

AIRVENTURE 2011

Every one has an image in their head of the perfect vacation. Travel to an exotic destination, a white sand beach, a five star hotel. My perfect vacation is ten days in a Wisconsin cow pasture sleeping in my van. Crazy? Why yes, thank you, I am crazy for Oshkosh.

I have attended the annual convention of the Experimental Aircraft Association for the last twenty two years and I'm looking forward to the next twenty two. I did upgrade my accommodations this year, I got a newer van. Yes, the Oshkosh Hilton has made her last pilgrimage to the promised pasture. After sixteen years of faithful service the old '86 GMC lost her enthusiasm for the road and, as my good luck would have it, a lovely young ('91) Chevy came into my life. I knew she needed a name so I toyed with the possibilities: Oshkosh Sheraton? Too many SH's. Oshkosh Holiday Inn? Too many syllables. Oshkosh Motel Six? Way too lame. Oshkosh Marriott? Nice rhythm, kinda rolls off the tongue. And wait, Marriott sounds just like Merry Yacht, we have a winner!

So here is the story of how the Merry Yacht and I pulled my beautiful ultralight flying vehicle, Fifi the Firefly to the biggest airplane party on the planet and to the best of my recollection, all the crazy fun we had.

Fifi was sporting an upgrade of her own this year thanks to the amazing artistic talents of my dear friend Phyllis Fox. Last winter's airplane project was engineering a wheel brake system for Fifi and as I sat in my shop waiting for inspiration I began to see a face on the small fairing that keeps my feet out of the wind. I got out my old model paint set and fashioned a crude pair of pouty lips around the pitot tube. Then I painted the pitot tube to look like a cigarette and sat back to admire my work. It was awful! I realized I needed professional help to save Fifi's dignity. Phyllis worked her magic and with a few skillful brush strokes breathed life into cold fiberglass. With big, beautiful green eyes and lush lashes Fifi the Firefly became Fifi the Seductress and I knew she would make an unforgettable impression on the Oshkosh gang.

Thursday, July 21, 2011

I borrowed Dan Murphy's trailer again this year and went to the airport early to load up my girl. Besides installing mountain bike brakes during the long winter I also had made aileron braces so the wing folding chore was eased a bit. It only took a couple hours of work in the warm sun to fold, load and secure my precious cargo for the four hundred mile trip. Compared to the two seat Kolb Twinstar that I trailered for many years this was a piece of cake. That project took two guys most of a day plus a dozen pieces of foam padding and a roll of duct tape. I have attended the convention a couple of times without an airplane and there is plenty to do but I felt like a spectator rather than a participant and being part of the show makes any effort worthwhile.

With Fifi ready to go I bought ice blocks for my coolers and fueled the Yacht then went home to pack. It didn't take long to throw all my summer clothes in a bag and I spent the rest of the evening going over the checklist: bicycle, bedding, hibachi, charcoal, camera, guitars, tarp, lawn chair, shoes and more shoes. The Marriott is more spacious than the Hilton was but she was eating for two and starting to stretch her waistband. My perennial camping partner, Jim Batzli was seriously considering flying to the show this year so we had already packed all of his gear and by the time I closed hatches for the last time the Yacht looked like a tramp steamer loaded for the Far East.

Visions of beautiful airplanes on perfect grass under a golden sun filled my head as I plopped it on the pillow. I flew the ultralight pattern in my dreams with Fifi purring her approval and I could have slept forever.

Friday, July 22, 2011

I woke to a blue sky and wasted no time filling the coolers in between bites of breakfast. Even after stopping at the airport to hook up Fifi we were on the road heading south before the sun began turning her light to heat. I have never been a coffee drinker but you would swear I'd had three shots of espresso, I was amped! The Merry Yacht turned out to be a splendid companion, sipping gas and coddling me in a manner the Hilton had forgotten years ago. Wisconsin slid by as I spun the radio dial and sang along with every song I recognized. Soon the giant Mercer Loon peeked in my window and wished me a safe trip. The lakes flanking the highway at Minocqua were filled with boats and bathing suits and smiling faces, what a fine day to be alive!

At Merrill Fifi seemed to be dancing a bit too happily on her trailer so I stopped for fuel and discovered two loose ties in her corset. A lady needs to have proper underpinnings so I respectfully adjusted her stays and continued the journey. Since leaving the canopy of northern forest I had been watching the skies and as we rolled on I spotted eagles, hawks and turkey vultures but almost no man made birds. I knew that would soon change.

The city of Oshkosh rose on the horizon at about 4:00 p m and the dots in the sky multiplied. It was three days before the official start of the convention but Camp Scholler was already buzzing as we buzzed by on highway 41 heading for the back door. Rolling down Waupun road I slowed, opened all the windows and took a deep breath, twenty two years of memories flooded my brain, all of them sweet. Good old Ed was at the barn gate and he waved us through with a big smile. I parked the Yacht in the shade of the huge black walnut tree in the set-up area and put my feet back in the lush grass of pilot paradise.

Eight hours in windshield mode had me a little stiff and as I stretched I heard a voice at the fence behind me, "Hey mister, are you a *Real Pilot*?" I turned to see Doug Greenfield leaning on the fence and grinning. Doug is the chairman of the all volunteer safety crew here in the Ultralight area, known as the 'Farm' and he enjoys a good laugh. He and his sons embody the spirit of Oshkosh, giving freely of their time to make sure things go smoothly and safely. All across the massive grounds of the convention hundreds, perhaps thousands of other volunteers do their part to make this the premier aviation event on the planet and certainly one of the smartest, cleanest, safest and most exciting events of any kind.

We chatted for a while then I began releasing my girl from her restraints. As always, a stranger appeared at exactly the right time to help me unfold Fifi's wings and roll her off the trailer. He peppered me with questions as we watched two Quicksilvers land, one on amphibious floats. One of the very first ultralight designs, Quicksilver is a double oxymoron as well. They are about as slow as anything that flies and I have never seen a silver one. I rolled Fifi down to the very end of the fence and screwed her tie down stakes into the good Wisconsin earth. By this time the sun had peeked around the walnut tree and I had worked up a serious sweat. Fifi had found her spot for the week and it was time to go find mine.

I unhitched the trailer in the infamous 'Lot 'U' and turned down Ripple road for the John Moody ultralight camping compound. Gatekeepers Rick and Nancy Jacobsen raised eyebrows at my fine new ride but I still got a hug and a hearty handshake. Rick had expanded the size of campsites this year and the Marriott eased into the last one at the fence. I had just begun to unload the tramp steamer when Jim came driving in. His mission to fly in had been aborted for a couple good reasons but it was good to see him with or without wings. We fell into our well practiced routine and soon had a kitchen and shaded living room set up between our four wheeled bedrooms. Home sweet Oshkosh!

A couple hundred yards distant but in clear view lies the south end of the main paved runway at Oshkosh International (actually named Wittman Regional after air racing legend Steve Wittman). This runway has welcomed all of the most famous and unique aircraft ever flown. The fastest and largest have found its 8000 feet adequate but this year it was a few hundred feet too short for an F-16. The

fighter jock came in hot and ran off the north end into the dirt. He made a nice furrow but his nose gear was not designed to plow and suffered accordingly. I know exactly how that poor pilot feels because I have made my very worst landings right here with hundreds of witnesses looking on. This evening traffic was slow but steady and we paused to watch a landing now and again if the sound intrigued us. The Farm runway right in front of us remained idle to our great displeasure but we knew that too would soon change.

