

Oshkosh 2014

It's the middle of winter here at the lake and I'm loving it. Everything is clean and white, the ski trails are groomed, the rink is shoveled and the maple is cured. My only unshirkable responsibility is to keep 200 cubic yards of air above freezing. Oh yeah, and eat. There is plenty of time to think.

Lately I've been thinking about last summer. Specifically ten days in July and August. Oshkosh 2014. There are a lot of videos on the web but they can't tell the whole story. Fortunately I was there and I took notes.....

Thursday, July 24

I've been excited all week, making long lists of stuff to bring and stuff to buy. I retrieved my coolers from the attic and loaded the poles and tarp that shade the Oshkosh Marriott (my van) and her living room. The weather has been cooperative and I have mowed and groomed the grounds at Bob's Cabins so I can take today off.

At the airport I fold Fifi's wings and make her comfortable on the trailer. Counting four Champion stickers on her tailboom I realize this will be the fifth time Dan Murphy has loaned me his trailer to bring my girl to the dance. Last year it suffered some damage in the ultralight trailer parking area and he welded it up without complaint. When I asked to borrow it again this year he didn't hesitate to say yes. That either makes him crazy or very kind. I choose to believe both. Speaking of the devil, up he drives to see me off. While we chat Mike Busch, Bud Gorman and Steve Merrill roll up with good wishes for our journey. They all nod and make nice comments when I show them the new brace I have invented to hold Fifi's wings immobile for the trip. Airport people are the best!

Rolling the loaded trailer back into the hangar I head to town for ice and groceries. It's easy to spend too much on this massive cookout so I do. I can't sit down when I get home, running back and forth between the Merry Yacht and the checklists my adrenaline pumps and my efficiency slides. Finally I give in to sleep and dream of sunlit grass runways and warm embraces from my girl in smooth evening air.

Friday, July 25

Yesterday's excitement took its toll and it takes some time to get focused. The Merry Yacht finally rolls out of the driveway at 9:30. The sky is overcast but not really threatening and I welcome the shade. At the airport Fifi joins the parade in minutes and we are southbound and down. I have been looking forward to this moment since last August and I can't suppress a grin. The wind whistles through the vents as the Yacht settles into a stately cruise. Checking the mirrors gets boring fast as Fifi sits motionless as a gold brick and I take my first deep breath in two days.

As we float across the high bridge into Wisconsin I can actually feel my attitude change from manic preparation and planning to just sitting back and enjoying the ride. If I haven't thought of it by now, I can live without it. When the overcast darkens and sprinkles turn into brief downpours near Hurley I just keep rolling. The Merry Yacht and Fifi get a nice bath and air dry by Mercer. I stop for gas at Merrill and buy some big bottle rockets at the fireworks store. The Yacht rolls on and I enjoy every mile. Soon enough Oshkosh looms on the horizon and my good mood elevates.

I navigate the security fence at the airport perimeter like the seasoned pro that I am. (Last year it was all new.) Guiding the Yacht up to the snow fence surrounding the ultralight runway I open all the windows to let the Oshkosh atmosphere in. It's 5:30 on a perfect summer afternoon and the clouds are slinking away from the 'Poberezny Bubble'. That's my decidedly non-scientific term for Oshkosh weather patterns. I have seen nasty storms march in from the northwest only to glance off the Bubble

and leave the convention grounds dry. I've also seen some nasty storms hit us in the teeth, the Bubble doesn't always work.

Today it is working and I take my sweet time releasing my girl from her bonds. As I bend to the task I hear a scooter putt up and look to see Paul Rickert followed shortly by his two kids on bikes. I met Paul here many years ago and like many Oshkosh friendships we have a deep bond even though we only see each other here. His kids are beautiful, intelligent and friendly, just like him. By and large, the people you meet here usually seem to have their ducks in a row. A touch of vision and a lot of hard work put them in a good place and they inspire me. Catching up with the Rickerts while I work releases the residual tension from the long drive and I begin to get drunk on the rarified air. When Fifi unfolds her regal wings and allows me to tie her down I proceed to the trailer parking lot and then to the John Moody ultralight campground, home for the next ten days.

Mike Garrett has staked out spaces at the fence next to his immaculate VW Microbus for the Merry Yacht and Jim Batzli's truck. I ease in and begin to transform a vehicle into a house. First the bike comes out, then the coolers, the hibachi and charcoal, the tool boxes then the structure for the living room. Erecting the tarp is old hat and I pause on the roof to pan 360 degrees and take in the scene. There is already one DC-3 parked at the end of the ultralight strip and a handful of flying boats off to the side. They are all classic, twin engine Grummans named after waterfowl. Behind them the main runway is active but not busy as aircraft of all shapes and sizes arrive from the corners of the globe. Okay, busy but not full blown Oshkosh Busy, not yet.

I finish stretching the tarp over its frame and walk up the rise to Rick and Nancy Jacobsen's fifth wheel home. I get a hug and a hearty handshake from my favorite volunteers and we chat for a bit. Peace and order in the campground is their job and they could do it in their sleep, sometimes they have to. Nancy is just sweetness and light while Rick can put on his Marshall Dillon face if it is needed. In this mellow world it is rarely needed. We joke about the line of porta-potties blocking a large chunk of his view of the ultralight runway and right on cue a Challenger ultralight sweeps in from the south for a landing that we don't get to see. "Why do they get a better view than me?" he asks, "They don't even have windows!"

Heading back down to camp I realize I'm now fully integrated to Oshkosh time. I'm not walking, I'm strolling, perhaps ambling. No hurry no worry. Jim has not yet arrived and it's getting late so I munch on a sandwich and catch up with Mikey. An Oshkosh buddy for nearly 20 years, Mike still looks 20 years old. His animated conversation brings the party atmosphere to our little patch of grass and the sun takes her leave.

Saturday, July 26

It's cool enough in the van to take my time getting up. Lots of lazy stretches to a sound track of purring aircraft engines. I poke my head out to a perfect summer morning and I smile. Jim's parking spot is still vacant so I grab a banana for breakfast and pull out my tool box. Fifi trailers without her propeller so I need my torque wrench with a 15mm socket and a half inch box end. And my reading glasses. Oh, and the prop! I drop everything but the prop in my old Boy Scouts of America backpack and see the name tag on the back. My name, troop number and address is still legible after fifty plus years of hard service. When I look up I'm at a Camporee with Troop 325 and I'm an exited 10 year old because this is the coolest camp *ever!* As if to justify the italics a Quicksilver swings around the trees to the south and swoops in to land right in front of me. I am positively giddy!

I decide to walk rather than carry my precious propeller on the bike. Since the perimeter road was built the walk is pretty short and I have Fifi properly assembled and inspected in no time. Walking down toward the Ultralight Barn I get a great view of the classic and contemporary parking and see several cool older airplanes at a glance. The Barn isn't open for business until tomorrow but it is a beehive of activity with volunteers stocking shelves and getting organized. The consignment shop is

another room in the same barn and they seem ready to go. I poke around the old Rotax engines, used props and airframe parts before turning to the coat rack in the middle of the cramped space. I stumble upon a real high quality brown leather jacket and it fits. It hangs nice and feels rich. The only squawk I can find is a missing zipper fob. I suppose that is a problem for some people but to me it's an opportunity. I've already designed a nice replacement in my mind as I flip the friendly man behind the counter a twenty.

