

AIRVENTURE 2016

It was 31 below last night, wind chill minus 49. I got to thinking about July, specifically July in Oshkosh. The annual convention of the Experimental Aircraft Association is always the highlight of my year and last year was no different. Well, maybe a little different.

I have been bringing my girl, Fifi to the big show for six years and every year I borrowed Dan Murphy's trailer for the trip. I finally decided to build my own trailer instead of relying on Dan's generosity. It was supposed to be my winter project but a friend's airplane was upside down in my shop so no room for welding lessons. I made a rough sketch on a napkin and bought some steel. I found a cheap wire-feed welder at Harbor Freight and a chop saw at Menards. I bought a drop axle and wheels at Northern Tool along with springs and bearings. It was already summer when the stars finally aligned and I got my shop back. Luckily for me my best buddy and airplane building partner Jim Batzli was visiting and we hit the ground running. Without his amazing help and unflagging energy there would probably be a pile of steel laying in the shop to this day. By the end of one busy weekend all the parts were cut and the basic layout was tacked together. After Jim went home I spent several days welding all the scrap ends together for practice and when I couldn't bust them apart with a four pound maul I figured I was ready for production. Of course my first welds were awful but I remembered Jim's parting words, "Your best friends will be an angle grinder and a can of paint." Boy was he right. By the time I finished all the welding, added deck, lights and fenders it was time to load Fifi up and go.

Friday, July 22 2016

I woke early to a beautiful summer morning and got right to it. All my camping stuff was already stowed in the Oshkosh Marriott (pronounced Merry Yacht) so I just had to load the cooler. I snacked while I packed and hit the road by 7:00. At the airport I rolled Fifi out on her new chariot, hooked up and headed south. I checked my mirrors nervously all the way to Duluth but began to relax a little when I crossed the high bridge into Wisconsin. My usual route through the central lakes area of Mercer and Minocqua had been washed out by recent flooding rains so I stayed on Hiway 53 down to Chippewa Falls. Stopping for fuel I chatted with a local couple who confessed a long suppressed desire to learn to fly. I gave them my best "never too late" sermon while I cleaned the windshield. Checking the new trailer I found a problem.

With wings folded back the weight on Fifi's tailwheel is excessive so I designed a pylon to support her tail boom tube. Said pylon was walking forward on the trailer tongue threatening to tip over. I hammered it back to vertical and lacking a better solution I clamped a vise-grip to resist movement. Rolling eastward toward Wausau on Hiway 29 I realized I couldn't see the ratchet strap I use to hold Fifi's wings together. The highway was very busy and the day was getting real hot but I decided I had to pull over and check it out. Dodging speeding big rigs I slid back along the van side and couldn't believe what I saw. The strap had indeed released and was dragging along hooked precariously on the vise grip I had just installed. Talk about dumb luck! Fifi sits backwards on the trailer so her wings could have easily unfolded in the wind and that would have been catastrophic at 65 miles per hour on a busy freeway. She would certainly have been destroyed and God know what other highway mayhem would have ensued. Thanking my lucky stars I gathered up the errant strap, refastened it and dug out another strap to double the security.

The rest of the trip was uneventful but I was extra vigilant with my mirrors. The Yacht rolled into Oshkosh at 3:00 and it was stinking hot. Gone are the days when I could just sneak in the back way and buy my camping credentials later so I stood in line sweating with all the other pilgrims.

When I finally rolled up the grass hill to Beagle Field I was toast. I took off my shirt and poured my warm drinking water over my head. As I slowly began releasing Fifi from her bonds Jim and Mikey motored up on scooters. Jim is the lifelong friend I already mentioned and Mikey has been an Oshkosh buddy for decades. We all camp together and they had seen me from our camp site across the runway. They 'helped' me unload by sitting in the shade of Fifi's wing and sipping cold beverages. Right then the euphoria hit me, I was in my favorite place in the universe with my girl and my best friends. Excellent!

After Fifi was tied down I pulled the trailer to its parking spot and ran into another Oshkosh pal, Vern. The world of Ultralight flying is full of colorful characters and Vern is the prototype. After many years of hanging out here at our camp Jim and I went to Vern's home show this spring. The Sun-n-Fun show in Florida has an ultralight strip called Paradise City and Vern is the mayor. He went out of his way to show us around and even took us flying so we love the guy. Here at Oshkosh he works with Lockwood Aviation. He borrowed jumper cables from me to charge the battery of Ian Lockwood's Harley and offered me a beer but I begged off to go set up camp.

It was getting on in the day but it was still hot and muggy and it felt real good to get the tarp set up so we could sit in the shade. Mikey promised to grill pork chops so Jim started snapping green beans and shucking corn from his garden. The meal was almost done when Mikey decided he needed a shower so we ate well and had the pork chops for dessert. Vern, Ian and a pretty young girl named Amy stopped by after dinner and the tales grew taller as the evening wore on. My euphoria grew deep and wide and I was loathe to end the day but I finally crawled into the Yacht about 1:00. When I woke at 5:00 to christen the chamber pot I saw the impending dawn and remembered to unfold the windshield shades just in time. A few more delicious hours in the sack allowed me to wake fresh and sober to another delicious day.

Saturday, July 23 2016

As opposed to dinner Mikey had breakfast ready right on time and we enjoyed a lovely scramble of eggs and last night's veggies. Over the last few years Mikey has evolved from the ultimate party animal to our camp's main chef and he does a great job occasional delays notwithstanding. Arrivals on the main runway slowed a bit as a haze rolled in but it takes some major weather to make them stop completely. Our camp hostess Nancy Jacobsen rolled by on her golf cart to warn us of a possible storm on the way. Oshkosh officials always err on the side of caution so we get a few of these warnings every year. They usually don't develop but it never hurts to check your tie downs.

