

*My name is Frank Caruso, and I live and fly out of Hilton Head Island, SC (HXD), West Palm Beach, FL (F45), and the Seymour Airpark (TN20), in Tennessee's Smoky Mountains. I made my first solo flight during the Spring of 1958. This is my account of my 50 Year Circle of Flight*

I would suspect that no pilot will ever forget their first flight. Mine came just a bit past my 17th birthday and as I was about to start classes at a local commuting college in northern New Jersey, where I still lived at home with my parents. I had just purchased a 1957 VW beetle and enjoyed crossing over into rural New York state to explore some of the winding and hilly roads in nearby Rockland county. On this particular spring day I was tooling along an unfamiliar back road when I suddenly came across a small grass airstrip with about a half dozen planes tied down. There, just a few feet in front of me was a green and silver colored airplane, its owner busily applying a coat of polish to its metal fuselage. I stopped the car and watched for a while. Finally I went over and began a conversation with him. I found out that the plane was a Luscombe 8A, and the field was a Civil Air Patrol strip. I was intrigued and immediately began asking more questions, eventually picking up a cloth to help Art (the Luscombe owner) with his polishing task. After we finished some 30 or 40 minutes later, he casually asked, "Have you ever been up in a small airplane?" When I answered that I had never been up in any kind of airplane, he offered a ride. It was the most exciting 15 minutes of my life. There we were, skimming across the rolling tree covered hills of this upstate farm community, and I was viewing the terrain below as I had never seen it before. Although the flight was way too short, it instilled in me a desire and longing to see more of our beautiful world from this unique vantage point.

I learned of a private airport located a 30 minute drive from my north Jersey home, and that following weekend I had signed up for flying lessons at the Ramapo Airpark, in Spring Valley NY. My trainer was a Aeronca 7AC and my instructor was Walt. Over the summer of '57 I would sneak up to the airport on good weather evenings whenever I could put aside the \$10 that it would cost me to obtain an hour of dual flying in that yellow tail dragger with the 65 hp Continental engine. I managed to eventually accumulate almost 30 hours in my logbook, and did my first solo and even got a solo cross country flight in before my father found out just where I was spending my evenings. When he did, the ultimatum that he offered quickly ended my flying...at least for the short haul. The choice was to either stop flying, or move out of the house. Since I was barely able to earn enough money at my summer job for tuition, books and the 18 cents for the gallon of gas to make the 30 mile round trip drive each day from their house to school, it was a no brainer. In the Autumn of 1958 I reluctantly gave up flying.

Now fast forward to 1964. I had graduated college in '61 and had finished up my 6 months of military service (tanks, not planes) by 1962. I got hitched in '63 and during that first year of marriage, I managed to convince my new bride that an airplane would really make our lives together so much more meaningful. I had seen a 1946 Ercoupe 415C which happened to be available for only \$2,250...with fresh paint and annual. It was metallic blue and had a white speed stripe (an oxymoron for this 90 mph airplane), but it cost less than the Triumph TR-3 that I was driving by then. This airplane was a joy to fly, especially with its sliding cockpit windows stowed. It was just like my convertible, and with no rudder pedals and a nose wheel, you simply drove it off and back onto the

paved runway, just like a car. I picked up right where I had stopped, a half dozen years previously. For the next 12 months I concentrated on converting my student ticket to a private pilot license. But I soon began to realize the shortcomings of this small two place aircraft with regard to load carrying capabilities for our anticipated long haul flights. After all, I had convinced my new wife that a plane would be our magic carpet to the world that lay before us. At 90 mph those would be very lengthy trips indeed.

So, immediately after obtaining my private ticket, I sold that Ercoupe for \$2,400 (a small profit) and purchased an almost brand new 1963 Cessna Skyhawk for \$10,000. With this 130 mph airplane with four seats we were finally able to begin to go places. And go places we did. With a small 50 cc Honda motor scooter with a quick disconnect fitting on its main spar assembly, we could easily stow the front half of the bike in the baggage compartment, and its main assembly safety belted onto a folding plywood carrier that fit on the 172's rear seat. Two side mounted canvas saddle bags would carry most of our personal effects for weekend trips. Over the next few years, with such an arrangement, we managed to fly throughout the northeast, down to Florida and throughout much of the Bahamas. We made a few trips to Mackinac Island, Michigan, and several into Canada. Our big trip, however was to Mexico City (airport elevation 8,000 feet +) where we had to almost reach our maximum service ceiling in order to safely clear the 12,000 to 14,000 foot mountains that ring that very hazy and polluted metropolis. However, visibility cleared up when we left a few days later for a flight down to Acapulco and Zihuatanejo, on the Pacific side of Mexico. All in all, those 5 years and 700 hours in the 172 were a lot of fun and adventure, all done VFR (visual flight rules). However, by now we were feeling a desire to go to more distant ports and at a faster pace and ground speed.