Back out in the sunshine I fold my new bargain into the old haversack and start back up the hill. The temperature has been on the rise all morning and I welcome the shade of the Merry Yacht when I get back. Placing a camp chair on the edge of the shade I watch two really spacey looking gyroplanes swoop in for ridiculously short landings. From this vantage point I get a really great view of landings on the main runway a couple hundred yards away and all it takes to watch the ultralights and rotorcraft up close is a change of focus, I don't even have to turn my head. But I should. As soon as I have the thought something draws my attention left, up the grass strip. A Rans S-6 like Jim and I built is coming in for a downwind landing. One of the first things a student pilot learns is to always take off and land into the wind but weird thing happen when you combine an unfamiliar landing strip with the pressure of ten thousand pilots watching. Compounding our arriving pilot's problems is the downward slope of the runway going this direction. To his credit he only uses a couple hundred feet to get stopped but they are the *very last* couple hundred feet.

Mikey has his head inside the engine compartment of the Microbus so I look over his shoulder. He is fussing with carb linkage but I am blinded by the gleam. I have never seen such an immaculate engine room. When he was still running the original power plant he had to carry a case of oil wherever he went. This is orders of magnitude better. He has been restoring this VW for years and he tells me he is doing some wheel bearing work this week too. While the ultralights land in front of him. His energy is just amazing.

And inspiring, I decide to jump on my bike and take a tour of the convention. It's downhill this direction and the breeze feels refreshing as I glide by green fields steadily filling with aluminum artwork. Parking the bike in the show center bike yard I stroll toward the runways. I see Jerry's One Man Band is back again with the same sign he had posted last year: "This is my last year!" The accordion master has been at every convention I've ever been to and if you said he's been at every one since the first I wouldn't doubt you. I walk slowly and keep my head on a swivel. I see something cool everywhere I look but I also *feel* something. The atmosphere is thick with optimism and joy. Big piston engines swinging huge props bring the rhythm and bass while happy chatter fills the higher registers of a sweet symphony. Bravo maestro!

At the Antique Barn I see Mark Marino, Mike Shannon and Tom Betts fussing over the Lark of Duluth. She is completely assembled and they are adjusting cables to get the ailerons lined up. They look sharp in matching shirts but they must be roasting in the sun. I seek shade under the wing of a classic Fairchild nearby and admire her cabinet quality woodwork. In this same space sits a perfect reproduction of the GeeBee Q.E.D. Compared to all the other Granville brother's racers this one is a giant. Her huge art deco wheelpants are works of hand hammered art.

I can feel my blood sugar slipping low so I step over to the Subway kiosk and buy a big chocolate chip cookie and a bottle of cold water. Sitting in the shade of tall oak trees I just soak in the incredible kaleidoscope of sights and sounds all around me and think about how lucky I am to be here. Heading north across the grass I dodge wingtips and emerge on the Plaza. One B-17 is attracting a crowd but otherwise the square is nearly empty. A semi truck seems to be giving birth to an airplane so I walk around back. I'm shocked to see a full sized F-16 being winched down a ramp. The vertical tail is folded back through a slot in the engine and the wings are off but it is still such a tight fit I expect to hear a wine cork POP when it emerges. Most of the crew wear USAF tee shirts but there is one extreme exception. A young woman seems to be in charge and her pink tank top is eye-popping. I decide to watch for a while. The F-16 is painted in full Thunderbirds livery and I assume it is a

publicity tool rather than a flying example.

Once it is standing on the tarmac I mosey back toward my bike and bump into Dana and Merideth Holladay with their little princess in a stroller. As we chat it starts raining Bonanzas. The Beechcraft mass arrival has begun and every square inch of runway is suddenly in full use. A lot of the incoming planes are the iconic V-tail variety and they all look factory fresh. I pedal the mile uphill back to camp and the Bonanzas are still coming in three abreast! Must be well over a hundred all landing safely at the only place in the world that this could happen. I'm just getting comfortable in my camp chair when I have to jump up to watch an arrival on our grass strip. Another Rans S-6 is struggling with the freshening west wind and he makes a 'sporty' but respectable landing. I give him a hand. At 2:30 the Cessnas do their mass arrival and if there are fewer than the Bonanzas it's not by many.

After a snack I decide to test the limits of bicycle travel. Historically no bikes have been allowed inside the fence but I saw some casual bikers on the grounds earlier. I am delighted to coast down the security road all the way to the flightline without being stopped. Turning north I glide all the way to the warbirds and I can't believe my luck. I do the all-day tour of the convention grounds in about a half hour. On the way back I talk to a gate guard and he says bike freedom is only for today, tomorrow its back to foot only for the duration of the convention.

I stop to check on Fifi and talk to the pilot parked next to her. He has been flying his Ukrainian made light sport aircraft all day so I ask him how he gets away with it. He explains that because ultralight pattern traffic is restricted to arrivals and departures he just makes sure to depart the pattern for a while so when he returns he is officially an arrival and therefore within the rules. I make a mental note.

Resting in my camp chair I study the manual for my gigantic pilot watch and try to set the alarm for oh-dark-thirty. An overcast is organizing but it is still hot and muggy. Across the ultralight runway by the flying boats a relic from the cold war taxis to park. It looks a little like an olive drab DeHavilland Beaver but it sports twin rudders on a massive horizontal stabilizer. With my binoculars I read Max Hoste on the tail. Four big guys clamber out and start setting up tents. One of my greatest thrills is seeing an aircraft I have never seen before so at Oshkosh one taxis right up in my face. A few more ultralights arrive in my living room but it's not a steady stream.

Jim rolls in about 7:30, his pickup stuffed with camp essentials. He parks between the Merry Yacht and the VW Microbus and relates the long and winding tale of his last 24 hours while he drags gear out of the truck. When the coolers come out there is a brief pause to open a beer. While we talk a camp neighbor comes over with a bucket of fried potatoes and three hot ears of sweetcorn for Jim, Mikey and me. We have never met this fellow before but the offering is not surprising and gratefully accepted. While we chow down Paul walks up with some succulent barbequed ribs left over from his family dinner. At this point it is very hard to refute the fact that I have died and gone to heaven but it's not over yet.

After we assemble Jim's kitchen up against the fence and connect his shade tarp to mine we have our home complete and sit down to enjoy it. The sun has finally set and the party starts. All evening old friends and new stop in for a chat or a drink, mostly both. Mikey is the friendliest guy in the world so whoever drops by is either his best bud already or soon will be. The constant throb of aircraft engines stops precisely at 8:00 and the whole convention grounds change character. Under camp lights little islands of quiet conversation dot a dark sea of cool grass. Distant lightning plays along the western horizon but it does not seem to be getting closer. The Bubble is working.

