

Sun n' Fun '21 - Lakeland, Florida - April 15, 2021

There are several premier General Aviation expositions held in the United States each year with the grand-daddy of them all, Airventure, held, each July, by the EAA at their Wisconsin headquarters. While I have been to Oshkosh several times, and I have even posted two blog entries about those visits, it has never been during the big Airventure expo. It's always a week or two before, while I'm in the Chicago area on VW Club conventions. However, the second largest of these US based aviation gatherings has to be *Sun n' Fun*, held right here in Florida, and usually in April or May. While I have flown my airplane into just one of those events, most of the time I will make the 135 mile, 2 1/2 hour drive each way up to Lakeland, often for just the day. On other occasions I will grab a motel room and spend a few days there enjoying the various forums, seminars, static ramp displays, vendor exhibits and the daily and nightly fly-bys and airshows. Last year, 2020, the entire event was canceled, due to Covid but it was back, in force, this year and I decided to make it a one day visit, not yet wanting to stay in a motel room as long as the Chinese virus was still making its presence known.



One of the first things that I do when I get onto the show grounds is to go over to the Light Sport Aircraft exhibit area to spend a little time with the crew from Just Aircraft, the company that manufactures the experimental airplane that I built back in 2007. I was pleased to learn that they are doing very well, indeed, with more than a 6 month backorder timeframe for their kits to be delivered. Like with many "man toys", bigger seems to always be better and they have designed their airplanes to be sturdier, longer, and capable of handling more power. This above model of their SuperStol had a unique nose cowl design to accommodate a larger, more powerful engine. The tires were HUGE and I have been told that they could cost up to \$2,000, EACH!! This type of tire is well suited for backcountry off-airport landings on riverbeds, sandy beaches and unimproved mountain strips, making them easy/peasy. When I built my machine, a dozen years ago, you could get into this sport for about a \$60K total outlay. Today, with the ordering of many of the heavy duty options available, you are lucky if you are able to hold the cost to double that. However, their basic Highlander model is still very much in vogue and it allows for some inexpensive flying enjoyment if you are content to visit "normal" airports.

After my Just Aircraft visit, I wandered over to the War Birds ramp where I had a chance to walk up to and closely examine many of the aircraft there, on static display. Some of these would be seen later flying in the airshow.



I have mentioned the above North American P-51 "Mustang" in previous blog articles as my home airport in Indiantown, has a service shop that deals almost exclusively with this particular airplane. During WWII it was used mainly as fighter support for the B-17 bomber and they are truly magnificent flying machines. Originally built for about \$50K each, after the war they languished in aircraft bone-yards and could be picked up for much under \$1,000. Today a well restored and maintained machine will set one back \$2.5 million or more... way more!



Another North American aircraft that I have talked about in one of my earlier blog articles is the T-28 "Trojan" advanced Navy trainer which came into being in the '50's, well after WWII. While it was used as a light attack counter-insurgency aircraft in Vietnam, it has since found favor as an aerobatic Warbird performer at air shows such as Sun n' Fun. My wife's multi-billionaire boss, Les Quick Sr., owned two of them, along with his \$13 million dollar Bombardier Challenger personal jet. The particular airplane, seen above, would also perform in a fly-by of similar Warbird aircraft during the airshow portion of the day and I have it, along with the Douglas C-47 that led this aerial procession on a following page photo, taken during that performance.

Of course the main reason for visiting a Air Show is to see airplanes flying. On this page I have a bunch of aircraft that I photographed during the aerial portion of this event. Just below is the C-47 leading a trail of T-28's & T-6's. Kinda reminds me of a momma duck followed by her ducklings.



And below is a few of the military training jets, taking to the skies. In the forefront is the Lockheed T-33 Shooting Star, one of our first fighter jets. It's lack of a swept back wing design kept its speed sub-sonic. Adjacent are newer model training aircraft, the names of which I do not remember, during their low level flyby.



And, finally, here is the AeroShell Flying Demonstration team with their AT-6 "Texan" airplanes doing their aerobatic performance. These were all done in close formation flying which always leaves me feeling just a little bit "aprehensive". I always am fearful of that one little mistake which can completely ruin a pilots day.



Of course, the highlight of the day had to be the Navy's Blue Angels and their 6 man team flying the brand new Super Hornet F-18A's. Now you think that the previous formation flying was tight? How about this photo?



Their aerial demonstration was conducted for over a half hour, and was simply amazing. While I took dozens of photos, I am only presenting a few here... one more mind blowing than the other. How they did this below inverted formation, with neither pilot being able to see the other, I will never know.



And, below, they are in their "diamond" formation in a high speed fly-by. Always an amazing performance.



One might ask, so why do you, as a General Aviation pilot, even care about this type of flying, since you will never do anything similar. Well, not entirely true. A couple of years ago I did publish a blog article with a photo of me and 2 other Highlanders in a formation flight, although nowhere as close as these professional performers.



And, speaking of those professionals, just after the Blue Angels performed and before the flying portion of the show closed the shows announcer indicated that we were about to see a fly-by formation of the Air Force's Thunderbird Aerial Performance team go over while on their way to Coco Beach and the Patrick Air Force Base. I had already put my I-phone back in my pocket after closing the camera app and scurried to get it back into play. However there was less than 6 seconds between the announcement and the fly-over. So, in deference to that failure, I have a photo from the Air Force's archives that shows four in formation with their F-16A "Fighting Falcons". In actuality the group that flew over us at the Lakeland Airport looked to be about 8 and they did only a single pass at slow cruise speed. I have seen them perform at other air-shows but not for many years now. They are scheduled to fly a show in Sanford, Florida in mid-October and, depending on our motorhome travel plans, I may try to see them there. One can never get too much in the way of "formation flying", can one?

