

April 12-14, 2010 Sun n' Fun, Lakeland, Florida

One of the premier aviation events, held each spring in Lakeland, Florida, is the EAA's Sun n' Fun expo. I try to attend whenever I can. This year I was already in South Florida, but had to drive (yeah, I know, drive... bummer) back to Hilton Head for a scheduled meeting almost immediately after its opening day. Even though I didn't have my airplane with me on this trip, I decided to make the 2 hour detour to Lakeland and spend, at least, a couple of days there. I had heard that the Just Aircraft Company was going to display a nose geared version of their tail wheeled Highlander light sport airplane (the model that I own). Now, I have well over 100 hours of tail dragger time so I should start to be feeling comfortable with this type of flying and, more especially, landing. However, I had recently heard stories about several Highlander owners with a whole lot more experience than I, ground looping their airplanes. While ground looping is a phenomena that can effect any airplane if the crosswinds are strong enough, it is especially detrimental to tail wheeled types. Not having a nose wheel acting as a stabilizing force, it will simply weather vane and pivot about itself. If the pilot is not quick to counteract this force, the plane can tilt over, digging a wing into the ground, and possibly even tip over on its back. This can be a very embarrassing and expensive event and will create havoc with future insurance premiums. I thought that this might be the time to investigate and determine if this might be a modification that I would want to consider. One of the key factors is being sure that I can still get the plane into my hauling trailer since, in a triked version, the tail will sit much higher. We are discussing several options to accomplish this end, and hopefully will come up with a solution

In addition to my time spent in the Light Sport Aircraft area, I did get to view some of the aerobatics flying demonstrations that this event has become so well know for. This year's featured performers were the U.S. Air Force's Thunderbirds. While I wouldn't be around for their actual air show performance, as I had the meeting to attend in SC, I did get to see their aerial maneuvers on arrival day. I usually wind up spending a fair amount of money while I am at the show, as most items are discounted. However, my only purchase this year, from just one of the many, many vendors that set up boots in the display hangers, was a case of aviation oil. On my second and last day at the event, I simply strolled around, looking at airplanes and enjoying the beautiful central Florida spring weather.



Just Aircraft's Highlander with tricycle gear



US Air Force Thunderbird F-16 aircraft in flight



Beech Baron making a low approach



WW II era training aircraft on the flight line

While not directly connected with Sun n' Fun, I did have the opportunity, just a month earlier, to be at a Charleston, SC safety seminar, jointly presented by its Division of Aeronautics, the FAA and the SC Aviation Association. It provided for a day of learning and training which is always an important factor in keeping one's skills sharp. I was personally invited to attend, by the FAA's Safety Team (FAASteam), in order to be publicly presented the **Wilber and Orville Wright Master Pilot Award**. This is a really nice plaque that goes to any general aviation pilot who has attained at least 50 years of "safe flying". Since my original student pilot certificate was issued in 1958, and as I am still actively flying, this made me eligible for the award. There is an application process which involves documenting your flying history, along with a vita and letters from pilots who knew me "way back when". The problem is that most of the pilots who were around when I first started flying, have long ago arrived and landed at that giant "airfield in the sky". I finally found a non pilot friend who was actually with me when I first started my training and he wrote a letter attesting to that fact. The end result was my being honored with this award at a gathering of fellow pilots. My biggest gratification, in all this, is the fact that I am still alive to have accepted it.



FAA presenting me with the Wright Bros. award



Aerial view of the Custer County, S.D airport

Because of various personal issues and commitments which had involved more time and energy than I would have liked, last year's summertime trip had to be scrapped. However, this year I am more hopeful that I will be able to get out West for, at least, a few months. I have promised that I will be available for the months of June and July to assist at the Custer County Airport in Custer, SD. I expect to be "on the road" in mid May with my motor home, trailer and plane for the 2,500 mile drive to what, in 2009, was honored as South Dakota's "Airport of the Year". The "job" calls for 3 days of volunteer work each week, which should leave me plenty of time to enjoy the beauty of this part of the country with its rolling hills, many hot springs, the Badlands and, of course the famous "Mt. Rushmore" faces in the rock. I am looking forward to again flying and sightseeing in this part of our country.



Me and Cessna Skyhawk N5791T in 1965

And, finally, through the FAA's registration records, I was able to locate and visit with the current owner of my 1964 Cessna Skyhawk. It is now located at the Asheville, NC airport and I spent a few delightful hours visiting with its new owners, Kevin and Teresa Wilson, a weekend ago. I thought that you might like to see the "before" and "after" shots of me with the Skyhawk. At least one of us does not look too much worse for wear.



Me with same aircraft in 2010. IT looks GOOD!