When Vern pulls up on his low rider scooter it's rather late but it's Saturday night and nobody has to get up early tomorrow. Vern is a master craftsman of home made spirits and wines. He has his usual variety pack of small bottles and encourages taste testing. After a few passes someone suggests that we are the Experimental Aircraft Association's Experimental Drinking Chapter. I think for a bit about all of the cool and crazy people I have met here over the years and I decide that name has most

probably already been taken. Vern is an old hand in very light aviation and he regales us with tales of the good old days. He's a great story teller and a world class name dropper and the more we drink the better he gets.

I am completely pooped when the party finally drifts away so I crawl into my Marriott suite and slip into my cozy bed. Flashbacks of an incredible day play on my closed eyelids and I fall off to slumber with a big grin on my face.

Sunday, July 27

I wake to the distant throb of big, round engines and slip out of the Yacht to watch the EAA's B-17, Aluminum Overcast rumble overhead. She flies a regular schedule of tours out of the Appelton Airport and we see her several times a day. Before I can say, "Good morning" Jim puts a take-out container of biscuits and gravy in my hand. Mikey has been up for a while so he went out and bought us breakfast. Generous fellow that he is Mike has brought us this same treat in years gone by. I don't know where he gets them but they are a great way to start the day.

It is sunny with a light northwest breeze and perfectly comfortable so we sit in the living room and chat as we watch the faithful arrive at Mecca. A really slick red gyro lands right in front of our kitchen and formations of T-6s land on runway 27. The show doesn't officially start until tomorrow but the Breezy is already going round and round the pattern carrying happy campers for free while Pipers, Cessnas and more exotic travelers find their way to the promised land. Jim heads to the showers so I tune my travel guitar and entertain myself, always looking up.

I need to register Fifi at the Barn so when Jim gets back we bicycle the familiar route out Ripple road, down Knapp Street road (yes, Street road) to the Barn bike lot. Short lines of people wait at the Barn windows to buy passes for the show. They are all smiling and chatting happily as they receive their wrist bands. Jim and I already have bracelets so we head to the gate and talk with Ed the perennial gate guard. He recognizes us both and gives us a hearty welcome. We stroll around to the show side of the Barn and take a moment to absorb the scene. The Barn sits on a rise that continues gently upward, through Boelter's campground, to Beagle Field. The ultralight grass strip will always be Beagle Field to me. The higher ground allows us to take in the activity and appreciate the atmosphere from a clear perspective. Decades of memories flood back but 2014 has it's own flavor and I savor the difference.

Inside the Barn I get the welcome back smile from all of the volunteers as I sign Fifi in and get my swag. The most important bit is the mug. Labeled "Airventure Oshkosh Showplane Participant" it is one of the few pieces of memorabilia that cannot be purchased and therefore the most precious to me. This is my sixteenth one. For nine years my Kolb Twinstar carried me over these quiet farm fields. When I flew Miss Chaos (my Rans S-9) here in 2003 my landing was so terrible that I left her home for the next four conventions. In 2008 I tried again with slightly better results but I decided Miss Chaos and Beagle Field don't mix. It was pure providence when I found Fifi in 2010 and my mug collection resumed in earnest. This simple glassware means a lot to me.

The sky has developed a small but threatening dark spot as Jim and I walk back to our bikes and sure enough, it opens up and spills all over our heads as we peddle madly back to camp. Mike has thoughtfully closed our truck windows but the dark cloud passes quickly and we are left with a perfect summer day. The temporary nastiness has virtually halted arrivals at our strip but the General Aviation (GA) traffic continues on the paved runways even through the remaining sprinkles. Jim points out a biplane that seems to be riding a rainbow down to a perfect landing.

We feel the wind clock around to the north and freshen. A squall line crawls over the Warbird area but the atmosphere does not seem that unsettled and the Warbirds are more than two miles north of us so we decide to get back on the bikes. Locking them together in the center bike lot we proceed on one of our long and rambling treks across the grounds. We always seem to hit our points of interest

even though our path is diverted every few minutes by some fascinating sight. Actually, it doesn't even need to be fascinating to divert us, we are both fans of all things aviation and we are kids in a fantastic candy store. As usual we end our trip with a stroll through the fly-mart, a small city of tarp covered stalls filled with all manner of wares. Imagine dozens of mom and pop Wal-Marts, only cheaper.

When we peddle back to camp we are delighted to see Chuck and Kristi. Chuck is Mikey's dad and Kristi is Mikey's girl. They are both enormously fun to hang with and the party starts immediately. As we catch each other up on a year of life another black cloud marches in and dumps on our tarps. Apparently the Poberezny Bubble is taking the day off. This system passes as quickly as the others and the GA traffic is unfazed. More than ten thousand aircraft will be accommodated here on the field so arrivals need to continue and the pilots just take what they get and make the best of it.

We all notice when it gets a little quiet and we know what that means. A military arrival always puts a hold on other traffic so we all turn eyes and ears to the sky. The ears have it this time as a heavy mechanical thumping approaches from the south. We can feel it in our bones before we see anything but soon enough an apparition clears the trees and we all gasp. A pair of scary looking V-22 Ospreys lumber into view and float slowly up the flightline in helicopter mode. The air is positively alive as the beasts pound it into swirling submission. Every eye is glued to their magic act until they settle their menacing mass onto the runway. Just another amazing day at Oshkosh, but we're not done yet. Not by a long shot.

Beagle Field, also known as our front yard, in addition to being ultralight heaven is also home built rotorcraft headquarters so we are not surprised when four Rotorway Executives arrive en masse. Impressed to be sure but not surprised. Mikey is a big helicopter fan so his normal grin widens by about a foot. We are still talking vertical flight when three Baby Belles make a similar arrival. The name came from their resemblance to the M.A.S.H. medevac marvel but it has since been changed to Safari due to copyright considerations. Their iconic bubble canopy will always remind me of the Bell 47. Unlike the quiet, closed throttle swoop of the ultralight aircraft, helicopters get louder as they near the ground and keep flailing away at the air until they settle in their parking spots. It's hard to ignore the racket.

The air is cooling off so I slip on a flannel shirt and we all shift into kitchen mode. Chuck takes great satisfaction in preparing gourmet meals so while he readies the grills for ribs Jim wraps potatoes in foil and I snap beans fresh from Jim's garden. Looking southeast across the airport Mikey sees an interesting cloud formation and calls us to the fence. Less than a mile away we watch a small, snakey looking funnel cloud dance and twirl well above the ground. It never proceeds past the rumor stage and after about five minutes it peters out. The aroma of sweet barbecue sauce gets our juices flowing and we sit in randomly arranged camp chairs to devour the feast. The dinner conversation is lighthearted and the diners are delighted. After dinner Chuck requests music so I whip out the camp guitar and bang on it for a while.

Population in the John Moody Campground is growing steadily with a new vehicle rolling in every few minutes. Tomorrow the big show begins and the excitement is palpable. I'm not sure I have the alarm properly set on my giant pilot watch so I elect to crash early. I can't miss the 6:30 briefing because Fifi needs to fly. So do I.