I did dishes and then hopped on my bike to cool off. Bicycles are allowed on the flight line until Sunday so I coasted the whole length of the field watching crews ready their displays and polish the airplanes. I could just feel the excitement building for the biggest airplane extravaganza in the world. There were still acres of empty grass but there were conga lines of arriving aircraft taxiing to fill those spaces. More than ten thousand will eventually find their parking spot in row after row extending to the horizon.

When I got back to camp I grabbed my torque wrench and Fifi's prop out of the Yacht. Jim pedaled with me over to Fifi's tie down and we watched the Bonanza mass arrival begin. For the next twenty minutes all manner of Beechcraft's best came flowing in like a river, landing three abreast with military precision. Looking back at the approach path we could see dots in the sky all the way to Fond du Lac. In all the world this amazing spectacle only happens once a year and it only happens here. Other types, notably Cessna and Mooney also arrive en mass but with much fewer numbers.

When I finally pronounced Fifi airworthy we struck off up the flight line towards our favorite manufacturer's display. Jim and I both built and fly Rans aircraft and we have become part of their extended family. Company founder Randy Schlitter and his girl Shelley had recently tied the knot so

we wanted to congratulate them. We arrived just in time to help them unload a jam packed pickup full of airplane parts and pieces. By the time it was all laying on the grass we were sweating bullets so we got back on the bikes to generate a little breeze. The overcast thickened and a light drizzle welcomed us back to camp. The big tarp over the Merry Yacht is not very attractive but it sure does its job. Shade from the sun and shelter from the rain, who could ask for more?

We sat and talked with Mike and his girl Kristi and perhaps a beer or two got cracked. When stomachs started to growl Jim and I diced potatoes and onions with some other veggies and wrapped them in tin foil. I started the grill and Jim put a pot on his Coleman stove for the sweetcorn. The rain had let up while we prepped but when Mikey brought the steaks and we dished up the rain returned with a vengeance. Vern scooted in just in time and we all huddled in our living room to eat. You might think a room without walls would not be the happiest place to eat in a driving rain but there were smiles all around. The food, the friends and the atmosphere were all delicious and we consumed with delight. We put the dirty dishes out in the rain to rinse and told tall tales into the night. After I crawled into bed a nasty thunderstorm rocked the Yacht and rolled me into restful slumber.

Sunday, July 24 2016

The sky was clear when I emerged and Mikey was right on time with a huge breakfast. After we ate Kristi headed north to see friends and I pedaled over to the Barn to register Fifi. I could tell it was going to be another scorcher but the general aviation traffic was picking up on the main runway. I helped Jim duct tape screens to the open windows of his trusty Suburban, apparently a mosquito kept him awake in the night. I wasn't bothered, perhaps a benefit of my poor hearing. While we worked Nancy coasted up and told us Fifi was on the official Airventure Ultralight T-shirt this year. That called for another trip to the Barn (UL headquarters). There were actually eight different ultralight models on the shirt but Fifi was unmistakable with her big eyes and pouty lips. I bought several including three smalls for my grandkids. As long as we were there Jim and I strolled the rows of UL vendors and studied the new designs. The wind sock guy asked me how Fifi was doing. Like going to the dance with a gorgeous babe, people recognize me but only ask about her.

Back at camp we sat in the shade and watched the quickening pace of arriving aircraft. Jim turned on his aviation radio so we could hear the tower trying to control the chaos. Beagle field (the grass strip going by our kitchen) had a surge in traffic too including all the competitors from Valdez, Alaska. That city hosts a famous short take off and landing contest and they have been showing their stuff here for a couple of years. Mostly real working bush planes they look too big for the ultralight strip but they sure don't need a longer runway. Dana and Merideth Holladay rolled in from Florida with their darling little Alex and set up a big tent. As we were chatting we saw crash trucks whipping south down the main runway so Jim and I got on our bikes to check it out. About a hundred yards south of the runway threshold we saw a white low wing airplane upside down in the grass. We never heard how he got that way but we did hear the pilot walked away. It wasn't long before incoming traffic resumed its manic pace.

As we worked on dinner another good Oshkosh buddy, Paul Rickert showed up with his kids so all of the usual suspects were on the scene. The sun finally lost its hot temper in a red ball on the horizon, not a moment too soon. Vern and Amy came by later but I didn't stay up too long. With the first pilot briefing at 6:30 in the morning I opted for sleep. I dropped off with visions of sunny flights and happy landings dancing in my head.

Monday, July 25 2016

When I woke up at 5:25 I was not the least bit surprised. The alarm was set for 5:30 but I have an annoying talent of waking up before the clock when I'm excited about the coming day. The sun hadn't crested the horizon yet and it was cool enough for jeans. A few other early risers moved quietly about. I wiped the dew from my bike seat and pedaled to the Barn. The aroma of fresh coffee and pastries filled all the airspace between the happy pilots and the ladies behind the counter wore sparkling smiles. I saw a lot of familiar faces and the briefing tent was standing room only. Mark has a way of presenting serious material with a sly sense of humor and his briefings are always memorable. I was happy to learn that the traffic pattern and the rules were unchanged, nearly identical to what I was told 23 years ago at my first official Oshkosh briefing. All the pilots signed release forms and got paper bracelets to show our credentials.