We were both tired enough to forgo a big meal and made sandwiches from left over 'No Name' steaks and cheese. Like a time-release pain pill the Oshkosh attitude began to seep into our veins and we slipped into the vernacular without realizing it. The rest of the year Jim and I are just working stiff's struggling to stay ahead of the tax man but at Oshkosh we are Pilots and Airplane Builders in a world where those are titles of the greatest respect. We put our feet up and savored the moment.

When the sun finally found the horizon the mosquitos had no respect for our titles so we retreated to our bed chambers. Just before daybreak a thunderstorm tested the moorings of my tarp and I spent some quality time tightening ropes and spilling out puddles. When the fury dissipated I dried off and crawled back into bed.

Saturday, July 23, 2011

Jim was already on his second cup of camp coffee when I finally disembarked from the Yacht into a hot and extremely muggy morning. Brilliant white cumulus clouds were everywhere except where they might provide some shade for our kitchen. We fired up the Coleman stove anyway and took turns sunburning our heads while flipping sausage patties. The cast iron pan was so heat-soaked by the time the eggs went in that I burned them badly but we ate without criticism. Three trikes landed in our front yard but we still didn't see a lot of arrivals at the Farm. Trikes are what we call those three wheeled buggies with props on the back and hang glider wings overhead. Just one of these unique aircraft would attract attention at your local airport but here and now they were "Not much going on."

When the dishes were washed we mounted our trusty bicycles for the first recon run. Including runways and aircraft parking areas the Airventure grounds probably encompass 1000 acres so wheels are a necessity. The main bike parking area is close to the center of the whole show so this is where we start most of our explorations. One of the first attractions we see when walking through the fence from there is Jerry's One Man Band. During the show we always stop and listen to the accordion master but Jerry was still in setup mode so Jim chatted with him for a bit and bought a CD. We walked past the Theater in the Woods to the antique and classic parking area and spent a couple of hours ogling the Staggerwings, Fairchilds and Wacos sitting on the grass. These Golden Age icons with their mohair interiors and crank down side windows always spark a bit of nostalgia in me even though I wasn't even around for their heyday. Like classic cars of the era they seem to be hand made by artisans rather than pumped through a cold assembly line and every one has a unique 'personality'.

The clouds got closer together and their bottoms turned gray so we decided to head back to camp for lunch. While we pedaled the Bonanzas to Oshkosh (B2 Osh) made their mass arrival, landing three abreast in clean formation. Stopping at Boelter's for ice we noticed the ultralight set up area was filling up with trailers bearing flying machines of all descriptions.

As we snacked back at camp Doug scooted up in his golf cart and warned us of some nasty winds associated with an approaching front so I pumped up my back tire and rode over to check Fifi's tie downs. A motorcycle and trailer had parked next to her so I chatted up the rider. He showed me his clever solution to transport his powered paraglider. An entire flying machine of his own design fit neatly on the tiny trailer proving once again the amazing ingenuity of the motivated aviator. You only see stuff like this at Oshkosh. While we talked the Cessna mass arrival happened on the main runway, not an impressive number.

Once back at camp I took up my position next to Jim at the fence and we graded landings.

Dozens of Mooneys came in as a group but the forecast big winds never did. In fact the clouds began to disperse and a (relatively) cool breeze tickled our tarp. This new air mass caused the tower to turn the pattern around so incoming traffic began landing at the other end of the runways. Jim tuned his hand held transceiver to the tower frequency so we could listen to the efficient, sometimes urgent, sometimes comical radio work.

In order to accommodate the incredible volume of arrivals at Airventure the parallel taxiway is pressed into service as a runway . It is designated as runway 18 left when landing to the south(180 degrees on the compass and left of the main runway) or 36 right when landing to the north (360 degrees on the compass and right of the main runway.) This is how the Bonanzas and Mooneys can land three abreast, two on the wide runway and one more on the taxiway. In addition to this traffic multiplier both runways are divided lengthwise by three huge colored circles painted on the tarmac. (In typical pilot understatement they are called dots.) This allows the controllers to direct the first in a group to land long (far down the runway), the second to take the middle and a third to land short so three landings can happen on each runway at a time. It's mind boggling to visualize but brilliant in practice. The tower controller might say, "Yellow Piper, turn your base now, cleared to land runway 18 left on the green dot." and the pilot knows what he has to do. Most of the time. Some pilots just don't get it.

We listened to a controller coax, cajole and finally order a Jabiru to land on the pink dot with no success. With the patience of Job he held the poor confused pilot's hand until he finally had to send him out of the pattern to try again. Of course the whole time he was coddling the newbie he was also smoothly directing another dozen arrivals who knew what they were doing. Those tower guys and gals are constantly shoving fifteen clowns into a tiny car in the center ring of the circus. It's no wonder that every twenty minutes or so we hear a fresh voice on the radio.

Shrimp cocktail and adult beverages became dinner as the landing follies continued and the sun crept westward. Just before sunset our old pal Mikey rolled into the camp. His girlfriend Christy had her purse dog Brewster (Brew as in beer) well hidden because pets are not allowed. We all stayed up late laughing and talking loud secure in the knowledge we would not be flying in the morning. The cool breeze continued into the wee hours.

I had only been asleep for a short time when the thunderstorm came crashing in. I don't think Mike had even retired yet because he was right at my elbow helping me drop the tarp. We worked together pinning the ends to the ground until my shirt was completely soaked. Mikey never wears a shirt.

Sunday July 24, 2011

When I finally crawled out of the Yacht I saw that a DC-3 had parked across the grass runway from us in its traditional spot. DC-3s are not quiet, I must be a sound sleeper. I suppose it helps that I'm mostly deaf. Magically the tarp over our living room had been restored to its former glory while I snoozed. Jim handed me a take-out container of biscuits and gravy courtesy of Mike. Not only does our friend never wear a shirt I don't think he ever sleeps either. Suitably fortified for the day we pedaled up to the set up area and helped Mikey take his Kolb off the trailer. A beautiful example of the Kolb MarkIII, this bird had suffered a landing mishap long ago and was lovingly rehabbed by Mike's own hands. He is properly proud of her and we followed his directions respectfully.

The temperature was in the mid seventies and the cumulus clouds were just starting to form around the edges of a crystal blue sky. I put Fifi's propeller back on and torqued it twice then gave her a full inspection. When I was sure she had made the transition from trailer queen to flying machine I made another full inspection in the opposite direction. It never hurts to be sure and I had all the time in the world. Every couple of minutes another curious wing-nut would stop by with questions and I was popping my buttons with pride as I answered each one. Nearly everyone you meet here on the farm is either a pilot or wants very badly to be one. Usually it's the wannabees that have the best questions and

I never get tired of bragging about Fifi.

The ticket windows were open at the Barn so Jim and I purchased the wristbands that made us citizens of a mythical city perched on a warp in the time-space continuum. Once a solar year the wormhole opens and people are mesmerized by amazing visions of a world beyond comprehension. When it slams shut a week later they ask, "Did that really happen?"

All the accepted rules of physics and hygiene are altered for a brief sneeze in cosmic time at this little elbow in the universe. Sir Isaac Newton would slap palm to forehead watching the aerobatic performers violate all of his sacred laws of motion.

"I should have just eaten that apple!"