Monday, July 28 2014

My eyes pop open at 5:30 even though the giant pilot's watch remains silent. Outside the Merry Yacht the air is cool and breezy but not so bad as to scrub the first day of flying at Beagle Field. I pull on jeans, grab my pack and peddle over to the Barn. My ritual of buying a super sweet pastry once each year is accomplished and I savor one gooey bite before wrapping it up and shoving it in my pack. A large event tent sits next to the Barn and serves as a briefing room as well as a venue for several presentations during the week. Many familiar faces greet me as I select an unsteady metal fold-up

chair. The tent sits on soft ground about fifteen degrees off level so all the chairs are unstable. Mark manages to keep the first day briefing refreshingly brief and injects his typical corny humor at the appropriate moments. Using familiar power point pictures he outlines the pattern procedures and turn points. Admonishments about altitude and track deviations are positively administered and questions from the assembled are few. After we sign the waiver we line up at the chicken coop for our wristbands. These bracelets allow the ground crew volunteers to quickly identify a pilot that has been briefed for the day because daily briefs are mandatory.

The big cottonwood trees on the hill are dancing as I stroll up to Fifi's tiedowns. I know the powered parachutes won't be taking their assigned time this morning and truthfully, if I was at home I wouldn't be flying either. I know Fifi can handle bumpy air but it requires me to pay more attention to guiding her and thus less time enjoying the ride. Still, this is OSHKOSH!

One benefit of the wind is that the dew has abandoned my girl and I leave her bath towel in my pack. As I release her restraints Pat Schmitz comes by and asks if I might repeat last year's performance of the song I wrote for Frank Beagle. Pat has taken Frank's position in the announcer's tower and I assure him it would be my pleasure. I take my time with the preflight inspection but Fifi is the essence of simplicity so there is not that much to inspect. There is no line at the gate so I push my partner onto the sacred grass and pull on my leather flying helmet. Being cool for summer I guess at three shots of primer and she pops on the first pull of the starter cord. My heart keeps time with her rising pulse and my lips pull back into a grin that I hope is not too manic. The helmet and goggles already scream "Mad Professor" and I don't want to alarm anybody.

I perform the tricky dance to climb into the cockpit as Fifi accelerates down the hill and manage to get on the heel brakes before it gets crazy. My girl is so lean and powerful that I must restrain her either physically or with brakes so the time in between the two is critical. Especially on a hill. Taxiing down toward the take off line I toss a smart salute to the announcer's stand and shrug into my shoulder straps. Fifi's petite feet find every gopher hole so I imagine we don't present a graceful picture but I don't care. I am escorting my best girl to the big dance and I am in heaven.

A lovely young lady holds the orange side of her paddle toward us while she scans the sky for incoming traffic. I give the throttle a test burst and check my altitude readout. Fifi has been the First fixed wing ultralight to depart Beagle Field on the First day of the Biggest Airshow in the World more than once and today is no different. Our flag girl spins her paddle to the green side, smiles and makes a broad, sweeping motion that says, "The runway is yours!" The morning sun swings over my shoulder as we line up and accelerate. Fifi immediately insists we turn right but I have the left pedal all the way down. It's annoying but it really doesn't matter, as soon as the throttle hits the stop the wheels leave the ground. Airborne, a little bank angle has us climbing straight down the runway. Instead of the usual smooth strong ascent it feels like we're climbing steps. The turbulence is dramatic and every fifty feet up is slapped twenty feet down. Fortunately, I spent six years towing advanced hang glider pilots who won't even leave the ground until the atmosphere gets "active" so these conditions don't disturb me.

Turning out on the departure leg I pull the power back and check my EIS instrument for altitude. Blank! This little box displays all the engine information and also has a handy altimeter. Or I should say had, right now it is just dead weight. I checked it before take off because Air Traffic Control (ATC) is very strict about staying at 300 feet above the ground and they can see us clearly from the tower. The hundreds of different aircraft using this airspace are stacked like flapjacks three hundred feet thick and that is our only spacing so staying on altitude is crucial for noise abatement. That is, the noise two airplanes make when they collide.

After twenty years of flying over these fields I have a pretty good idea what three hundred feet looks like so I just let Fifi bounce around my best guess. As I relax into the conditions my control inputs slow down and get smoother and I begin to enjoy the view. Fighting to keep the wings perfectly level is futile but if one wing drops, in two heartbeats it will pop right back up again on its own so there's no sense wearing out the stick. Turning south at the edge of Hiway 41 I take in the view. It's

pretty much farms from here to Milwaukee but the summer haze obscures the far horizon. Looking down at the highway I'm not surprised to be whizzing by the traffic. We're only going 55 mph through the air but we're making about 80 over the ground. What a great day to be alive!

The southern turn point zooms up so we swing left again to the east and beautiful Lake Winnebago. Forty thousand campers below me and not one has a view of the Lake. She shimmers in the morning sun and draws me in. Ghosts of the wind turbines on the far shore peer through the haze, their long vanes beckoning. I snap back to reality as four T-6s cross my twelve o'clock. The Aeroshell team is returning from their morning practice and swoop gently to land on the big runway. If Fifi weighed a ton and a half she wouldn't bounce around either. I look over my shoulder before turning north but see no other traffic. Now the whole convention spreads out before me and it is impressive. There is hardly a square foot of grass without an airplane sitting on it and all the concrete is covered with heavy iron. I glance over at the Museum and see no moored airship. Usually Goodyear or Farmer's Insurance brings a blimp but they might be waiting for better weather.

Fifi is still kicking and bucking as we arrive at the big oak tree so I decide to make a landing. This tree marks the exit from the square pattern onto a cockeyed base leg for Beagle Field. I calm Fifi's roar to a low rumble and lose sight of the field as we descend behind the trees then crank a hard left over the access road. This is the equally cockeyed final approach and requires another turn around a power pole to line up with the runway. Hey, its Oshkosh! When I pull the throttle to idle Fifi responds with a low bow and a sweet reunion with the sun dappled grass. Exiting the runway I turn to get in the departure line and find there is none. Apparently nobody else feels like flying this morning. They don't know what they're missing. Or perhaps they do.

I'm her only customer so the flag girl gives me priority handling and waves me onto the runway with a sweet smile. Fifi doesn't hesitate and by the time we pass the grandstand we're too high for a decent wave. I try to spot the Murphy's encampment as we cruise west and a couple dozen units meet the description. Not sure of my target I toss a big wave over the side for who ever is looking up. The next two laps don't get any smoother or any less wonderful. I change my focus from the grand scheme to finer details on the ground and see Jim and Mikey relaxing at our bivouac. The Oshkosh air washes through Fifi's wide open cockpit and exits with all my earthly cares.

As we tiptoe through the procedure for our last landing I let Fifi float half way down the runway so we can roll out to the gate. Shutting down the trusty Rotax 447 I let out whoop and jump out of the cockpit like a young ace. My day is officially made. A handful of spectators step aside to let us out but there are still no other aircraft waiting to get in. Fifi has a prime parking spot so I have her secured in minutes and stroll back to the Barn for my bike. The ultralight population on the grass is growing steadily and GA parking spots are filling up as well.

Back at camp I scarf some breakfast leftovers and rave about my flight. The boys have heard it all before but they listen politely. After a half hour or so some other brave aviators roll onto the grass to take their chances with the conditions and Beagle Field comes to life with the familiar cadence of take offs and landings that we love. Jim and I critique some landings then saddle up the bikes for our traditional daily tour of the grounds.

