

April 1, 2011 - Loves... Lost & Found - Winter Haven, FL

Those who have been following my writing on this photo blog may recall that I have been on a quest to try to locate my four previous airplanes. The first two were fairly easy to find since their registration (N) numbers had remained the same and a check of the FAA register quickly located their new owners.

My 1946 Ercoupe is now being stored in a hanger in Hershey, PA (home of the chocolate factory) and was not easily accessible to me (but I am still hopeful of personally visiting and photographing it again some day). In April, 2010 I did post an article which had "then and now photos" with me and my 1964 Cessna Skyhawk, which I had located, and then went on to see, in Ashville, NC. Then, last summer, I found my single engine 1960 Piper Comanche quite by chance. It happened to be located in Belle Foursch, SD, which is about 100 miles north of the Custer (South Dakota) County Airport, where I worked for four months as a volunteer. I made the trip up to have a photo taken with it and posted another "then and now" photo article last Sept. 22nd.

Well, on my way over to see the Sun n' Fun Aviation Expo in Lakeland, FL on 3/31, I stopped by to visit with my old aircraft mechanic, who has his shop in Bartow, FL (about 15 miles East of Lakeland). Bill Turley had been servicing my single and twin engined Comanches airplanes for well over two decades and runs a super maintenance shop specializing in Piper aircraft. I mentioned my quest to Bill, and he informed me that my Twin was now just up the road, in nearby Winter Haven. He quickly located and gave me the new owner's phone number.

I called John Collins and explained who I was and asked if I could come by to visit my old airplane, explaining that I was in nearby Lakeland, at the airshow. "Come on over" he invited and we agreed to get together the following day, Saturday, April 1st-April's Fool's Day. When I arrived at his home, I found that John lives right across from the Winter Haven airport, (how great is that?) where he hangers the Twin Comanche. Not only that, but his house is located directly on a private lake, and John keeps a Piper J-3 Cub on floats at a ramp in his back yard! "Have you ever flown in a float plane?" he asked. "Way back in the '60's" I responded. "Then lets go for a ride when we get back from the airport", he suggested. He didn't have to ask twice.

When we got over to his airport hanger I noticed that the twin's paint scheme had been changed for the 3rd time since it was originally purchased new, back in 1970. When I acquired it in 1986 I was its 3rd owner. John is owner number 5. As I was posing for my photo, I could not help but reflect that I was now 25 years older and 25 pounds heavier than I was back when my original picture with the plane was taken in 1986. That's one pound per year for me, but I noticed that the Comanche looked its still same trim and sleek self. It now has over 7,500 hours on its airframe and had even experienced a mid-air collision shortly after John purchased it in 2001, when a Cessna clipped him from behind. John was able to maintain control of the airplane landing it at nearby St. Petersburg airport, after declaring an emergency. The 90 year old pilot of the Cessna was not so lucky and was killed when his airplane spun in.



Me and my Twin Comanche in 1986 - Sleek & Trim



And in 2011 - Does this airplane make me look fat?



John Collins and his J-3 Piper Cub on floats



Pilot and passenger getting ready for a flight

I had enjoyed flying the Twin Comanche for some 10 years and logged almost 1,300 hours on it, including one memorable trip which took me over Cuba and onto the Cayman Islands. It was a wonderful and very stable instrument platform and I did quite a few IFR and night flights in it with complete confidence. It's almost 200 mph cruise speed made it a very efficient business tool and I covered the entire eastern third of the country servicing my client base with it. It was good seeing the old bird again and finding out that it was now in the hands of a competent and experienced pilot like John Collins.

For pure fun flying, there is nothing like a "rag bag". This is a fabric covered airplane (usually over tubular steel) and generally is a two seater. My Just Aircraft Highlander is a prime example. With it open door flying is quite exhilarating, and its high wing configuration, gives a fabulous view. While these aircraft are generally slow, their purpose is for fun flying rather than for going places. The J-3 Cub is probably the original "fun" flying machine and on floats it becomes doubly so. Having the dual ability of being a flying boat makes it the perfect "back country" airplane and it is widely used in places such as Alaska and northern Canada. Having such a machine in your back yard, just a 30 second walk from your home is the perfect combination. John had promised a friend, who was celebrating his 75th birthday, a hop and a jump over to nearby lakes, and said that as soon as he returned I would have a similar opportunity. It was neat watching the antique airplane quietly taxi out across this small lake and then turn around and come directly at me while I was photographing from the 100 foot dock behind John's house.

In 30 minutes the plane returned, gently touched down on the near still waters, and taxied back in. Now it was my turn, and after manually lifting the rudder cable we accelerated into the wind, quickly lifting off. John then performed a series of short "touch and goes" on a few of the literally dozens of lakes that dot the Winter Haven area. Before I knew it we were back on John's home lake, and taxiing onto his back yard ramp. This completed a perfectly delightful weekend in early Spring in Central Florida. I got to attend a "wild and woolly" Sun n' Fun Aviation Exposition, including viewing the aftermath of a F-1 tornado which touched down at the airport. I saw exciting performances by the Blue Angels and several other military aircraft. I found an "old love" and made a nostalgic picture with her, and I had the opportunity to take a ride in a floatplane. What fun!!

I am so glad that I took up flying when I was a kid of 17!



"Here's comin' at-chu" - A head-on view of John's low fly-over



The Cub taxi's out from John's lake front home



We quickly lift off and begins our climb out



This is our view from 600 feet over John's lake



The Cub's wing frames our view of Winter Haven