Seeing thousands of people grow younger by the day without even approaching the speed of light Einstein would probably chuckle,

"Vell, it was only a theory!"

On observing an entire society free of crime and violence Mr. Spock would surely arch an eyebrow and pronounce it,

"Fascinating!"

Feeling light headed from the change in dimensions we bought ice for the coolers and rode the gravity wave back to camp. Feet up and sunglasses on we witnessed the invasion of the warbirds. Mustangs, Corsairs and a flock of T-6s made military breaks and perfect wheel landings, backfires crackling from exhaust stacks and tires chirping on asphalt. Two B-25s appeared through this same time warp and made the triumphant landings they had made a lifetime ago in the pacific theater of WWII. We could almost hear Tommy Dorsey in the background.

When the Cessnas and Pipers of the general aviation fleet began to dominate arrivals I strolled down to the showers and scraped off a couple of layers of Farm dirt. I was almost back to real time until I opened my razor at the outside mirror. When an F4U Corsair drifts through the mirror while you are trying to shave you know you are in a parallel universe. I floated back to the Yacht in a euphoric haze, pretty much a common condition for alternate realities.

Aircraft of all descriptions from all corners of the globe continued to descend on Wittman field like bees to the hive. Traffic was picking up on the Farm as well, a pair of Challengers, one on amphibious floats, came sliding down final approach just as the sun hit that magic angle photographers wait all day for. I could see the expressions on the pilot's faces and I knew exactly how they were feeling.

Paul Rickert, the forth in our camp quartet parked his new SUV behind the living room just in time for dinner. Sharing the Oshkosh experience with his kids this year would require some serious shuttle work to mesh with their busy summer schedules. His home is only 90 miles south but he would be making several round trips. He was here alone today to scope out a program, what a great dad! The three of us enjoyed the reunion and the meal. Mikey was making the same round trip (he and Paul are neighbors) trading the Kolb-towing vehicle for the sleep-in-me vehicle so he missed it. By 10:00 Paul was headed south again and I was headed for my berth in the Yacht. Tomorrow Fifi would take the stage at the Carnegie Hall of ultralight flying and her partner needed to be sharp.

Monday, July 25, 2011

I woke up my customary three minutes before the alarm at 5:30. It was cool enough that long pants seemed appropriate for open cockpit flying. The Moody campground is so quiet before sunrise, other campers were stirring but they all kept a respectful silence. Just a nod and a smile were exchanged as greetings. I wiped the dew off of my bike seat and set out for the Barn. Since the whole ultralight area is called the Farm it makes sense that headquarters is in the Barn. In honor of announcer Frank Beagle, the iconic voice of the Farm for decades, I call the runway Beagle Field. The smell of coffee and the sound of happy chatter spilled out across the grass as I pedaled up. I have been playing

out this ritual for many years and it is still immensely satisfying. It's easy to imagine yourself in another time and place where a loose group of aviators gathered at dawn to plan a strategy for a day of sorties in aircraft as varied and unique as the pilots themselves. Leather flying helmets and white silk scarves would not be out of place here. A little light-hearted banter at the briefing could not disguise the fact that we were all committed to bringing every one home safe at the end of the day. We all signed our waivers, swore allegiance, saluted and headed out to our planes.

I towed the dew off of Fifi's lovely curves and watched a powered paraglider launch into the light northeast wind. Paragliders have elliptical wings and are usually foot launched but this one had a cart on three wheels and was in fact the one brought in on the motorcycle trailer. The earliest and thus most calm flying times are given to the soft wing fliers but today only our neighbor braved the breeze. When he settled back to earth Fifi and I were already at the velvet rope waiting for the bouncer to give us the nod. The rope dropped but before I could escort my girl to the dance floor a green vest caught my attention. He asked if we would step aside so the Electric Lazair could take center stage.

I have always been a fan of the Lazair. Iconic because of its clear tedlar wing covering and inverted 'V' tail the original was powered by a pair of West Bend chain saw motors. Now re-imagined with electric motors and an amphibious mono float she looked a bit like Cinderella's glass slipper. Fifi and I took a step back and bowed to the future.

The time warp works both ways at Oshkosh and this was a vision of days to come. With both engines at full power the only sound was the propellers digging in to the morning air and when power was reduced for descent the props just stopped! Apparently battery endurance was not a concern because he went around and around smoothly and quietly until I wondered if I was the only one who was bored. I was ready to hear the scream of gasoline powered two stroke engines, specifically the one behind my head! Future technologies will be more efficient, more ecologically friendly and possibly cheaper but they will not be more exciting. At least not to an old gearhead like me.

When the glass slipper retired to the charging station Fifi and I were first in line for blast off. Thanks to her new brakes I was able to keep the Rotax 447 at a high idle without rolling onto the runway. When the flagger showed us the green side of the paddle we were more than ready.

There are three sweet spots in Fifi's throttle: high idle, cruise power and SHOWTIME! I selected number three. Due to an effect called 'P factor' at high power and low speed Fifi really likes to turn right, demands to turn right. I'm a little slow this early in the morning so by the time I got my lazy sneaker all the way down on the left pedal we were pointed right at the announcer's platform. We weren't turning right any more but we weren't coming back to the left either. Fortunately Fifi has no patience with the ground and we were off and climbing before we even reached the chalk line marking the edge of the runway.

Off and climbing in the cool morning air and grinning like an idiot. All the loading and packing and driving and training and briefing were all focused on this one moment and it was all worth it. Leaving the planet is the ultimate jailbreak. Not only are you free to move at whim in all three dimensions but you are also free of all your cares and worries. They stay behind on the hard ground as you float on the silky viscosity of the atmosphere.

Maximum angle take offs are a no-no on the Farm for safety reasons but even at a relatively sane deck angle we arrived at the pattern altitude of 300 feet in a blink. Turning west I found the 'cruise power' sweet spot and Fifi sang a song. Most of the people in Camp Scholler were looking up and many waved, I waved back. We danced through the familiar rectangular track over campgrounds and cornfields leading an odd collection of gossamer wings. We blasted right past the turn point for a landing approach so more of our team could launch and swung smoothly into traffic for another lap.

Man and machine were one. When craning my neck to check for traffic I can see Fifi's strong wings but in normal cruise I don't see any part of her at all and I am not aware of the control inputs I make. I just think, "I'll fly over there" and over there I fly. It's natural, it's smooth and it's completely magical, much like the serial dreams I had as a kid after seeing Disney's animated 'Peter Pan'. This is

the true beauty of the ultralight experience, living in the air like you belong rather than beating it into submission with tons of metal and hundreds of horses.

This time at the lone oak tree we turned onto an offset base leg for landing. Most of our ultralight brothers had joined the parade in the sky and the field was clear. The runway disappeared behind trees as we slid down the glideslope but reappeared when we banked onto the dogleg final over the access road. Keeping the trees and power pole off her left wing Fifi lowered me gently to the flare with a flair and we slipped smoothly onto the green grass. I was a little clumsy with the heel brakes but soon we were taxiing back for another launch. I applied full left pedal with power this time and was rewarded with a much straighter take off run. Fifi's enthusiasm is nearly overwhelming when the throttle is set to SHOWTIME and soon we were back in the pattern with our dancing shoes on.