Our first stop at the Lark of Duluth finds Mark, Mike and Tom busy answering questions from an appreciative crowd. Jim whips out his phone and gets photos of all the classics gathered in front of the Antique Barn. These restorations are on the order of fine art and pictures will never do them justice but since this is the only place one would ever encounter all these pieces of history everyone has a camera in hand. We walk the long rows of slightly less ancient classics and Jim gets pics of Stearmans, Wacos, Staggerwings and Howard DGAs. (DGA stands for Damn Good Airplane and it truly is.) At the end of the first row is a positively gleaming Spartan Executive and Jim gets a selfie in the reflection.

Aimless and unhurried we meander through show center and my nose for sweets finds a new vendor with real ice cream. As we enjoy our treats we watch the traffic in the manufacturer's showcase.

All morning aircraft of all descriptions display their unique qualities over the main runway for thousands of discerning eyes in a pattern so tight it's almost a circle. Meanwhile the Ford Trimotor and the Breezy haul happy sightseers on the ride of their lives, the crosswind runway stays busy with arrivals and the EAA helicopter throbs over on its regular rounds. I cannot find a single patch of empty sky and I love it.

When our cones are consumed we amble north along this busy thoroughfare to our designated smoking area. It's the rare spot where we can get more than 50 feet away from airplanes and though not officially sanctioned, nobody has ever objected. The Zenith display is across the street so we peruse their offerings on our way to Rans. Jim and I have both built and fly Rans aircraft so their booth is always a target. We get a handshakes and hugs then sign their book of attending pilots. All the display craft get our close inspection and the occasional shorthand comment makes us feel like experts. I sit in the new S-20 Raven and she feels good. If I can ever afford another kit, this will be the one. The door sill is high because of the huge tundra tires but I manage to exit without looking too old.

Gliding through the other company displays our path gradually becomes southwest and we end up in the Fly-Mart. Out of the wind between the shops the sun starts to warm the air so we decide to head back to camp and change into shorts. About 2:30 the beehive of traffic ebbs and the big airshow gets under way. A half dozen parachutes hang in a bright sky with a high cirrus ceiling. They swing smoke canisters, a MIA/POW flag and the leader unfurls a huge stars and stripes. A couple noisy biplanes carve a tight, descending spiral around them while the national anthem plays. We have an excellent view from camp but the ultralight vendor area is even closer so we take the tour with our eyes skyward. The Aeroshell T-6s are as graceful as ever and even louder from this distance. Several very talented aerobatic pilots make their craft do unbelievable things then Sean D. Tucker comes out and shows them how its *done!* His little red biplane flips and tumbles so fast I don't know how he keeps his eyeballs in his head. Gene Soucy and Teresa Stokes perform their intricate wing walking dance for an appreciative crowd. One of my all time favorites is Matt Younkin's Beech 18. The black and red beauty paints smooth, symmetrical figures in the sky with the smoke from its two round engines. Designed in the 1930s for executive transport the big Beech was never intended for loops and rolls and Matt's gentle touch provides the perfect counterpoint to the frantic antics of the other acts.

The airshow continues as we peddle back to camp where Chuck, Mikey and Kristi are preparing to go to the Kenny Loggins concert. The rock show is free to all but Kristi scored back stage passes so they are going in style. One Marine Corp tilt-wing Osprey thunders off vertically and rotates to fixed wing flight remarkably quickly. His high speed pass looks way faster than I ever thought they could go. The last act of the show is invisible to us. The Valdez short field contest only uses a tiny chunk of runway way down at show center. All we see is the contestants flying an extremely slow approach to their shortest landing.

When Beagle Field opens for business we fire up the grill and start supper. The action is slow so we can hear Kenny Loggins as well as if we were there. The occasional take off is so close to our kitchen that we could hit them with a chicken bone if we had a mind to. As the sun retreats I pull on warmer clothes and chat with Paul, Mark, Jim and Mikey in our outdoor living room. Jim lights a fat candle for a little light and sets it on the ground. Mikey has too much energy to sit and when the candle goes out he says, "I might have kicked it over." Upon investigation we find he has stomped it into an orange pancake. Chuck started bringing Mikey to Oshkosh when he was a rambunctious youngster and Rick and Nancy, our campground hosts, nicknamed him Bam-Bam after the kid on the Flintstones cartoon. He no longer sports the hairdo but the name still fits.

The quiet conversation continues around a Coleman lamp, contentment. Aviation is the main topic but we also catch up on life in general. The wind has eased and it is very comfortable. We put a lot of miles on today but I don't feel beat up, just happily exhausted. The Yacht beckons.

Tuesday, July 29 2014

Morning eases into my bedroom and I take my time getting out of bed. It sounds like the ultralight pattern is busy so I know I missed the morning briefing. I wasn't exactly planning on getting up early but I wasn't ruling it out either. I can still get briefed at 5:30 this afternoon and fly this evening. The temperature is perfect, the sky is blue and, as usual, full of airplanes. Jim and I fry up sausage and eggs and use his camp toaster on the Coleman stove to make really good toast. As we dine the entire spectrum of light aviation parades by and life is good. At noon the ultralights park and the rotorcraft take over the runway. They make our living room noisy and windy so I walk down to the showers to scrape off a couple layers of Oshkosh dirt. Feeling refreshed I get into summer clothes and pull out the bike.

The bike parking at show center is jammed so Jim and I just chain our bikes together in the middle of a row. The sun is starting to flex her muscle so we duck into the big exhibition hanger just inside the gate. We have an unspoken understanding of how we attack the displays and we weave efficiently through in no time. Jim chooses not to exercise his habit of collecting catalogs and brochures from every vendor. It always leaves him with a heavy bag to haul around all day and he has apparently wised up. There are four of these huge buildings flanking Celebration way, the main entrance road. Companies hawking avionics, tools, parts and aviation schools are only a small part of the scene. You can buy anything from a fancy ladder to a foot massage in here and we stroll right on by all of them. Some of the booths are manned by attractive young ladies so we slow down from time to time.

Back out in the sun we stroll the wide boulevard to the next exhibition hangar and repeat our tour. That accomplished our path veers east toward the main runway and we walk the flightline parking. Row after row of treasured heirlooms await our inspection so we oblige. Oshkosh lore notes the mythical "Dead Grass Award" for the most ogled aircraft and we can see the heavy foot traffic around the most likely winners so we add our footprints to the voting. Wandering farther south gleaming aluminum catches our eye and we follow the sparkle like a couple of walleyes. An entire flock of classic Lockheed 12As sit in a perfect line in Vintage parking. Completely awesome! For a moment I am transported back to the 1930s and I think, "Golly, ain't they swell?"

Our old legs insist we sit so we find a shady spot under the huge old oak trees by Theatre in the Woods and discuss our delightful day so far. Lunch seems in order so we peddle back to camp and dig out some cheese and smoked oysters. Nothing is too good for Oshkosh. As we snack the big airshow cranks up so we have plenty of entertainment. When the Osprey starts his demonstration I bike over to the Barn for the afternoon briefing. It is difficult to hear Mark over the roar of the airshow but the message is familiar and I have my Tuesday wrist band in no time. When I ride back to camp to get my helmet, Jim points at the northern horizon. It seems our sunny day is about to turn dark and nasty. The Poberezny Bubble loses a valiant fight and the sky opens up. We huddle under the tarps for an hour and a half downpour.