I grabbed my pack and walked up the hill to my waiting date. My leather flying helmet came out of the pack along with a towel to wipe the dew from her wings. I whispered to her as I released her bonds and she fairly quivered in anticipation. We waited patiently at the gate while a brave powered paraglider (PPG) pilot did his foot launch dance into a fresh north west breeze. When he retired I led my girl onto the hallowed ground and fought the urge to cackle like a mad scientist. Helmet and goggles in place I gave a soft word of encouragement and a swift tug on the starter rope. She popped to life on the first pull and settled into a contented purr. As soon as that prop is turning Fifi wants to go so I do a clumsy step-hop-plop to get my butt in the moving cockpit. I snugged the belts as we bounced down the bumpy grass and gave a jaunty salute to the boys in the announcer's stand, (the Beagle's Nest). They all waved back. Everybody is excited on this first day of the big show! Including me and Fifi.

At the threshold of the runway I lift my heels off the brakes and the pretty flag girl shows us the green. Here we go! As I ease in the throttle Fifi gives her usual hard tug to the right but I'm way ahead of her with full left pedal. Before the throttle hits the stop we are off and climbing like mad. I toss a wave to the grandstand and turn out to the crosswind leg while pulling power back and leveling off. The mad scientist cackle bubbles out and ends in a cowboy whoop, we're back! Leaving the planet is always the high point of any day but doing it in this fashion at this place is just about as good as it gets. We glide out over camp Scholler and watch thousands of happy campers beginning their day. The air is active but the bumps don't bother Fifi. In her element at last, she dances through the swirls like a surfer through the curls and gains energy in the act. Turning south along hiwy 41 I take a moment to feel sorry for the poor souls creeping down the highway towards another Monday at a job they don't like. The next turn reveals a sparkling Lake Winnebago under the rising sun. Every ripple has a diamond on top and a boat wake becomes a laser beam across the surface. With a glance to the left I take in the entire convention and it looks like my own personal kingdom, towers, pennants and all.

Approaching the turn out point for landing I come back to reality and bank out of the pattern. This is the really fun part. As I set up a brisk descent the runway disappears behind tall cottonwoods and we aim right at the parked float planes. A sharp left lines us up over the access road and we continue descending right past the tall power pole on Ripple rd. Now the runway comes back into view so I bank left, pull the power to idle and dive for the threshold. Like most ultralights when Fifi's propeller stops pushing it becomes an air brake so you must lower the nose to keep flying speed. This dramatic swoop ends in a gentle flare and wheels kiss grass. I am elated! I wait all year for this amazing experience and it never disappoints.

Taxiing back to go again I see Jim and Mikey at our camp but they are not staring in awe at my accomplishment. Mike is fussing with the tarp and Jim is doing dishes. Just another ordinary extraordinary day at Oshkosh. Traffic is still light so the flag girl swings the green side of her paddle in a dramatic flourish toward the sky and off we go. In seconds Fifi lifts her wheels but I sense a lack of enthusiasm. A little extra push on the throttle doesn't move the lever and I glance at the tachometer. It reads 5700 rpm which is plenty for climbing but well shy of the 6450 I usually see at this point. We are

already too high to consider aborting the take off so I cross my fingers and continue. Unbridled joy is quickly replaced with serious concern. The throttle and the mag switch are my only links to the motor and I only have one mag so I'm not touching that. Instead I start playing with the lever while I scan the emergency landing area in camp Scholler. This narrow alley between campers is supposed to be sterile at all times but I have seen kids playing there once or twice. Unfortunately my ministrations with power bring no improvement. Fortunately the 5000 rpm I need to cruise keeps coming so I follow the pattern and try to unclench my teeth. I'm nervous about pulling power to land so I do the complicated landing procedure a lot quicker than normal but it ends well. A bead of sweat drips off my nose as we taxi to the gate.

I managed to tie Fifi down without using inappropriate language and biked back to camp. I always have a spare set of spark plugs gapped and ready to go so I grabbed them and the torque wrench. It was getting warm enough for shorts so I shared my story with Jim as I changed. We agreed that two stroke engines only need gas and spark to make noise so changing the sparkers seemed like a good first step. After torquing them in I pushed Fifi to the run up area inside the fence and she started right up. I wasn't strong enough to hold her back when I blipped the throttle so I decided to do a test flight. I'm sure my decision making was influenced by my strong desire to keep flying but my rationalization was that she had had enough power to make a lap last time.

The flag girl waved and the power of positive thinking had me feeling real fine until I looked at the tach, nuts! We were committed but the rationalization that she had made it once before suddenly seemed very weak. I paid a lot more attention to my instruments than the scenery but it was a successful trip around the pattern and I thanked my guardian angel profusely.

Back at camp Jim made some delicious brunch sandwiches and we talked about Fifi's attitude. Of course Oshkosh is the one place in the world where every Rotax expert is at your service so we pedaled off to quiz them. Phil Lockwood made an astute observation, "They quit building that engine over ten years ago so no matter how shiny it looks, it's old." The boys at LEAF suggested cleaning the carb and I bought a new fuel filter from them. A tech in the Rotax booth asked me about my maintenance procedures then said, "I would take the whole engine apart." Nobody gave me a magic bullet so I decided to put my problem aside and enjoy the show. We bought some bifocal shades then tramped over to the Rans display to see our favorite birds. Shelley gave us each a T-shirt for helping them unload, she's such a sweetheart.

Back at camp a perfect airshow sky was the backdrop for a perfect airshow. The Martin Mars water bomber was awesome! Also billed as the biggest warbird ever built she filled the sky and sounded like thunder. With a sleek hull the size of a schooner and wings as long as a 747's she made two graceful passes down the runway then on the third her whole bottom opened up and 7,200 gallons of Lake Winnebago pounded the concrete. That's enough to cover four acres of burning forest. Since she has no wheels we watched her trundle off to the seaplane base while a crew fanned out on the runway to pick up all the fish!