After a couple more euphoric circuits we hit the exit ramp just as a Safari helicopter dropped into the field from the west. Small helicopters and gyros share the Farm with the ultralights. Most of them, like this arriving Safari, are homebuilts. I knew the air near the surface would be scrambled from the whirling rotor but I had already left the pattern and the only safe way back in is from a takeoff or a wave-off. We stayed high on final so when the orange paddle was waved cruise power was all that was necessary for a nice pass over the runway and re-entry to the parade. Another lap and another landing constituted our constitutional for this sunny summer Monday morning and we left the ball with a bow and a curtsy.

With Fifi secured in her prime display spot I checked in at the Barn and got my swag. The classic cow hat, the Ultralight Pilot ID pin and the Showplane Participant mug are only given to the few hardy souls who carry, drag or fly their magic carpets through the wormhole to planet Oshkosh and I'm proud of mine. I was slightly disappointed to find the mug etched rather than bearing the metal badge all my other mugs wear but I proudly passed it around back at camp.

One of the cool things about getting up before dawn to fly is once your done there is still a whole day ahead of you. After breakfast Jim and I mounted our trusty bikes and plunged headlong into the Oshkosh Experience. First we parked the bikes at the Barn and walked the ultralight exhibit area. The sky was blue and the sun was hot but there was just enough breeze to make it tolerable. We ran into Mark Marino and Sandra Ettestad in front of Warp Drive Props and casually jockeyed for the shadiest spot under their awning as we chatted.

We poked our curious heads into all the light aircraft in the vendor's displays but we always turned to watch a takeoff or landing on Beagle Field. Back at the Barn we talked with Dan Grunloh and he said he got a good shot of Fifi for his Light Plane World e-newsletter. He was sitting on a handicap scooter and sporting a giant, fuzzy boot on one foot. Even though he couldn't fly this year and getting around was an obvious pain we could tell he was happy to be there. And that seemed to be the case with everyone we saw, happy to be there.

Back on the bikes we coasted down Knapp Street rd. to the bike corral at the center of the action. We always take the time to chain them together even though we know no one comes to Oshkosh to steal an old bike. The first exhibition building inside the gate offered a shady stroll and we accepted, traversing the rows of vendor displays and fanning our faces with our hats. Jim and I are seasoned veterans of the overwhelming information overload and easily edit out the white noise to focus on the things we care about. I had been looking for a leather Snoopy helmet and goggles since Fifi came into my life so I pulled up short at a display of flying helmets. Most were high gloss airbrushed artworks but the one that caught my eye had antique looking leather stretched over the fiberglass shell and sported an upscale headset. When I inquired about the price the attractive blonde answered in a clipped British accent, "Two thousand dollahs." Actually she may have said, "Two thousand foah hundred dollahs." I can't recall because as soon as I heard a comma in the price I tuned out.

Exiting the building onto the main square we slowly drifted north scanning left and right and finding something new and delightful in every glance. We have no itinerary and no schedule,

anywhere we find ourselves will still be Oshkosh. Air traffic over the main runway is nonstop, this time of the day airplane manufacturers showcase their latest creations in flight for the most discriminating of potential customers but everybody else is watching too. That's why we're one big family here in the time warp, most of us can't afford to own this fantastic technology but we all can appreciate it, and we do. Even when our attention is on the ground the constant throb of piston engines in the air punctuated by the distant scream of the turbines defines life on planet Oshkosh.

Excepting the occasional, "Hey, look at that!" neither Jim nor I lead this expedition but inevitably we wind up at the Rans tent. Since we both fly Rans airplanes that we've built we're considered part of the extended family. We catch up with all the cousins and inspect the hardware.

Huge kernels of cumulus popcorn floated in a brilliant blue sky as we caromed through the rows of homebuilt honeys parked near the flight line. We only covered a couple of grassy acres of Kitfox, Thatcher, Dyke delta and KR2 before I needed a cool treat so we meandered back to the pavement and stood in line for soft serve cones. Rather than a surge of energy from the infusion of sugar I started feeling the urge for a nap so I steered us back toward the bike corral. We passed the heavy iron on Conoco Phillips Plaza (formerly Aeroshell Square) and saw the stage going up for the REO Speedwagon show later in the day.

Back at camp I dozed a little in the Yacht till Vicky came over and the airshow started. The Aeroshell T-6s were as noisy and precise as ever leaving four thick smoke trails snaking through the summer sky. Matt Younkin put his beautiful Beech 18 through her paces in elegant symmetry followed by a Pitts Special demonstrating the acid-rock version of elegance. We don't hear the show Public Address down on the Farm so Bob Carlton surprised us with his silent sailplane. I could see by the trails of smoke from the tips of the long wing that he had looped and rolled a few times before I looked up. His graceful figures didn't seem to cost him any altitude but when he finally did get low he just fired up the little jet engine behind his cockpit canopy and zoomed back up. It was back to the noise as Gene Soucy and Teresa Stokes did their classic wing walking act in and on the big Show Cat biplane. Kent Pietsch landed his Interstate Cadet on the speeding Winnebago after demonstrating his energy management mastery from altitude. It was apropos of nothing when Pyro Kenny lit off a couple hundred gallons of gas at the end of the show but it was a satisfying bang and the black smoke billowed.

After a quick snack we pedaled back down to show center for the REO concert. The Plaza was packed and the weather was perfect. A few thousand happy campers swayed to hit after hit and the sound quality was much better than last year's Chicago show. A half dozen soldiers perched on a Blackhawk helicopter at the edge of the plaza for a better view but they must have gotten permission from their CO because they were all wearing helmets. With the classic synthesizer intro to "Ridin' the Storm Out" we started moving back toward the gate and were on the bikes when they finished up.

The ultralight pattern was switching from fixed wing to powered parachutes when we got home and we watched them float around while our Cheezy Brats sizzled on the grill. The heat of the day headed west with the sun and the mosquitos went to bed early so Jim and I stayed up and passed the guitar around.

Tuesday, July 26, 2011

The sound of my tarp flapping in the wind woke me about 8:00 but it wasn't another thunderstorm so I just pulled up the sheet and went back to sleep. Two stroke engines at full throttle finally got me out of bed, not from irritation but from curiosity. Beagle Field wasn't really busy but there was enough traffic to keep us entertained while we made bacon and eggs. Gene Smith had his newest Backyard Flyer up and Paul Mather ran demo after demo in his M squared two-seater. A couple of Cub clones were making delightful one wheel landings in the brisk crosswind. Breakfast was fuel for the body, the air action fuel for the soul.

The distinctive rumble of big radial engines drowned out the ultralights as a flock of T-28s arrived in formations of four and made crisp military breaks to enter the pattern for the big runway. I can imagine being a nineteen year old cadet standing in front of one of these huge, snarling beasts for the first time and swallowing my Adam's apple. As soon as they were all down the time warp jumped 50 years ahead and two F/A-18s came screaming down the sky and planted their massive aircraft carrier landing gear on the asphalt. One of them was Blue Angels #7 in honor of Naval Aviation's centennial. Just as he was flaring to land Gene Smith's ultralight mirrored his trajectory at our strip in the foreground and for a second they appeared to be the same size and moving at the same speed. Where's a video camera when you need it?

I had to pump up my back tire again before we could embark on our daily expedition. We strolled through two more exhibition buildings and walked the Light Sport Aircraft Mall. We happened to be near the flightline when the world's only flying B-29 Superfortress, FIFI made her triumphant return to Oshkosh. I could feel the time warp shift and I only had to squint a little to imagine myself on Tinian island watching the Enola Gay land after changing the world forever. Ten thousand people cheered. It was an emotional moment. By the way, my girl Fifi did not take her name from this bird of war but from her model designation, FireFly.