It's near dark when the rain tapers off and Jim and Kristi make burgers for the whole crew. Paul walks down the hill from his great camp spot and relates a dad story. His kids, both teenagers, had been sitting around the trailer looking restless. He finally said, "Get on your bikes and go do something!" They quickly brightened up and peddled off. "Kids", he says to us, "Sometimes you almost have to bonk 'em over the head with the obvious." Quiet conversation around the Coleman is comfortable and easy. Eventually my mattress calls and I obey.

Wednesday, July 30 2014

I miss the morning briefing again but the post frontal weather tells me I'll fly tonight. I whip up eggs and bacon while Jim makes toast. Little airplanes flying through the kitchen add spice to our

breakfast. Today's tour starts in the tent town on the other side of Beagle Field. Yesterday we were far too interested in the airshow to pay attention to all of the ultralight vendor booths. I am amazed to find a brand new, fully assembled aircraft priced under 18 grand. It's the Aerolite 103 and she is a beauty. I recently flew Bud Gorman's A-103 and I know they are sweet flying birds. We take our time walking the grass aisles stopping to ask questions and poke our heads into cockpits. We don't touch anything without an invitation and I'm pleased to see most of the crowd showing the same respect. The Just Aircraft Super-STOL gets a close inspection and her designer is right there to answer dumb questions. Some of the powered parachute buggies seem way over the top in finish and instrumentation but I guess every category needs a Cadillac.

Satisfied that we have seen it all we roam down towards show center for photos of the Howard 500 and Grumman Albatross. Both are done up in plush executive interiors that make me drool. Operating either one of these beasts for a day costs more than I make in a year but that doesn't mean I don't want one. Nearby sit no less than five Howard DGAs and Jim captures their images in pixels. These airplanes and the dozens around us are the Faberge Eggs of aviation and we admire them with a hushed reverence.

Another work of art, the Benoist flying boat draws us and Jim buys tee shirts and hats with the Lark of the Lake logo. Mark and Mike are all smiles even though they are roasting in the sun. A lady in period costume is being photographed in the cockpit and having the time of her life hamming it up for the cameras.

Our old legs plead for a break but we cruise for bargains at the Fly-Mart before biking back to camp. Snacking in the shade we watch the airshow with our feet up. Tennessee Tom rolls in from Minnesota about 4:00 so we head back to the middle of the action to show him around. The Rans factory is feeding their dedicated minions today and even though we are only a couple minutes late the barBQ is nearly gone. Behind the Rans tent is a patch of shade with a perfect view of the airshow so we sit in the grass to watch, and chew. I leave Jim and Tom to the tour while I go back to the Barn to get a bracelet. On the way I run into Matt Ferrari, sixty thousand people on the grounds and I keep running into old friends. He says his family is here, somewhere, and they will come down to watch Fifi fly tonight.

The airshow finally winds down about 6:30 and soon after the green flag goes up over our airpatch. Fifi is happy to get in line with a large group of her sisters and proudly parades past the grandstand. Remembering her tendency to turn right I line up cocked to the left and apply full left rudder as we accelerate. I may have overcompensated as we are heading straight for our kitchen and I see Jim and Mikey looking over the fence with wide eyes. When Fifi pops off the ground I casually bank away and toss a wave. These little surprises are the true beauty of light flight. In bigger airplanes, (they are *all* bigger) pilots often find themselves just sitting watching the technology fly. Ultralight pilots are physically involved at all times. We don't have to foot launch anymore but you won't find us napping at the controls.

Fifi shows her tail to the crowd as we climb into the traffic pattern. The evening air is as smooth as butter but there are a lot of friends in the circuit and occasionally we pop into some propwash. Gliding around this familiar track is both exciting and relaxing if that is possible. I'm confident of our abilities and at ease in the cockpit but I'm still thrilled to be here. My head is on a swivel to keep tabs on the traffic but nobody seems to be doing anything crazy. The Wednesday sailboat race on Lake Winnebago is dramatically lit by the lowering sun, white sails on a deep blue background. The "South Forty" aircraft parking is nearly full and that means there are about ten thousand airplanes on the ground below us. We glide right by the big oak tree and fly roughly parallel to the runway. The line for take offs is long and the crowd is deep at the fence. I watch Gene Smith's Backyard Flyer make a near vertical takeoff then we turn west to stay out of his way.

After our second lap we slow down to sequence for landing. We stay high over the oak tree so the flagger can see us turn base then the power comes back for the snakey final approach. Fifi does one

of her best touchdowns for the crowd and we proudly get back in line for more fun. Four more glorious laps and two more landings later we head for the gate. Matt Ferrari greets us and says he got some good photos then snaps a portrait of me and my girl at her tie downs. The powered parachute pilots are pushing their laundry carts onto the field to take advantage of the calm evening air. I poke fun and call them 'bag-wings' but they do look like a ball to ride. Plus anyone who has spent the time and energy to become a safe citizen of the sky has my respect no matter what they fly. The powered paragliders take commitment to a new level risking ankles and knees in their quest for minimalist aviation. I watch them all float around in the dying light while I peddle back to camp.

The last one is still collecting his laundry when we hear a roar from show center. EAA has brought the Saturday night airshow back for the last couple of years and it became so popular they added a Wednesday night this year. We stand at the snow fence and watch the Aeroshell T-6s light up the dark sky. I have a 'Close Encounters' flashback as four roaring apparitions pierce the night with more brilliant lights than a small carnival. Even though it's dark they have their smoke systems full on adding to the mysterious aura. Gene Soucy's Showcat biplane looks completely consumed by flames and sparks as he twists and turns above the awe struck crowd. Manfred Radius' jet powered sailplane trails sparks from the tips of it's very long wings. I get vertigo trying to determine the attitude of the sleek craft as it sweeps across the blackness. The pyrotechnic payload award goes to Otto the helicopter who shoots mortars in all directions for a very long time.

When the last engine noise fades the ground fireworks begin. We have a great view and I feel sorry for the thousands of campers who have to walk home in the dark after the show. The traditional 'Wall of Fire' caps the evening's entertainment and we flop down in camp chairs to savor our good fortune. It's not long before I find my cozy bed in the Yacht and slip into dreamland.

Thursday, July 31 2014

A sugar craving wakes me a little after five in the morning so I test my blood to confirm and immediately rip open a banana. My giant pilot watch hasn't stirred me yet this week so I decide to stay up and catch the morning brief. The sky is blue, the air is calm and the dawn ride to the Barn is a pleasant Deja Vu. I pay for three gallons of gas at the counter and put the receipt in my pocket. With a new wristband I sit under Fifi's wing and watch the bag-wing boys have their fun in the rising sun. Even at this early hour the grandstand is nearly full. For an up close look at the joys of grass roots aviation there is no better place on the whole convention grounds and these savvy spectators know it. A paraglider pilots does a foot-drag pass and the crowd applauds.