One after another the best aerobatic pilots tumbled and twisted through the air leaving long snakes of smoke in their wake. The immutable laws of physics seemed more like suggestions that they chose to ignore and the question morphed from, "How do they make an airplane do that?" to, "How do they make it stop?" Our comfortable camp is an excellent vantage point even though we are well south of Show Center. The acts use the main north-south runway as their stage and at the speeds they achieve our end of the runway gets as much attention as the center. Plus, we get to watch them turn around for the next pass.

As the spectacle wound down I watched with envy as the ultralight gang got ready for the evening flying session. I desperately hoped Fifi's ills would clear up with exercise but I could not justify putting the show in a bad light just because of my need. I am fully confident that I could make a safe landing off airport if I had to but I cannot guarantee that nobody would get in the way and I don't want the the public thinking ultralights are unreliable gadgets. I kicked back to watch the fun.

Mikey whipped up some luscious brats to go with Jim's beans and sweetcorn so we sat down to gain some weight. No ultralights launched right away and soon we heard the reason. Two F-4s, two F-86s and two T-33s came screaming in for precise military breaks to land on the big runway. Never a dull moment at Oshkosh.

General aviation arrivals continue on the main runway during the UL session and at one point it got rather quiet. That got our attention. Suddenly an A-26 swooped in from the south, landed normally and then slammed its nose on the pavement. Spewing dust and smoke it screeched down the runway with a crash truck hot on its heels. Rick came by and told us the pilot knew his nose wheel didn't deploy so the tower shut down arrivals and rolled the trucks. No one was hurt but somebody's checkbook would soon suffer a severe hemorrhage.

Kristi threw a birthday party for Chris, a nice young fellow camping with the Just Aircraft guys. She went to town and had a custom cake made with big frosting boobs on top. He turned sixteen away from his family so she decided he needed some attention out of the kindness of her heart. Across the way a girl named Maggie was turning nine so she and her parents came over and joined in. The cake was delicious. Paul Rickert came by for a chat while Third Eye Blind played a concert down at show center. Jim and I used to go to the opening day concerts but the crowds are thick and the late afternoon sun can be wicked so now we just listen from home.

Powered parachutes (PPC, rectangular wing, never foot launched, often two place) and powered paragliders (PPG, elliptical wing, usually foot launched, mostly solo) finished off the evening flying session. I call them both bag wings because their wings are sewn fabric, have no rigid structure and only assume airfoil shape when moving through the air. Also because when they are done flying the pilots stuff them into bags and carry them off. Sensitive and light, they routinely get the earliest and latest flying times when the air is smooth and the breeze is light.

I was not surprised when shortly after dark Jim made apologies and crawled into his camper. It had been a long, hot day. I sat in the Yacht and plucked on my classical guitar for a while before retiring myself.

Tuesday, July 26, 2016

I woke to the sound of two stroke engines at full throttle and it didn't irritate me in the least. I knew my ultralight mates were having their fun in the morning sun. When I stuck my head out I saw a clear blue sky full of bag wings. Unlike we fixed wing pilots these guys can make low passes down the runway or touch and goes and they love to show off. PPG pilots will fly low enough to skim their sneakers over the grass then power up to 'surf' the length of the runway. It's pretty entertaining. While we watched, a paraglider pilot with a small kart tried to take off across the width of the runway. Apparently he thought the very light westerly breeze had to be taken head on. It wasn't a great idea. As soon as he powered up we could tell he wasn't going to clear the power line on Knapp rd. When he finally figured out a pinch of fairy dust and a happy thought were not going to get him over that wire he collapsed his wing and plopped down just short of the fence. Never a dull moment at Oshkosh.

Mikey whipped up another great cheese scramble and as we ate we watched a time machine take the field. Looking like something Alberto Santos-Dumont built a hundred years ago Lee Fischer's bis-24 is history reborn. Lee conceived, designed and built this lovely little ship in his Winchester Skonkworks shop as kind of an homage to Santos-Dumont's Demoiselle. It lifted off as soon as he touched the throttle and floated away at a stately 29 mph.

It was getting very sticky when Jim and I pedaled down to the bike lot by the exhibition buildings so we stepped quickly from shade to shade as we made our way to the flight line. Wittman rd. is a great stroll because it runs parallel to the main runway where showcase flights take place all morning. You might see the brand new HondaJet or Al White's Dyke Delta doing laps while the P.A.

Announcer tells thousands of fans what they are looking at. Jim got his usual lemon ice treat and just carried it for a while. The plastic spoon they give you will break if you don't let it soften up a bit so he used it as an ice pack on his forehead. We walked by the yawning maw of a C-5 Galaxy where dozens of pilgrims filed through in amazement. Still the biggest freighter in the fleet one coat of its olive drab paint weighs more than my whole airplane. Maybe both of my airplanes. An Air Force AWACS plane with its frisbee on top gave us some wing shade while we watched three young girls toss ball caps down from the wing of a B-17. Leaving the heavy iron parking in Boeing Plaza we strolled through the Vintage area and checked out a Curtiss Pusher reproduction. The modern looking airplane engine gave it away but the wooden ribs and miles of wire bracing looked authentic. Walking back towards the bikes along Vern Avenue we noticed the space for Jerry's One Man Band was vacant for the first time in decades. He had been threatening a well deserved retirement for a few years but we missed the old timey accordion sounds.