Back at camp we iced the coolers and kicked back for the airshow. Sean D. Tucker tore furious holes in the sky with his ultimate Pitts Special, no doubt gritting his teeth through moments of intense G forces. Julie Clark provided the perfect counterpoint in her highly polished T-34. As she performed her smooth, graceful dance with red, white and blue smoke tracing her path you could just feel her smile. The afternoon airshow is like a tailgating party inside the stadium, during the game so Jim and I just snacked out and cheered the team on.

By 4:30 I was ready for a nap but instead I rode back to the Barn for the evening briefing. All the pilots who did the morning brief were good for the day so there were only a handful of folks in the tent and the airshow thundered on outside. I signed the form and got my Tuesday paper bracelet then sat under Fifi's wing for the rest of the airshow. I gave her a loving inspection and pushed her up to the gate as the show smoke cleared and the FAA waiver expired. The breeze had a southern component so we launched from the top of the hill and made right turns in the pattern. I waved at Rick and Nancy after takeoff and enjoyed running the pattern backwards. I used to dread flying this direction. My old Kolb Twinstar had a long wing and her power off glide angle was only a bit steeper than the slope of the runway. This and the tall cottonwood sentries at the approach end had me landing well down the runway on a number of occasions and using my Flintstones brakes to get stopped. Tough on the tennies! Fifi, on the other hand has a petite wingspan so when I pull the power back she comes right on down. Landing downhill now is just another feel factor and Fifi puts her wheels right where I want them.

The evening sun was filtered through light cirrus clouds and colors muted slightly. After a warm day on the ground the air pouring through the cockpit was cool and soothing. We danced and sang, landing whenever the approach was clear and launching again into Fifi's world. The Farm was busy and it felt good to be a part of the larger swarm saluting the departing traffic jam back on earth. At the southwest corner of our (mostly) rectangular race track I was jolted out of my reverie by a potential traffic jam of my own. Bogey at two o'clock, converging fast! In emergency mode the human mind is capable of amazing computational speed and in a fraction of a second I had done the math and the physics and pushed the stick forward into the safest section of the air for this scenario. Fortunately the pilot of the bogey did the same math and pulled up. I could tell you my heart was pounding but my heart is always pounding when I'm with Fifi so it wouldn't mean a thing.

On the next lap a Thunder Gull entered the pattern from the west and caromed around the parade for a while till he got oriented and landed. The term 'Bumper Cars' popped into my brain and I laughed out loud. As a way to press the reset button on all this craziness I put my girl down and taxied her to the fuel shed for a drink. Standing back on the ground I watched the tribute to Bob Hoover pass

over. The F-86 Saber, the Shrike Commander, a P-51 Mustang and a Saberliner bizjet made several formation passes to honor the man who flew them all brilliantly. It was a once-in-a-lifetime event to witness but when I climbed back in my girl and actually shared the air with them I was reminded that Oshkosh is an alternate universe. There seemed to be a lot of warbirds in the air as well and though the rules kept us safely separated they were close enough to identify as friendly. Good thing too because we're running a little low on ammo back at the aerodrome. The Farmer's Insurance Zeppelin was a plum target in the northwest sector but my orders kept me out of range so I focused on the local traffic. After the mission was complete Fifi put her feet back in the grass, accepted adoring stares from the crowd at the fence and curtsied politely as we glided back down the hill to her tie-downs. I tucked her in for the night and kissed her on the forehead.

The back tire was low again as I pedaled back to camp and the wheel had a wobble but my head was in the clouds and all was right with the world. Jim and I feasted on baby back ribs and taters fried in garlic butter and I sampled some delightfully aromatic agave. It got cool enough for a sweatshirt after dark and I was just thinking about retiring when a fellow camper dropped by for a chat. He introduced himself as Joe and said he was flying a Ridge Runner tonight and almost T-boned a yellow Kolb. My bogey! When I told him it was Fifi and me in his crosshairs he got real serious and explained the whole episode. Apparently a helicopter had departed our strip as he was passing by and stuck itself right under his Ridge Runner in the pattern. He was afraid the helo would climb to altitude at any moment and put him in the blender so he was taking evasive measures and not paying much attention to anything else. I completely understood and reassured him that there were a million cubic yards of air out there and it wasn't that difficult for me to find one without him in it. In the end we both accepted it as a learning experience and vowed to be more careful because of it.

Wednesday July 27, 2011

I woke to the sound of rain on the roof so I laid in bed for a long time savoring the fact that I wasn't in a leaky tent on the cold ground. Jim was sloshing around in flip-flops and a poncho trying to create comforting camp coffee out of chaos. The tarp did its job and we managed a decent ad-lib breakfast without getting too wet. It looked to us like an all day soak so we created an alternate plan and mounted Jim's suburban for a shopping expedition. Mikey told us of a bike shop in a strip mall so I brought my troublesome back wheel and we went exploring. It was IMC right to the ground but we finally found our target sitting on five acres of shiny pavement that was probably a cornfield two years ago. The bike techs were great, they set me up with a new tire and tube and put my wobbly rim on their fixture for alignment. After a few quick cranks of the spoke wrench it ran true and I was a happy camper. Meanwhile Jim had found sale prices at the Columbia outlet next door and emerged with a new rain jacket in a bag. When I asked him why he hadn't put it on he said, "It's brand new, I don't want to get it wet!" It's always fun hanging out with Jim. We stopped at a gas station for snacks and smokes and took our time wandering back to camp. The grass road between the rows of campers had turned to slick black mud and we slid into home about noon.

I just had the new tire mounted when the rain suddenly stopped and the overcast lightened up. We took it as a sign and shifted back into Oshkosh mode. Parking the bikes in the Barn lot Jim led us down to the Classic/Contemporary aircraft parking. Yesterday he saw a Cessna 170B that reminded him of the one his dad owned fifty-some years ago so we became detectives on the case. We had a clue, he had phoned his mom and asked if she remembered the N number and she said "What?" Then he said, "The call sign, mom." and she said, "Sure, 97 Delta." Armed with that amazing recollection we walked the wet grass through rows of cherished old chariots in search of a memory. When we came upon N3297D I wasn't at all surprised and Jim slid down the wormhole to 1957. He looked at every detail with young eyes and soon the joy turned to doubt. It just didn't feel right. There was no one

around to question so we continued down the rows. The sun was still hiding in the thick overcast and the air was damp to the point of mist, perfect weather for a mystery. As we inspected several other 170s Jim's enthusiasm seemed to wane until we came upon the nicest looking one we had seen. He stopped, cocked his head and said quietly, "That's the one." I looked at the tail number, N2797D. Great stories tumbled out of his memory as he looked her over and I happily rode into the past with him. (As could only happen at Oshkosh it turned out he was exactly right and before the end of the convention he chatted with the current owner and made a new friend.)

On the way back to our bicycles we stopped in the Barn and checked the radar. More rain was coming but slowly and we thought we might spend some more time at show center but big fat raindrops slapped our shoulders and persuaded us to turn for home instead. So much for modern weather technology, any idiot could tell it was going to rain.