When it's our turn I slip my girl's bonds and escort her to the dance floor. Even after twenty years I still get goose bumps when I step on this hallowed grass. The pockets in my shorts won't comfortably hold my small bottle of Amsoil so I slip it into the leg after I sit in the cockpit. No cup holders in ultralights. Fifi's five gallon tank is still too full to accept the three gallons I purchased so we have to burn some before I can fill up. What little breeze there is favors a southerly take off so the pattern is reversed and we make all right turns. With the downhill take off Fifi gets airborne quickly and we are climbing through 100 feet before we pass our camp, I wave anyway. The cool morning air washes over me as I lead my partner through the familiar dance steps and we become one. My conscience mind is not flying an airplane, my sub-conscience mind *is the airplane* so I just enjoy the ride.

Landing to the south can be as tricky as the other way. The runway is invisible until we slip between the tall trees at the approach end then it's a slam-dunk to the downslope and a slow flare. With her short wings Fifi comes down quickly when I need her to. After three laps I let the landing run long and roll to the fueling shed. I find the oil bottle still in my shorts and add it to the tank before the gas thus allowing the flow to mix the blend. A green vest volunteer puts up on a scooter and tells me Beagle Field just closed due to an accident on the main runway. Whenever an incident occurs on the

main field ATC shuts everything down but I have noticed in the past when something goes wrong at our end of the field they don't seem to care. We taxi up the hill to the gate and exit. From this elevation I can see about ten emergency trucks surrounding rising smoke way over by the Oshkosh Military Trucks. The Oshkosh company makes heavily armored vehicles for the armed services and dozens of them line the far end of the field all week. I overhear someone saying that a Breezy bounced a landing and swerved into one of them. That can't be good.

The temperature is climbing smartly as I peddle back to camp so I change to shorts. Jim, Tennessee Tom, his friend Andrew and I head back to the middle of the action to start the daily tour. At the Rans tent I buy a company ball cap and Randy's wife won't let me put it in the bag. I *must* put my EAA hat in the bag and wear the new one. "Yes Ma'am!" We walk all the way north to the Warbirds area and Tom buys a picture of himself wedged between the two Professional Bombshells stationed under the wing of a B-25. The girls fuss over him and he turns a delightful shade of red. Strolling back south Jim and I check out the two exhibit hangars we haven't seen yet while Tom and Andrew go to get a helicopter ride. I buy a log book for Fifi from Lockwood Aviation then we meander over to the Fly-Mart.

Distant thunder grows alarmingly loud and suddenly the air is full of F-16s. The Thunderbirds hit town like Hells Angels on crack, screaming every direction at once just above the treetops. I'm sure it is closely choreographed but it seems like chaos. We pivot madly between the booths trying to take it all in, even the vendors leave their registers and dash out in the street. Apparently they have full tanks because the madness goes on and on until we have to look down and rub our sore necks.

When the scene finally mellows Jim and I walk to bike parking and run into Tom and Andrew. Just their luck, they were in line for the helicopter when the field closed for the Thunderbirds' arrival. We have barely made it back to camp when the sky opens up and we duck under tarps for 20 minutes. The airshow starts a little late but the sun comes out strong and dries the grounds. Ninety minutes later another thunderstorm marches in. Where's the Bubble when you need it? The airshow performers soldier on through the first bits of rain but eventually the show sputters out.

The rain intensifies and the puddles forming in the tarp threaten to pull it down. This is precisely why I choose to sleep in a metal tent. It's nearly dark before the downpour backs off. All the pots and pans in our uncovered kitchen are full to the brim. Realizing that detail saves him a walk to the water buffalo Jim lights the stove and starts shucking corn. Brilliant! A rack of ribs goes on the grill and a pound of shrimp gets cooked. Outdoor cooking can be challenging but the outdoor dining makes it well worth the effort. As we happily consume our creations Vern rolls in on his cartoon scooter. It has a trunk! The trunk opens and the samples come out. These are different from those we tasted the other night but like those, all very tasty. Vern tells us which garden or orchard the fruit came from and displays a keen knowledge of the arcane art. Dana pokes his head into the circle and with a little cajoling, tries a nip of nectar. A smile sneaks onto his face and his cheeks get a little pink. The next time a sample gets passed his way he waves it off, says good night and disappears into the dark. The experimental drinking laces the conversation with happy laughter and I noodle around with my road guitar. The night is very black and the air is comfortable, eventually the bed beckons.

Friday, August 1 2014

I don't bother rolling out of the sack until 8:00 and when I do I'm hit with a blast of warm, humid air. Jim is already up but before I can wish him a good morning an executive golf cart pulls up and stops. This thing has three rows of seats, kind of a golf limo. The young fellow asks me if I fly Fifi and I confess. He says Pat sent him to fetch me to the announcer's stand to play the Beagle song. I haven't even run my hand through my hair yet so I tell him to go away and tell Pat I'll be there in a while. I don't rush my morning routine. Usually when I play in public it's late night and the audience has been drinking but this song is simple so I figure the cobwebs in my brain won't wreck it too badly.

I collect Jim's Martin six string and tune it up before walking off for the south end of the runway. One of the ubiquitous tractor trams happens to be loading so I hitch a ride to the other side of the runway.

By the time I climb the stairs to the announcer's tower I'm sweating and finally fully awake. Pat introduces me to videographer Rick Seeley and Rick sets up the shot. He has me sit at the edge of the platform and places his camera to capture the ultralight action behind me. Pat introduces me to the crowd and sticks the mic in my face. I do my best to ad-lib a tribute to Frank and an explanation of the song. Glancing at Rick I get a thumbs up so I start to play. It occurs to me that I haven't even tried to sing a single note yet today but the first one doesn't suck so I put some feeling into it. I notice the G string is coming unwound at the second fret but it still sounds like a Martin so I play on. Ultralights launching at regular intervals make it hard for me to hear my own voice but they make the perfect background for this song and I can't help thinking about Frank. I'm actually a little emotional when I finish and the crowd responds nicely.

When I get back to the bivouac Jim is whipping up eggs with Jimmy Dean sausage and we fuel up for the day. I am concerned about how Fifi weathered yesterday's storm so I ride to the Barn and walk up the hill. It is hot and muggy but the air is moving so its not unbearable. Aside from a few small puddles in the cockpit Fifi looks hale and hearty. Her tie down ropes are snug. My next stop is the showers and I return refreshed. Jim and I are discussing the daily tour when Chuck and his friend Gary roll in from Illinois. They immediately take over the kitchen so Jim and I forget the tour and pitch in. Tonight is spaghetti night and the preparations cannot start too early.

The northwestern sky darkens yet again but the airshow starts anyway. It sprinkles a little but never lives up to it's potential. After a week of extreme aviation the aerobatic acts don't rivet our attention any more but we still watch. All work stops in the kitchen when the Thunderbirds take the sky and they are amazing! At one point three of them cut the corner getting back to show center and come screaming right over our heads. Three F-16s, tight formation, 400 plus miles per hour, 60 degree bank, *right over our heads!* Heart stopping!