Pedaling for home we split up as I went to check on Fifi and ran into Mike Shannon at the Barn. We stood in the shade of a black walnut tree and compared notes. He was having trouble finding the right set of floats for his Rans S-7 but had some leads still to track down. Fifi was posing for pictures with a young family when I walked up so I introduced myself and offered her cockpit seat to the kids. They were delighted and mom spent mucho megapixels on their smiles. Fifi makes young people very happy. And the young at heart.

Back at camp Jim showed me our surprise meal plans. Paul is an EAA Lifetime Member and one of the perks of that status is a big dinner event in the Museum. He had kindly offered his two tickets and Jim couldn't refuse. It would be a long, hot bike ride to get there but it would be cool inside and the beer was on the house. I dug around in my bag and found a clean, white AOPA polo shirt with a nice collar. I always wondered when I was going to wear that shirt. We watched the airshow for a while then got back on the bikes. There was no official bike rack but we found a place to lock them up around back and had to ask directions from the Museum staff. Luckily we had to walk through the main exhibit hall so we dawdled and gawked and read all the plaques. These historic flying machines deserve the special treatment they get here.

When we got to the big hangar we saw acres of tables but it still took us a while to find two empty seats. Even in this packed crowd I saw a several people I recognized so I didn't feel like I was cheating. The head honcho of EAA, Jack Pelton gave an enthusiastic welcome speech even though it was the fourth of six he would deliver that day. When he confessed that despite the hard work, Airventure was his favorite time of year we all got it. The meal was prompt and delicious and our table mates were typical EAA, friendly and polite. The fellow next to me had brought his young son to his first convention and the boy was loving it. The featured speaker was a retired Air Force general but I had left my insulin back in my cooler so we had to excuse ourselves.

Beagle Field was buzzing when we got back and the sun was finally losing its scorch. We watched Kristi get a ride in the Just Aircraft Super Stol and I had to laugh. The Stol takeoff is a rather dramatic event and I could clearly see Kristi sitting in the cockpit staring at her phone. As they turned into the traffic pattern Jim's phone started buzzing so we watched Kristi's pictures in nearly real time. I hope she actually enjoyed the flight and not just the camera work. The ultralight session was cut short to make room for the Valdez boys so we watched their bush pilot antics in the cool evening air. Across the runway on the show side of the fence the crowd was six deep and I hoped they were being gentle with my girl. At eight o'clock the whole world got very quite so we got the guitars out. We were exactly one verse into 'House of the rising sun' when Paul dropped by so we forgot the music and chatted the night away. Paul is bright and engaging and these conversations are a comfortable Oshkosh tradition.

Wednesday, July 27, 2016

I crawled out of the Yacht into a hot, muggy morning. The silence was deafening. Mikey pointed out a long piece of purple cloth hung over a light pole across the runway and said it was a paraglider that had just crashed into a parked helicopter. Never a dull moment. Once the green vests had secured the scene ultralight traffic started up again. I hung out in the shade and watched them fly by. It must have been Jim's turn to sleep in and just as he appeared Chuck, Mike's dad arrived in camp. Happy handshakes all around. Mikey made some delicious eggs with cheese and Jim made hash browns. All I did was eat. For a guy who lives alone this kind of service is a rare treat.

It was nearly noon before we were ready to do our daily tour and the humidity was oppressive. It finally burst into a full blown storm so we abandoned our plans and just held down the tarp. When the gust front passed it rained hard and Jim got into his fowl weather gear while I got into my van. The rain eventually dwindled to a sprinkle so we went to check on Fifi. I can see her from our kitchen but she is on the show side of the runway so it takes about twenty minutes to get there. We have to pedal out of the camp, up Ripple rd. to Knapp street rd., down Knapp to the Barn, lock up the bikes and walk back to the runway. After all that effort her tie downs were still tight so we left her to cruise the UL vendors again. North to south we strolled the wide grass avenues occasionally pausing for a close inspection or to query a vendor.

When we got to the end we just kept meandering southward. Several immaculate Grumman flying boats were parked wing to wing. Widgeon, Mallard, Goose and Albatross were all represented. I guess old Henry Grumman really liked waterfowl. I believe the Duck was his first design and there is one in the Museum but I'm not sure if any are still flying. The real odd duck in this collection wasn't a Grumman at all. A stout white hull supported a gull wing with pusher engines and a tall tail. It looked like a fine art sculpture so we weren't surprised to see an Italian name on the data plate. Piaggio makes some really sexy airplanes and this was no exception.

The drizzle petered out but the clouds stayed and we were happy for the shade. Heading back to the Barn we checked out the ultralights and light sport planes parked out front. A Buccaneer II with a 4-Sale banner caught our attention. I had become enamored of a Buc II at Sun-n-Fun in April and almost went way into debt just to become amphibious. This example tempted me as well but sadly I'm already way into debt so cooler heads prevailed. In the Barn we scanned the bulletin board for possible projects to score on the cheap but nothing thrilled either of us. Once again we were reminded that in aviation, even junk isn't cheap.

The ceiling was high enough to start the afternoon airshow so we cruised back to camp to spectate. Wednesday is traditionally spaghetti night so we got sauce simmering while the aerobats ripped through the sky. Kyle Franklin in his Sasquatch biplane actually seemed to tear chunks out of it. Chuck came back from his one day tour and surprised us all by begging off the big feast and the night airshow. We were sad to see him go. The gigantic Martin Mars returned for two low passes and a fish dump. After a day of rain the runway probably didn't need more water but it was mighty impressive non the less. The Royal Canadian Snowbirds arrived in a flock, politely landed and got out of the way. They would be performing later in the week and apparently didn't want to make a big fuss about arriving. Jim reminded me of the Air Force Thunderbird's arrival a couple years back. They terrorized the place for twenty minutes. Full afterburners at tree top height, you could have heard it in Milwaukee. People were actually ducking when they screamed over from all directions at once. A difference in cultures, Eh? Although, when you think about it the American team had Thunder right in the name and how noisy is Snow? The airshow ended with a Heritage Flight, a P-51 Mustang with an F-16 on its wing. As if on cue the sun peeked out and lit the pair beautifully.