Sprinkles continued off and on but the airshow started on time with a tribute to the Centennial of Naval Aviation. Very rare round engine warbirds thundered around under the overcast, all wearing Navy blue. A Douglass Dauntless dive bomber, a TBM Avenger and two F4U Corsairs were escorted by a slightly younger T-28 and I took another time jump. I was a mechanic, standing in the sand of a Pacific island watching my friends fly off on another mission and hoping they came back. I waved my GI cap and wished them luck but mostly I was wishing to be up there with them.

The whine of jet engines brought me back to the present, or at least closer to the present. An F-86 Saber flashed by followed closely by the Navy's version of this classic fighter. Beefed up for aircraft carrier operations few were made and this one is the only flying example left. Filling out the jet age roster was an F/A-18 Super Hornet. Visibility was not optimal and as they turned for a high speed pass they swung a little wide and came in directly over our heads. Three jet fighters at high speed and low altitude is like a shot of adrenaline straight to the heart. We were all wide eyed and grinning before we even got our fingers out of our ears.

The clouds continued to press in and the rest of the airshow was canceled. An unnatural silence added to the feeling of being stuck under the cotton in an aspirin bottle. That's not to say our spirits were dampened, we snacked and yacked and thoroughly enjoyed the afternoon. Ever the cockeyed optimist, I rode through sprinkles to take the afternoon briefing and sure enough, the sky began to lighten. There is a flagpole on the spotter's riser near the top of the hill and I watched the red flag as I wiped the rain from my girl's ample charms. We couldn't fly till the red banner came down and the green went up and that could only be authorized by the FAA boys in the control tower. When the red came down I began to release the tie downs but before I was done it went up again. "What?" I asked myself or maybe I said it out loud. Maybe I yelled a little, I felt like I was being teased. Actually I don't mind being teased a little but this was more like I just released her stays and her husband came home.

A bright flash followed by a percussion wave that hit me in the chest and moved the earth gave me my answer. Apparently Pyro Kenny had set up a monster finale for the airshow that didn't happen and he needed to light it off. It was quite impressive. Before the smoke cleared the green flag was going up over Beagle field and my testosterone came flooding back. The path up hill to the runway gate was getting a little slick from the rain but we didn't let that stop us and Fifi's motor was purring away behind my head in minutes. We launched from the top of the hill and made right turns again but the air was heavy and hazy and it seemed like we were flying through a snow-globe. Just after I waved at the Moody campground and turned into the pattern the Grand Rapids EFIS blinked out. I knew the switches under my left knee were vulnerable to moisture from last year's Oshkosh adventure so I had taped a baggy over them before leaving Two Harbors. Low tech usually works fine in the ultralight world but after an all day rain this was like a screen door in a submarine. The EFIS tells me all of the engine speeds and temps plus altitude and rate of climb but Fifi and I communicate on a higher level so I just ignored the balky instrument. Even though the air was syrupy it was still active and we had to fight through the cottonwood blender for our first landing. There wasn't much traffic so we were back

in the sky quickly and lost in each others arms. We danced to our heart's desire and retired satisfied.

The breeze relaxed enough for the electric Lazair to close the show on silent wings as we burned some more tube steaks on the grill. Mikey's buddy Sammy the electric bicycle entrepreneur joined us for dinner and drinks and spilled a little mustard on his dress shirt.

Thursday, July 28, 2011

It was quiet, too quiet when I opened my eyes in the spacious Yacht. Peeking through the blinds I thought the window was fogged up until my eyes focused and I saw it wasn't the window, it was the whole world that was fogged up. As Mark Marino would say, "I had to file IFR just to walk to the porta-potty". Ha. We whipped up egg McMuffins on the coleman and talked about how fast the week was speeding by. The sun started burning through the fog mid morning and it got hot quick. I walked down to the showers and was refreshed for about ten minutes. Two F-16s made noisy touch and goes while I was walking back. One of those, I believe, became the plow mentioned earlier but we can't see the north end of the runway from the Farm so we were blissfully unaware of the excitement.

The air was thick but no rain threatened so we rode back down Knapp street rd. At the LEAF booth I whipped out cash for two spark plugs and a small slip/skid indicator. We wandered through the open air Flymart, picked at the tool bins, tried on cheep sunglasses and ogled the racy nose art. Minor treasures in hand we pedaled back uphill to the Barn. I sat in the shade of Fifi's wing for a while before installing the new plugs. The slip/skid ball had foam tape on the back so I just smacked it in the middle of the panel then picked off the electrical tape holding my yaw string to the windshield. I wouldn't need that primitive device anymore.

A steady stream of people passed by with questions or comments, sometimes real nice compliments, always smiles. One large, well dressed fellow had an eastern European accent and a microphone. He showed me the clever digital recorder in the mic handle and proceeded to interview me. I think he said it was for a blog but even if it was just his way of taking notes it made me feel important. Thanks Fifi.

Jim and I bought more ice and rode back to camp in time to see the Burt Rutan tribute. Many of his most iconic designs flew formation in the threatening sky. Boomerang, Catbird, Defiant, Starship, Long EZ, which one of his artworks are not iconic? Warbirds started the afternoon show, lots of warbirds! Two by two they thundered into the sky until I thought Eisenhower had returned to orchestrate an attack on Illinois. The jet warbirds were launching as I pedaled back to the Barn for the afternoon briefing. I was trying to put on the wristband when the sky opened up. It poured for twenty minutes and the Barn filled up with rain refugees. I found a T-shirt on the racks that I thought Mike Busch would like and read all the airplane-for-sale ads on the wall, twice.

When the sky was wrung out I wiped my bike seat with an open palm and rode home. As I coasted by Rick and Nancy's post with a smart salute and started up the muddy path I heard some one shout. About the third shout my old ears finally focused and I heard "Engine!" I turned to see Kerry Kearney and her friend Rob waving. Changing course in the slime was challenging but I made my way to their spot without falling. I have pictures at home of Kerry directing ultralight traffic way back when cameras used film. We had a delightful time critiquing EAA, religion, politics and the state of the world in general.

My bike tires were so encased in mud I had to shift down to granny gear to ride up the shallow slope to the Marriott. Jim said "Spaghetti" and Italian sausage hit the grill. A few hardy ultralighters launched into the gloomy sky but I was too focused on dinner to join them. We had the sauce and all of the other savory ingredients simmering when Mikey decided to help. I should mention that there are no level surfaces in a camp kitchen. One quick stir and the whole pot went right on the ground. Jim and I jumped up and helped Mike push as much of it as we could back into the pot and it turned out to be

quite tasty. The occasional blade of grass just added to the seasoning.

Poor Mikey barely had a forkful before he got some bad news. Another Kolb owner walked into our dining room and confessed to putting a gash in his wing. They were both parked at the Kolb factory display and a moment of carelessness found one wingtip slicing the other. Of course Mike dropped his dinner plans and went to inspect the damage. When he returned an hour or so later he was upbeat, "It's just a four inch slice in the fabric, we put packing tape on it and it's good to go." Low tech works in the ultralight world. We celebrated with a toast to the various gods of the air, one at a time. Then we toasted some more stuff. Mikey showed us some pictures on his I-phone and I fiddled with the guitar. It got seriously dark so we sat around the Coleman lamp and told war stories.

Friday, July 29, 2011

I heard the clock beep at 5:30 but I was extremely comfortable and did not wish to move. A cold front had passed during the wee hours and the Yacht was air conditioned. When I finally disembarked I found it was not much cooler than yesterday but way less humid. A dozen ultralight pilots were enjoying the morning air and Mikey was one of them. Jim and I were watching him take off when our attention was peeled away by a large shiny object flaring for the main runway. The Boeing 787 Dreamliner made her flashy entrance and if we hadn't been watching Mikey we might have missed it.

