson. Any app, whether new or a revision, must go through Apple's vetting to be placed in the App Store, a process that can take a week or more, which could be a significant problem for an app that customers depend on. Apps in the Google Play store receive approval within two to three hours, he said, and thus fixing a minor bug in an Android app is much easier and quicker. Another advantage is that Android tablets are much less expensive than Apple's iPads.

The Go app uses the same data in the app or on FltPlan.com's website. "Since the service was born on the Web, FltPlan's servers save all flight-planning information and user documents," Wilson said. "Should a pilot's mobile device become unavailable, the pilot is just one Internet connection away from his data."

Features of the FltPlan Go app include a button to access the main FltPlan website, and buttons for airport data, charts, approach plates, a checklist feature, navlogs, weather, a scratchpad and a tool for drawing on approach charts and maps.

The checklist includes a switch to turn on voice readout. Maps and approach and taxi charts are geo-referenced. Other features include breadcrumb trails of flight path flown, rubber-band route planning, offline flight planning and editing and FBO and airport information with fuel prices. The goal is to make the iPad and Android versions of Go look and feel exactly the same, Wilson said.

FltPlan Go works with Sage-tech Clarity ADS-B receivers and Sirius XM Weather, and the company plans to add connectivity to other ADS-B receivers, according to Wilson. ❑