We all chowed down on spaghetti while the ultralights did their thing. I was wishing Fifi and I could join them until I saw the Valdez boys infiltrate the pattern. The sound of a 180 horse Lycoming

just does not fit my expectations on Beagle Field and I wouldn't want to share the pattern with them. When it got calm the PPGs filled the sky. A pilot wearing a skirt tried to foot launch and we all felt sorry for her when her attempt failed. Paragliders can be tricky, especially when there is no breeze at all.

Everything got very quiet at 8:00 as usual but we knew there was much more to come. Airventure brought back the Saturday Night Airshow a few years back and it was so popular that now they are doing it on Wednesday as well. Just before sunset the Tora! Tora! Tora! Pearl Harbor reenactment started and down on our field two PPG pilots launched. I thought out loud, "Those guys are going to be in big trouble." but no one seemed concerned even as they climbed steadily towards show center. By the time the Japanese ceased their bombing runs our paraglider pilots were high over the crowd and things got interesting.

Very advanced PPG pilots can do an aerobatic maneuver called an 'Infinite Tumble'. It resembles a series of outside loops that a fixed wing pilot might perform but the wing stays almost stationary while the pilot spins around it like a yo-yo doing the 'around the world' trick. It looks completely impossible and deadly dangerous but both of our bag wing boys were pulling it off in tight formation. Closer to the ground they recovered and began a synchronized aerobatic ballet with high banked turns and helicopter spins while five more pilots launched and joined them for graceful formation work. Those of us who live for the very light end of aviation often feel ignored by the big money at the other end of the field but this demonstration in front of a huge crowd showed us the organizers had been paying attention. We were elated!

As full dark closed in the Aeroshell T-6s began their noisy show lit up like the Las Vegas strip and spewing enough smoke to completely conceal their airframes. The effect was a Close Encounters moment lacking only the theme song and the little green men. Lights were swinging and dancing through the smokey sky with no definable point of origin. Bob Carlton wowed the crowd with his jet powered sailplane, Gene Soucy set his big Showcat on fire and several other acts trailed streams of sparks and shot fireworks over the thrilled audience. Finally a Korean era F-86 Saber did some very fast and very low passes. Its afterburner left a streak across my eyeballs that took minutes to fade.

As the echos subsided we dropped back from the fence to freshen our drinks because we knew it wasn't over yet. A ground based fireworks display filled the next half hour with oohs and aahs from the crowd. With forty thousand campers and thousands more drive in guests Wittman Field is a city unto itself and any city would have been proud to offer that display on the Fourth of July. For a big, fat exclamation point on the evening the pyrotechnic experts touched off the 'Wall of Fire' and even from our cheap seats we could feel the heat and concussion.

We all collapsed into camp chairs and reviewed our big day. It wasn't long before eyelids started drooping and my Merry Yacht suite whispered of sweet dreams.

Thursday, July 28, 2016

It was real early when the tarp started flapping and the van started rocking. It rained steady for an hour or more so I just sat in my room, cozy and dry. At least it wasn't hot. I don't need to close the side doors to stay dry so I chatted with Jim while he pushed the puddles out of our plastic roof. The rain let up about 9:00 and we watched a big KC-135 tanker circle the field. After a couple of low passes he climbed eastward with a thirsty F-15 hot on his tail. The overcast was just high enough to allow general aviation departures and they were steady all morning. I threw some Jimmy Dean patties on the cast iron and followed with eggs and hash browns. When the rotorwing gang stormed Beagle Field Jim and I headed out on the bikes.

Rolling easy down Knapp Street rd. I noticed the empty grass shadows of several Spartan Executives. There were six or seven of them here this week. A big, burly piece of art deco sculpture

they are so rare that this was the largest gathering of the type, ever. Considering the quirky weather it was no surprise they had left. We saw similar gaps in the long lines of parked airplanes all over the grounds and I started to get that awful feeling that things were winding down. No! It's only Thursday! Fortunately the exhibits were all busy as beehives despite the occasional drizzle. Jim bought some of the cool bi-focal shades that I had scored earlier and we strolled by Cirrus. Down by the flightline we ducked into the EAA merchandise store to dodge a shower. Naturally we started browsing and we ended up buying some of those hippie themed T-shirts. Finally we gave up on the weather and rode home.

The afternoon airshow went off on schedule and I looked up from time to time but I had seen so many snap rolls and tumbles I was getting jaded. I was reading the Airventure Today paper and it said Harrison Ford would give the two millionth Young Eagles ride today. It was cool to see the picture of Han Solo with artfully disheveled gray hair and a full, white beard. Of course the lucky kid was a pretty sixteen year old girl, no zit faced dorks for this photo op. The fact that two million young people have been given free airplane rides through this program speaks volumes about the dedication and the generosity of the pilot community. I wish I had an airplane with two seats.

The air boss never put up the green flag over Beagle field for fear it would blow away so we grilled chicken in relative quiet. Departures continued on the main runway and, jaded or not we still couldn't help glancing that way when throttles came up. Conversation was light and dinner was delightful as usual. It got chilly after dark so Jim retired early and I fiddled with the camp guitar in my cozy bedroom. Songs I hadn't thought about in years kept popping into my head and somehow found their way to my fingers. Being away from TV and radio for a week seems to free up creative brain space. Ooh, excellent name for a band, Brain Space.