After another gloriously greasy camp breakfast we started our daily trek of the grounds. In one of the huge exhibition buildings I struck gold. A little kiosk with fine leather jackets called Pop's Leathers had a display of flying helmets! These were what I had pictured in my mind, no fiberglass crash structure, no fancy headphones, just soft, supple leather and artful stitching. Some did have cups to accept your radio headset but I chose a more classic style: "Curse you Red Baron!" They measured my head ten different ways and said it would be custom sewn and delivered in a couple of weeks. And the price was right. I could tell you that put me in a good mood but that would be redundant, I'm always in a good mood when I'm at Oshkosh.

Outside we looked at more airplanes and made another lap of the Flymart before biking home to sit in the shade. On the way we stopped for three bags of ice. They fit perfectly in Jim's handlebar basket but they really threw off the weight and balance so he had to arm wrestle the front wheel all the way home. Paul Rickert was there with kids and we caught up on our travels. He had been a busy chauffeur and tour guide but the kids were mostly enjoying themselves.

I wanted to check the main jet needle on Fifi's carburetor so I excused myself to the flightline. I enjoy these small moments of intimacy with my girl and feel it's important to really understand what's going on in her complex heart. At the afternoon briefing I got my fifth arm band and wore it with pride. These colorful bracelets give you access to the airfield and identify you as an active citizen of Beagle field. I never cut them off until the convention is over. That way my wrist says to the gatekeeper, "Yes, I took the briefing today, and yesterday, and the day before." That doesn't mean I'm a better pilot but it sure means I know the rules.

The sky was blue and the winds were light as we stepped into the ballroom, the gatekeeper looked at my jewelry and laughed. So much for respect. I thought it appropriate to buy my girl a drink before we danced so we sauntered down to the fuel shed. A Hummel Ultracruiser was the only bird in line for gas. This all-metal low wing art deco classic had flown all the way from New York to hang with the gang at the Farm. An animated discussion took place between the pilot and the pump guy so I hauled my deaf ears closer. The pump was dry! I couldn't believe it. A perfect evening for flying and no go juice. Fifi had enough for a couple of laps but I had already polluted it with enough two-stroke oil for a full tank. I never take off with less than half fuel anyway because we share the strip with so many others it may not be possible to land when you need to.

The word hit the wireless and soon Doug Greenfield coasted up in his golf cart and gave me the news. "The truck has been called and it should be here in an hour....or so." That brought me down for about a minute. I realized I was inside the velvet rope at the coolest dance in town so I got cozy in the shade of Fifi's wing and got into the action. The Quicksilvers were enjoying a one time exemption to the 'no buzzing the field' rule in honor of their long and storied history in the world of ultralight aviation. It's so comical when a pilot makes a low approach, goes to full power six feet over the grass and goes exactly nowhere. I ate a banana watching an MX traverse the length of the field at top speed. A whole banana! The helicopters park near the gas shed so I checked them out too. Our next door neighbor back at Moody built a sweet Safari and I was impressed by his attention to detail

Just when I was contemplating pushing Fifi back up the hill Lee Crevier saved the day. He pulled up in front of the fuel shed in a golf cart with two six gallon jugs full of premium auto gas. I don't know where he got them, I didn't ask, I just grabbed one. Soon Fifi sang her song and lifted me into her world. The air was smooth and the lowering sun cast dramatic shadows on the enchanted land of Oshkosh. Mikey was in the pattern with his pretty bird and we exchanged happy salutes. My spastic engine gauge stayed on the whole time but it would change screens at random intervals so I didn't pay it too much attention. My new slip/skid indicator was a complete failure, the ball found a place it liked and did not move. I stomped on the pedals till the wind blew sideways through the cockpit but the ball never moved. I wished I hadn't thrown away that piece of yarn till I realized that last lock of hair on my rapidly expanding forehead was serving the same purpose. Low tech rules! We had the opportunity to make three uphill landings and Fifi made me look good each time. It's such a cool feeling to swoop down past Rick and Nancy's trailer and just slide your wheels onto the manicured grass.

Finally sated we strolled back down the hill and ran into Bob Payne and his son at the tie downs. More than half a million people walk these acres of grass each year yet we always bump into friends. In this case it was no mystery, they had seen Fifi flying and came to investigate. My girl is petite but at 300 feet above the crowd she attracts a lot of attention.

I surfed a wave of euphoria towards home, Fifi loved me, the weather was perfect, and my back tire was fully inflated and running true. The last block of Ripple road is shaded and slightly downhill so I got some speed and slalomed edge to edge as if still flying. Rick and Nancy waved as I swooped through the gate and I just grinned.

Back in the bivouac Paul was grilling for all the kids, Jim, Mikey and I qualified. After the younger kids were full he loaded them into the SUV and headed back to Illinois. Being a dad to teenagers is a big job and the paycheck is not measured in dollars but I could tell he was enjoying himself. Jim and I got on the bikes one more time to go see the Lt. Dan band at Theater in the Woods. Apparently, the word got out. The entire population of Two Harbors could have got lost in this crowd but everybody was happy and the music was great. Gary Sinise is a huge veterans advocate and his show is pure USO, something for everyone. We stayed till the end.

Yesterday's rain had turned every dirt path into mud and most of that mud got tracked onto the pavement of Knapp Street rd. Baked by the sun all day that mud became dust and we ate a pound of it biking home. Every passing vehicle was like a helicopter in the desert.

I was surprised to find Mike when we got home, in years past if it was dark, Mikey was at the beer tent. Not only was he not going to the tent but he had spent a good part of his day at Kidventure helping youngsters enjoy the Oshkosh experience. He gave Jim and I each a little plastic bag containing the parts his kids had assembled into a working windmill. Mikey was completely stoked about his mentoring time with the kids. Of course he only has two gears, sound asleep or completely stoked. He was also fired up about volunteering to crew for the balloon launch in the morning. Several hot air balloons were planning a dawn launch from our strip and he signed up to help. Knowing he had an early wake-up call did not, however, stop him from staying up late while Jim and I played guitar tag. I think we were all heavily aware that the week was winding down but we never let

on and fully enjoyed each others company.

Saturday, July 30, 2011

I heard the balloons blasting their propane torches at 5:00 a m but I could not summon the energy to get up and watch them drift off. Shame on me, I must be getting old! Nah, can't blame it on the years, I'm just plain lazy but vacation is all about doing exactly, and only, what you want to do. The next time I woke up powered parachutes filled the sky with color and two-stroke exhaust and there was a good crowd at the fence. Paul was already back with his brother and a new roster of kids. They whipped up a fabulous camp breakfast then trekked off into the action. Jim and I attempted to assemble our Kidventure toys in fits and starts. There were no directions but we put our airplane builder hats on and eventually puzzled it out.

The last of our daily expeditions started with a stop at the Barn. I had to use a screwdriver to pry the skid ball off of Fifi's panel, that double-sided tape is tough! When we got to the exhibition buildings I told my sob story to the guys at LEAF and they gave me a refund without hesitation. Of course, being airplane guys we all had to speculate on the cause of the malfunction. Trying to touch every base one more time we passed by big FIFI, the B-29 and gave her a close inspection. It's amazing that a pressurized, high altitude, long range strategic bomber was designed and built back when they were still trying to make a decent light bulb.