Tonight is a special night for Beagle Field and when the airshow ends on the main runway it starts right up again in front of our kitchen. The Valdez boys have brought their super short field bush planes all the way from Alaska and tonight they're playing on our field. The ground crew sets up orange cones at the take off line and I'm disappointed to see them half way up the runway from us. We invited Mark, Tom and Mike from the Lark in the Lake crew and they show up right on time. Gary has made a deluxe salad, the pasta is al dente and the sauce is superb. We mop it up with luscious French bread while we watch the action. The competitors take off away from us to the north but they get real slow on approach right in front of us. Someone suggests they have helium in those gigantic balloon tires. Our camp site is bustling with happy diners, I count twenty before I give up. Its a party, Oshkosh style.

Tradition says when Chuck cooks I supply the music so when the flying is done I pull out the electric guitar and my battery amp. The Ibanez Les Paul clone is very flashy. It plays well too. Chuck is my biggest fan and always ready with a request. After the guitar is safely back in it's case the warm conversation continues into the wee hours. The air is warm too and I realize I never had to put on long pants today. A little voice in the back of my head says, "You better enjoy it now, it's almost over!" so I lean back and savor every moment.

Saturday, August 2 2014

Blue skies and light winds greet me as I step out of the Yacht. Jim is doing dishes and there are a lot of them. Mikey is loading ten pounds of toys and camp gear into a five pound Microbus and somehow gets the doors closed. Its a bittersweet good bye when he rolls out about 9:30. We will miss him but we are certain we will see him right here, next year. After breakfast Jim and I peddle over to the Barn and I apply a couple of small duct tape bandaids to Fifi's leading edge. These are bits of

hangar rash from years ago but I want my girl to look her best. Peddling down hill to the main bike lot we know this will be our last tour and the little voice is more insistent: "Soak in all you can!"

Of course we visit the Rans tent one more time for good byes and while Jim takes pictures of the S-20 I step next door. The Sonex display is all yellow and the birds are very cute. The Xenos motor glider interests me and I find John Monnett right there to chat about it. The brilliant benefit of the Big Show is that not only can you talk to folks who have built the aircraft you like, you can usually speak with the designer himself. We wander the sunny grounds without any particular goal and stumble upon new delights at every turn. If this convention lasted a month you still couldn't see it all.

Back at camp we snack madly on too many leftovers as the airshow cranks up. The sky fills with warbirds and the pyro crew supplies the concussion and fire for the simulated bombing runs. Every airshow this week has been amazing but today they pull out all the stops. No dark clouds threaten and everyone is pumped up from the spectacle. I mount up to go take the briefing and the Thunderbirds make it all but impossible to hear Mark say the same things he has been saying all week. I just nod thoughtfully and go get my bracelet.

When the jet roar dies down I release Fifi from her restraints and wait for the green flag to go up over Beagle Field. The weather is absolutely perfect and all of my senses are running wide open trying to absorb every detail. We launch downhill again and as we climb over camp I see Jim giving a guitar lesson to Gary. Flying the circuit in the setting sun is just as magical as can be and we dance and soar without a care. After a couple of smooth laps we track the course for landing but as I retard the throttle I see a bright red trike streak under us to cut in line. With wings descended from hang gliders, trikes at first were slow and floaty but these new ones go like hell! It doesn't break my heart to take another glorious lap so I just lead Fifi back into the flow. With three landings and seven laps behind us I see the sun is getting low so I reluctantly ask my girl to let me down easy. Just as we touch Fifi skips a little and I feel ham-fisted for the first time all week.

Chuck has all the grills going when I get back home and the bag-wing boys are having a ball in the still, warm air. Sweet corn, steaks and pork chops sizzle over the coals and the evening air wraps us like a comfy blanket. One last night in our cozy living room lives up to our expectations. Paul drops by and when I lament my last landing he comes to my rescue. "You landed right in the bottom of that little swale so when you hit the lip, she jumped. Not your fault." I love that guy.

The Saturday night Airshow is even better than Wednesday's if that is possible. The pilots give their expert best and our spirits soar with them. The ground fireworks are like Disneyland on Walt's birthday and the wall of fire at the end is so big we can feel the heat from here. When the campground gets quiet I slip away alone for one last walk around. My twenty-fifth year at Oshkosh is winding down but I'm not sad, I delighted that it fulfilled my dreams once again. Tomorrow is going to be a long day but I will stay up as long as there is a conversation to join.

Sunday, August 3 2014

I roll out of bed before eight but Jim, Chuck and Gary are all up drinking coffee. Travel is the only priority today so we set to work. Tarps and tables get folded, Tupperware tubs get loaded and grills get dumped. Its another sunny day, hotter than yesterday of course so we quickly work up a sweat. When the doors finally close we give hearty handshakes to Chuck and Gary with promises of "Same time, same place next year!" The Merry Yacht resists rolling out of the divots she has made in the ground but I insist. Jim is right behind me. We stop to hug Nancy goodbye but Rick is not home so we leave our regards. The Rickerts are not packing up yet and we bid farewell to Paul, Rachel, Kyle and their friend Calvin. Jim leaves his pickup at trailer parking and helps me load my girl. More sweaty work. When I'm satisfied that Fifi is secure I drop Jim at his truck with my sincere thanks and head for the highway. Rolling north on #41 I take one last long look at the Magic Kingdom then turn my attention to trucking. The Yacht has old fashioned wings in the windows and I turn them inside out

so the air blasts into the cab. The rolling hills and farm fields blur in my peripheral vision and I crank up the radio.

An hour into the ride I'm beginning to cool off when I hear that horrible roar and I delete an expletive. Looking in the right side mirror I see tire shreds flying and immediately pull over. This is the third blowout in the last five trips to Oshkosh and it is getting tiresome. TIREsome? I vow to quit buying used rubber. The freeway is busy but thankfully the dead soldier is on the right side so I don't have to run for cover every time a semi wails by. Forty minutes later I'm drenched with sweat as I pull back out into traffic. I think about the seven hours of hot dusty road ahead with no spare and I shudder. Tire stores are probably not open on Sunday even if I could find one so I just keep my fingers crossed. The spare is a slightly different size than the other tires so I also fret about strain on the differential but there is no way I'm going to try to swap it to the front.

I top off the Yacht at Merrill again and am happy to see all the tires are still mostly round. It is a lovely day if I keep the windows open and I find myself enjoying the ride despite the potential trouble. My first glimpse of Lake Superior at Ashland feels like home and I relax a little. When the city of Superior appears on the horizon I know I will make it and I relax all the way. My neck is killing me from gripping the wheel so tightly. By the time Fifi slips into the hangar on her trailer I'm back to elated and the last twenty miles home just whiz by. I empty the coolers and pull out the bike but the rest of the stuff can wait till tomorrow. When I finally plop down in my favorite chair I realize I'm exhausted but happily so. In fifty weeks or so, I'll be chomping at the bit to do it again.

February, 2015

Its a solid twenty below outside my window but I still feel that warm summer sun. Reading my journal always transports me back in time so I can live each day again. If you were there I hope my words have helped you make the same escape. If you haven't been to Airventure Oshkosh I hope I've helped you realize what you're missing. You may not care to copy my experience but the Convention contains all the ingredients for you to write your own unique story. Put it on your 'Bucket List' right now, you won't be sorry.

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