Friday, July 29, 2016

I woke up about 7:00 with that empty feeling I get when my blood doesn't have enough sugar. Fortunately, the pantry is within reach of the bed so I crunched a cookie and went back to sleep. The next time I looked at my watch it said 10:15 but there was no ultralight racket. I could see why when I crawled out into a wall of fog. Jim deadpanned, "I thought you were dead." Going along with the gag I said, "Why didn't you call 911?" His poker faced reply was, "What good would that do? You were already dead!" I had to bow to his logic.

Without those distracting airplane noises he and Kristi had done last night's dishes and cleaned up the camp. It felt good to pull on jeans and a flannel shirt after the heat earlier in the week. Jim and Mikey and I all bring enough food for the gang so by Friday we're cleaning out the coolers and adding ingredients and even courses to each meal. It seems silly to haul it home. This morning some of last night's chicken got into the egg scramble along with shrimp, ham and fresh jalapeno from Jim's garden. We also had hash browns and bacon on the side. That's roughing it!

The ceiling lifted enough for the giant C-5 Galaxy to depart and we had the best seats in the house. Her cavernous cargo hold empty she climbed steeply and soon disappeared into the clouds. The disembodied roar slowly rolled away to the south. As if shaken loose by the behemoth's passing some rain drops pelted our tarp.

Jim had decide he would leave tomorrow so we got on the bikes for a last tour. He didn't make it out of camp. His brand new back tire went flat. I got out my pump and we fiddled with the valve stem but we couldn't keep air in it. EAA has regularly scheduled tram service all over the grounds so we walked down to the end of our airstrip and caught one. We decided to drop by Rans again to say our goodbyes and ran into our old friend Rick Hayes at Sling. The South African aircraft company makes a beautiful low wing Light Sport that has circumnavigated the planet. Rick invited me to try it on and I was duly impressed with the fit. Snuggling in I imagined I was topping the Cascades on my

way to visit the grandkids. I figured, if they could fly it around the world I could fly it to the west coast. The dollar signs on the brochure brought me back to reality but it was a nice dream.

The afternoon airshow was cranking up as we strolled back up Wittman road so we caught the tram headed south. The sky cooperated with the schedule and there were spots of blue for the performers. The Snowbirds closed the show with a classy demonstration of tight formation flying. Their jets have no afterburners but what they lack in noise they make up for in precision. It looked like you couldn't slip a sheet of paper between their wing tips and with all eight ships the bomb burst filled the sky.

We filled the grills again and feasted as the ultralights whizzed by our kitchen. Never a dull moment. The crowds got deep again on the show-side fence and soon the ultralights were recalled so the Valdez gang could do their thing. These guys are real working bush pilots and their short field skills are a matter of professional pride. The gigantic donuts they call tires would make a decent swim raft for your kids. It is interesting to watch but predictable. I prefer the unlimited and unorthodox personal expression that the ultralight rule allows and encourages. Not that I'm complaining. Any time I can sit with a hot meal and a cold drink watching airplanes fly I'm a happy guy.

When it got quiet Jim and I walked up to Paul's camp and sampled some delightful campground baking. Paul's brother had made some warm, flaky biscuits and delicious cornbread on a Weber grill, amazing. There were quite a few full camp chairs and a bunch of kids bouncing around the picnic table, a real homey atmosphere. Jim told them he was leaving in the morning so there were lots of handshakes and good wishes til next time.

Back at our bivouac Jim started getting organized and Vern cruised in on his scooter. We sampled a few varieties of Vern's wine, I liked the watermelon. The tales grew taller as the evening evolved. Eventually the bed beckoned.

Saturday, July 30, 2016

Jim was packing when I woke to a perfect summer day. Blue skies, comfortable temperatures and enough ultralight traffic to keep me looking up. I passed coolers, grills and the whole kitchen through the back doors of the Suburban while Jim stacked. And re-stacked. There are millionaires (lots of them) who arrive in multimillion dollar airplanes and spend their evenings at restaurants and hotels in town but Jim and I prefer to bring everything we need and stay on the field. Much of the really cool stuff we see isn't on any schedule and we only experience it because we're there. Also, we're not millionaires.

Just as he was ready to mount up a pair of Grumman's biggest flying boats taxied out to depart. The Albatross is all art deco swoops and two huge round engines so Jim stopped to watch them takeoff. After ten days in the Moody Campground a sight like that can be taken for granted but we both know if it was to happen at our little home airports it would be front page news. When the Suburban pattered up Ripple rd. I looked at our decimated camp. No back wall for the living room, no extra shade, no kitchen, it was sad. I went to Mike's table for breakfast and afterward Kristi gave me a haircut. This has become another Oshkosh tradition and it's the only haircut I get all year. Kristi is a real pro and kind enough not to mention that there is less to cut each time.

With my own departure less than 24 hours away I decided to do one last full sweep of the convention grounds. I checked on Fifi first and found a note from Ron Blum on her instrument panel. I had hoped to run into him during the week but the other half million people must have got in the way. Enjoying the lovely weather I strolled the ultralight vendor's park and bumped into Dan Murphy. He had just seen Ron Blum and Matt Ferrari. We stood in the Hirth tent and talked engines. As I was admiring a cute little ultralight trike from the Ukraine a husky fellow with a thick accent invited me to try it on. He pointed out several clever features including retractable gear and I found myself intrigued.

The price was very reasonable and I was tempted until I remembered I can barely afford room and board for the two girls I already own. Part of the allure of Oshkosh is the chance to live these sweet fantasies and I indulged another a little later at the Pipistrel area. I sat in the pilot seat of a beautiful motor glider and let the rep give me the whole sales pitch. I nodded thoughtfully and took his business card.