We slipped into an EAA merchandise tent more for the shade than to shop but I saw another T-shirt I knew Mike Busch would like and he had said that he wanted "a couple". We also made a last sweep of the Flymart and Jim bought some wire wheels for his angle grinder. It was bitter sweet knowing that tomorrow we would navigate the wormhole back to black and white but we still had one more airshow to watch. Make that two.

The Ultralight Picnic and Pig Roast is always on Saturday evening so Beagle Field would be closed but the second annual Night Airshow would make up for it. And then some.

The ride home was uncomfortable in the 90 degree-plus temperature but we had pedaled up that slope so many times our legs didn't complain and we made sure to get more ice at Boelter's. Sitting in our shady living room we watched Molt Taylor's Aerocar fly the show pattern with a couple of electric powered airplanes. Mikey had his radio on and we listened to the announcer wax nostalgic about the old "Bob Cummings Show", a sit-com from the early 60's that featured an Aerocar. The Warbird Review started with a Navy Legacy Flight including the Dauntless dive bomber, an F/A-18 and a couple of Corsairs. We watched them and a line of black clouds with equal interest. All the old bombers thundered down the runway with bomb bay doors open and fighter escort. Pyro Kenny was right on cue, the flash and concussion on the ground made each bomb run extremely realistic. The black smoke rose and twisted into the blue sky, sometimes making huge, evil looking smoke rings. In a perfect Kodak moment a P-51 Mustang pilot pulled hard out of his strafing pass and flew right through the middle of a smoke ring. I could imagine the twinkle in his steely gaze and the flash of Hollywood light on his Fighter Ace smile.

We look northeast to see the show but the occasional glance to the northwest was unsettling to say the least. The black monster in the sky was moving at a real good clip and accelerating. All of the laid back denizens of Camp Moody suddenly shifted gears and it was rush hour at Grand Central Station. Awnings rolled up and flags came down, lawn furniture was stowed. You didn't need to be a pilot to know local meteorology was in serious flux. I ran around the Yacht madly pulling stakes then jumped on her ladder to gather the suddenly animated tarp. I threw it down as the gust front came crashing though and Jim had to play the Crocodile Hunter just to keep it on the ground. Doug told us later that wind speeds on the ground were over 60 mph and I thought, "Yeah, way over!"

The soaking rain we all expected never came and eventually the tempest lost its fury. As soon as I stopped worrying about our camp blowing away I started getting real worried about Fifi. Her efficient wings were pointed almost directly into those gusts and I knew they were tugging at her tie down ropes with all of her considerable strength. I grabbed a hammer, threw ropes and stakes in a bag and jumped on my bike. I got to the barn in record time and was relieved to see my girl sitting proud, upright and in one piece in her spot at the fence. Behind her in Boelter's campground four guys were still clutching the corners of their shade canopy. They told me Fifi had actually left the ground a couple of times and they were sure she would pull her stakes and back flip into their faces. The nice, round impressions in the ground where I had parked her wheels all week were still there but Fifi was ten inches back. The screw-in stakes were bent and the ropes stretched to their limits but nothing had broken and my blood pressure dropped twenty points. I drove stakes and ran more ropes just for something to do. The horses were already gone but this barn door was not going to open without my permission. Two Quicksilvers 40 yards away were not so lucky. They were parked tail to the wind and a fierce gust had pushed down on their wings hard enough to snap both spars. The poor things looked like butterflies under a boot.

The wind continued to abate and the temperature was finally comfortable when I got back to camp. Mikey's dad Chuck was there with friends and we pulled all of the meat out of the coolers. There was steak, tenderloin, ribs, salmon, shrimp, sausages and of course taters and veggies. We had eaten pretty well all week but we hadn't exhausted our stores and it seemed wrong to haul anything back home. All the grills were stoked and Chuck took over the kitchen. Paul was back with his group so there were plenty of appetites to satisfy and everyone was in a party mood. Since I wasn't needed in the kitchen I plugged in to my battery amp and did my 'classic rock' set. Beers were cracked, jokes were cracked, food was consumed and the sun went down.

We were still licking our fingers when we heard the rumble of big round engines off in the darkness. They grew louder and closer and everyone stopped in mid conversation to look out over the runway. Suddenly the four Aeroshell T-6s roared into the night sky belching smoke and lit up like a Vegas casino. Their flawless formation work made them appear as one otherworldly ship as they looped and rolled through the fog of their own show smoke. It gave me goose bumps. They were followed by a steady stream of mind blowing pyro planes. Bob Carlton's jet powered sailplane looked like a flying Roman candle, shooting colored sparks off in all directions. Gene Soucy's Showcat appeared to be completely on fire for his entire act. I felt like I was attending the coronation of the new Emperor of the Universe, certainly not standing in a cow pasture in Wisconsin.

When the airborne fireworks wound down the terrestrial version fired up. Take the fourth of July celebration of a major city, add in Chinese new year and multiply by five. Then add Pyro Kenny. Oh yeah, he was there. The finale singed eyebrows for miles.

When the last bits of gun powder and napalm had been sacrificed the cool evening closed in around our happy camp. Chuck and his party, Paul and his bunch took our handshakes and hearty farewells out the gate and headed south. Jim ran the checklist for his early morning departure to the Appleton art show and I took my customary last tour of the campgrounds. Walking around in the dark I tried to replay the highlights of a week full of nothing but highlights and at last just enjoyed the atmosphere on this friendly, alien planet.

Sunday, July 31, 2011

I heard Jim loading his Suburban at 6:00 and got up to see him off. We both wished each other safe passage through the wormhole and he motored away. The tarp had already been stowed due to yesterday's gale so I figured I would stay up and make an early start myself. It didn't take long to load the bike and empty coolers. The Marriott groaned out of her spot and we trundled down the camp road

for the last time. Rick and Nancy are usually up at this early hour but I saw no movement at the gate so I idled past and left with a silent goodbye. I wrangled the trailer out of the weeds at Lot'U' and putted through the gate at the Barn. Many of the tie down spots that had been filled with colorful flying machines all week were now sadly empty. While I pulled stakes and stowed ropes Rick Hayes strolled up and I enlisted his help to fold Fifi's wings. I walked through the Barn one last time and ensured the ladies behind the counter that we would meet again next year. Fifi sits backwards on the trailer so she looked back longingly as we left the scene of her triumph. As the Merry Yacht shifted into high gear I felt the dimension shift as well and soon we were just motoring down a boring highway on a familiar planet. After ten days outdoors Fifi and I were tanned and relaxed and I started to look forward to coming home. The wind whispered through the windows and the miles went by.

Eight long hours later I slipped Fifi into her cool, dark hangar, trailer and all, and forced myself back into the drivers chair for the short trip to Marble Lake. I found my cabin right where I had left it and none the worse for wear. The Yacht spilled her contents quickly and there was plenty of daylight left to fire up the grill but I had no desire. Charcoal is great but enough is enough. I started to open ten days of mail but soon found my head drooping.

A music video played on my eyelids as I collapsed into bed , electric guitar wailing behind airplanes in blue sky, airplanes on green grass, that cute girl dancing at the concert, but mostly airplanes. Just before I drifted off, out came the age-old question, "Did that really happen?"

.....Happy Landings!.....