I found a 1960 Comanche 250, with a newly overhauled engine available for just \$15,000. With it we managed to make 3 flights to the West Coast, with several onto Baja California, and one memorable flight down to see the Mayan ruins at Chichen Itza, Merida and Cozumel. It was memorable in that on our last day at their resort, we were not sent the bottled water that normally was left at our hotel door each morning. I decided to brush my teeth with tap water...a big mistake. When I suddenly realized that I was beginning to come down with "Montezuma's revenge", I made a last minute decision to forgo the long trip back up along the eastern coastline of Mexico to clear US customs at Brownsville, TX. Instead I elected do a much quicker flight direct from Cozumel to Key West. Although almost 500 miles over open water, I thought it more advantageous than trying to fight nausea and diarrhea for 10 hours while flying up along the Mexican mainland. Other than not being able to get a response from Havana Center on our IFR trip to the Florida Keys, the flight was uneventful. (Did finally get a communications relay from an Air France jetliner that was bound for Havana, so the Migs were not deployed as we entered into Cuban airspace). That single Comanche was truly a magic carpet and one that fulfilled the promise to my bride of years ago.

After I started my own consulting company, specializing in infrared thermal imaging for industry, I began to realize the business benefit that an aircraft would offer. In 1987 that single engine Comanche was exchanged for its twin engine version with counter rotating props. Over the next 10 years I flew that machine 1,300 hours, much of it business

related. But there were still plenty of opportunities for pleasure trips as well. Cuba was again revisited when we overflowed that Island, in June of 1993, on the Grand Cayman Caravan and the International Aviation Expo. This time Havana Center answered on first call, and we had a marvelous week on that British Island located just a little over 2 hours south of the US. There were many other voyages, throughout the Bahamas and Caribbean, as well as into Canada and throughout the eastern half of the US. But in 1996 I made a decision that I have regretted for over a dozen years. I sold that marvelous Twin Comanche, and instead purchased a large bus style motor home, which cost me well in excess the purchase price of every plane that I had owned thus far. I rationalized that decision by convincing myself that having a mobile office and laboratory in the field with me, as I worked my way across the eastern half of the US each year would make more sense than having to deal with the logistics of ground transport once I landed at each job location. Having the same bed to sleep in each night and easy access to the myriad of testing equipment that I needed for my projects solidified this decision. But not a day went by that I didn't stop to look up when I heard an airplane flying overhead.

In 2005 a client friend introduced me to the LSA concept that was just taking hold, and told me of a kit manufacturer that was based in the upstate portion of my home state of SC. I was intrigued, and shortly thereafter made a trip up to Walhalla to visit the Just Aircraft factory. A short demo ride with Gary Shmidt, one of the partners, off of their 600 foot downhill strip quickly convinced me that this is a plane that I would really enjoy. So, I put down a deposit on a kit, which was delivered in July of '06. That September I began assembly under the factory's "builders assist" program. However, 6 weeks into the program a crisis developed. The company that had taken over my business accounts had decided to back out of their purchase agreement. I had to go back out on the road, to resume the preventive maintenance programs that I was performing for these important long time clients...many of which were required by their insurance companies. I now had an important decision to make. Was I to let this kit assembly project sit until I found another buyer for my business, or was I to try to find a viable alternative. I learned, from the Experimental Aircraft Association, that there would be a "loophole" available to me until January of 2008. I could legally contract for others to actually complete my airplane and register it as an E-LSA under the "fat ultra light" transition rule. This would allow me to have the plane completed, but, alas, without the pleasure of my "hands on experience". Thus, on December 20th, 2007 I finally obtained an E-LSA certification for my Highlander. Then, on April 1st, 2008 ...*April Fools day* I finally made that all important first flight in the Highlander...some 50 years after I took my very first tail dragger flight in that Luscombe 8A.

A half century and 5000 flying hours to make a full circle back to a barely 100 mph airplane with a tail wheel and minimal instrumentation. That July I began a 6,000 mile, three month trip around the US, which I chose to chronologize in this web blog. Now, one year later I am about to partake of another trip with my motor home, trailer and plane. You are once again invited to come along and join me on this new adventure.