August 25th, 2008 - Greybull, WY and the "Boneyard"

One of the things that you notice when you look at the sectional map for this part of the country is how it is made up almost entirely of the color "brown". This is because the darker the color, the higher the depicted ground elevation. These maps start off in a light green color, which indicates ground elevations of only a couple of hundred feet. They are found mainly along the country's coastlines. Here in the mountains, the colors are beige, to tan to brown, to deep, deep brown. What makes this interesting is that as you fly over the areas depicted in "brown" on the sectional map, the colors of the ground are almost the same as on the chart.

My route on the sectional shows only brown

Today I made a 50 mile flight from Cody's Yellowstone Regional Airport to Greybull's South Big Horn Co. field. But first, a word about the airport at Cody. This field is located on the East side of Yellowstone and its elevation is just shy of 1 mile (5,102 feet). What makes this airport slightly unusual is that it has scheduled air carrier service--Delta connection flights, going to both Denver and Salt Lake City, up to four times each day--but no control tower. All flights, both commercial and general aviation simply announce their positions and intentions on a common frequency...much like CB channel 19. I had only run into this situation once before. When I first flew out of Hilton Head, which was originally serviced by Eastern, US Air and American, it also had only a common advisory frequency. But the last time that I went into that airport, it was controlled by non federal tower personnel. Just an interesting observation in this era of over control of the aviation industry.


And brown was the color of the land below me

While I based out of Cody, I tied my Highlander down at Spirit Mountain Aviation, which is the first FBO at this field, with over 25 years of service to General Aviation. Their owner and general manager, Joe Siligato is originally from Connecticut and he was a gracious host for the two days that I flew out of this very interesting airport.


This is the terrain encountered on today's trip

The attraction at **Graybull** was their "Boneyard", which is a storage area of old WWII era military aircraft...mostly transports, some of which were converted to fire fighting duty. Although greatly diminished in number, there are still over two dozen of these ageing aircraft sitting in the desert waiting for who know what. It is unlikely that but a very few will ever get into the air again, and the remainder are probably only there waiting for the eventual sale of their parts.

After landing, I made my way, by foot, from the general aviation ramp over to the "boneyard", which is about a mile away. There I meandered through the assortment, being careful not to step on the numerous ant mounds or cactus plants. I am sure that there are probably scorpions and rattlesnakes also in these fields, but the only animal life that I saw were jack rabbits. When I came across one, usually hiding under a discarded door panel or engine cowl, it would noisily scamper off, creating a moment of surprise on my part. Unfortunately the people that oversee this "museum" were not there today, since the summer "season" has finally ended and I am sure that visitors will be few and far between, until next year. I would have liked to have picked up a brochure or flyer to try to determine what I was looking at.


Graybull airport, with its aircraft "boneyard"

However, on the way to the storage field, I did come across two planes that were receiving “maintenance”. One was a C-119 Flying Boxcar which was undergoing an inspection to see if it could be brought into airworthy condition so as to obtain a ferry permit that would allow it to be flown to a museum that had recently purchased it. The mechanic did not tell me how far it had to travel, but I am glad that I would not be the one ferrying it. I inquired if the small jet engine that I noticed atop this plane was used for take-offs (JATO, or Jet Assisted Take-off). He said that actually it was used in fire fighting when the plane needed extra thrust to get it out of a canyon when heavy, and that it would run on aviation fuel instead of jet fuel (which is a form of diesel or kerosene). I wished the mechanic well in his efforts to get the plane airworthy. I suspect that it will become a form of job security for him.

The “GA” ramp. Note my parked red Highlander

The second plane that I came across, which I do not know the military designation of, was receiving a new windshield, “just in case” the owner wished to fly it again. This plane’s mechanic said that the plane had never left the ground while he had been employed there, and that had been for over 15 years. This plane was missing its nose cone and thus was open to all forms of animal life, both the crawling, flying, slithering or climbing variety. Again, not an aircraft that I would want to travel in.

C-119 Boxcar cargo plane with jet engine above

The flight back to Cody took about the same 35 minutes that the inbound trip took. Temperatures were hot, with the middle 90’s being reached by early afternoon. This requires some climb control on the part of my Highlander. Unlike my previous planes, which would allow me to firewall the throttle until cruise altitude was reached, this plane, with its tight cowl and imbedded oil cooler needs to be watched closely. Generally if forward speed of 72 or greater is maintained, temperatures will stay in the “green”. However, typically in a climb, I will be in the mid 60’s, which will see both the cylinder head and oil temps eventually get into the “yellow” range. Step climbing, by throttling back and maintaining a given altitude with increased forward speed, will bring the temps back into the normal range in short order, and then you begin the climb again. It is a bit of a nuisance, but given the type of flying that I expect to do with this plane, it will probably be tolerable. Those builders who opted for the more popular Rotax liquid cooled engine will not encounter this problem as those engines always run cool. In retrospect, I may eventually regret my decision to go with the air cooled Jabiru engine.

Just a few of the planes sitting out in the desert

This leads to another interesting variable that I have discovered flying out West. Normally, back east if surface temperatures are in the 90’s, by the time that you reach, say 8,000 feet you would be a good 20 degrees cooler. However, out here while I was flying back to Cody at 8,500 feet the outside air temperature was 87 degrees, with a density altitude of over 10,000. I realize that the normal temperature “lapse rate” of 2.5 degrees per thousand feel still applies, but it is strange flying that high with these elevated ambient air temperatures. Tomorrow, (Tuesday) we are supposed to see a dramatic change in weather patterns, and it is predicted to only get into the mid 70’s. That will be a nice change and should make both driving and flying more comfortable. In the morning I will be heading out for my next stop along the way, and into Montana.

Here I am looking over one of the stored planes