The blue sky and cool breeze seemed to put a smile on everyone's face while I tried to capture all the amazing sights and sounds to file away in my memory for another year. I hadn't had my annual ice cream treat yet so I got a double scoop of chocolate death on a sugar cone. It was delicious and I savored it in the shade but still managed to drip on my shirt.

The Fly-Mart is dozens of large tents full of 'bargains' in a corner of the grounds and we wander through almost every day just to make a mental list of what we might pick up at the end of the week. Since this was the last day of my week I bought some ear plugs and a mini safety wire pliers that might come in handy some day. In exhibition hangar 'B' I purchased an alarm clock and took my prizes back to camp. When I read the clock manual I couldn't believe my good luck. Under the large LCD time display was temperature to the tenth of a degree with trend arrows, day and date, humidity and a graphic depiction of the moon phase. Receiving the radio signal from the national atomic clock it will always be accurate to the second and it cost me fifteen bucks! That's an Oshkosh deal.

When the afternoon airshow started I rode out to check on Fifi and her trailer then returned to start packing up the Yacht. Saturday is typically warbird day so every light plane that ever wore Air Force livery circled the field while the jet fighters took off in twos and threes. When the light veterans landed the jets came screaming back in and made much larger circles around the airport. And much more noise. Watching them pull up after a high speed pass down the runway you'd swear they were going to climb straight into orbit. The Canadian Snowbirds put a fine finish on the festivities in a perfect airshow sky. The lowering angle of the afternoon sun put spot lights on the performers and made the popcorn clouds unbelievably bright against the deep blue backdrop.

Ultralight traffic was light but steady as I disassembled the Yacht's trusty tarp and packed away the poles. The hibachi, charcoal and all the stuff stored under the van got stashed into corners and secured. I left the bike and cooler out so I could reach the bed but they would load quick in the morning. I was a little sad about leaving so soon but I was still tickled to have cool flying machines taking off and landing so close I could hit them with a tossed lawn chair.

Mikey fed me again bless his heart, and we settled in for the night airshow. They started off with PPG's again just before dark. I don't know if I would ever fly a wing that can be tied in a knot but these pilots made it look like the most fun in the world. When full dark fell I saw a flock of crazy fireflies high above show center and it took my mind a moment to realize they were flares on the feet of skydivers under canopy. I bet it was cool stepping out of the jump plane over this party. The rest of the pyrotechnic show was the same as Wednesday's but if I was watching it for the tenth time I still couldn't look away. When the last plane landed, the last firework fired and the wall of fire faded I was ready for bed. It was time for my last Oshkosh ritual. I always take a slow walk around the campground using only the soft light from small fires or camper windows. I try to blend into the night and absorb the sounds and the smells and the feel of the grass under my feet. This is a very special place for me and I want to bring the essence of it home in my head and my heart.

Sunday, July 31, 2016

I woke before 6:00 to another perfect day. A shot of insulin and a gulp of orange juice had me fueled and ready. Mike was up so it was man-hugs with a big pat on the back and wishes for a safe journey. The sun was just coming up as I said my goodbyes to Rick and Nancy and rolled out of the gate. During the week I had engineered and installed a permanent solution to the trailer's wandering

brace with parts from the Fly-Mart so my confidence was high as I loaded my girl up for the long trip home. I took my time to get it right and had worked up a pretty good sweat by 8:00. I stuck my head into the Barn to say goodbye to the crew and was on the highway by 8:20. The Yacht was in fine form and the miles rolled by. A highlight reel video of the week ran in my head and I would occasionally burst into laughter as I drove. A close inspection at my only gas stop and frequent checks in the mirrors assured me that my confidence in the new trailer was not misplaced and the hours on the road were delightfully boring.

By the time Lake Superior appeared on the horizon I was looking forward to home and I knew another Oshkosh was in the books. The enormity of my experience started to sink in. In just a few hours I had traveled to another world. A world without anger or malice or even litter. A world where people moved through all three dimensions with casual grace. I saw thousands of people that I didn't know but I never saw a stranger. It was just one, big happy family and I was welcome wherever I wandered. The skills and talents I saw demonstrated were of the highest order and freely shared with all. The volunteers who make it all happen were of a single purpose and successful in every way, kindness and caring their watchwords. The atmosphere was filled not just with amazing flying machines but also happiness, inclusiveness and yes, love.

This world is so special that it only exists at one point on the time space continuum. I knew that if I turned the Yacht about and went back to where I just was, it wouldn't be there. But I also knew it wasn't a dream and I would visit again. I said a silent thanks to Mom and Dad, Orville and Wilbur and Paul Poberezny for causing this magnificent disturbance in the fabric of everyday life. I realized how lucky I was and I made a promise to myself to carry the feeling forward. Living the example of that world every day would surely make this world a better place.

Finally back at Helgeson Field I tucked Fifi away trailer and all. I gave her a peck on the cheek as I closed the hangar door and the Yacht jumped for joy without the load. Twenty minutes later I shoveled ten days of mail out of the box and turned down the driveway. The weather was ideal and I saw my little sanctuary with a fresh appreciation. It didn't take long to empty the cooler, open all the windows and plop down on the deck to unwind. Airshow clouds smiled down on the weary pilgrim and I savored the delicious exhaustion of the journey well lived.

And So,

Thanks for coming with me on my extraordinary escapade, I urge you to join me next time. If this doesn't sound like your thing, I hope you have something that brings you this much joy.

Keep looking up and.....Happy Landings!.....