

April 11, 2018 - Sun n' Fun Aviation Expo, Lakeland, FL

I only get to a handful of Air Shows each year but one that I always try to attend is the EAA/AOPA joint sponsored Sun n' Fun Expo held each April at Linder Regional Airport in Lakeland, FL. In the early days I would often be there for the entire 5 days of the event. That much time is needed to see all of the ground static displays, wander through the hundreds of exhibits and vendor booths and to enjoy both the day and night time air shows. These days one or two are ample enough and this year I only went over for the day. I had a specific shopping list of things that I needed to purchase and I also wanted to get over to the Just Aircraft booth so as to get an update on the latest going ons' with the company that developed the light sport airplane that I now fly. However my first stop was over to the Pilot Mall Store in order to purchase this year's event T-shirt. I still have ones from the past half dozen years and I always enjoy wearing same during my daily fly-in excursions to the various airport restaurants that I frequent. It says, to the other pilots that I encounter, "Yeah, that's right... I was there". This is probably the second, in size & attendance, national event in the aviation circuit each year; the first being EAA's Air Venture, held in Oshkosh, WI. Once that purchase, along with a couple cases of aviation oil and a spray can of Plexus plastic window cleaner was completed, it was time to get down to some serious exhibit visitation.



The first was over to the Just Aircraft booth where I had a nice visit with Troy Woodland and Gary Schmitt, co-founders of this amazing small airplane producing company. I also had a chance to see their latest offering for the aviation enthusiast, a newly designed Ultralight Aircraft. The **ultralight** was actually the precursor to the **light sport** airplane design, which came into existence in the early 2000's. Up to then ultralights, which were powered aircraft that weighed no more than 254 pounds, could carry only one person...the pilot. Over time, since regulation was so lax, people began to cheat and these very limited air vehicles soon were topping 500 pounds and had incorporated a "baggage area" which somehow were morphing into passenger

seats. In the early 2000's FAA rules were beginning to emerge which started to address these "fat ultralights" and by the middle part of the decade had developed into the Light Sport Aircraft, which would allow for two people to travel in airplanes with a gross weight of no more than 1,320 pounds (which included the passengers, fuel, and baggage, along with the empty weight of the aircraft). While ultralights began to take to the background, they were by no means gone. There is something about being at one with the sky and air around you. While this category of air vehicle is still very restrictive, seldom traveling more than 50 MPH and carrying a very light load for an extremely short distance, they are still out there in considerable numbers. For one, they are cheap to build/buy and to operate. They encompass everything from flying trikes, paramotor flying parachutes, and powered hang gliders as well as more conventional looking small airplanes. Just Aircraft apparently feels there may be a market for such an aircraft under their brand and have developed such a prototype which, although test flown, has yet to be fully implemented or, for that matter, even priced.

As I mentioned there are enough static displays and aircraft exhibits to keep one busy for days. But, because of time constraints, I limited my perusal to just a few, and before you knew it, it was time for the daytime air show to begin. These events are always very patriotic and will usually start off with the singing of our National Anthem accompanied by a Parachute team skydiving from about 5,000 feet while displaying our flag under one of the jumpers. This is ALWAYS a stirring start to the show and gets the audience in the mood for what will immediately follow. This year it was a flyover by a fleet of WWII trainer aircraft mostly T-6's. However, this was to be just the start of the War Bird portion of the daytime air show. This was followed by an aerial display of a myriad of flying military machines from the 1940's and '50's. While trying to write commentary for each and every one would take pages, I will try to present a short synopsis on each of the photographs following. Bear in mind that trying to capture clear images with my small cheap camera is challenging.



To the immediate left is just a portion of the North American T-6/AT-6 "Texan" flyover. This picture shows 9 of what had to be twice that number of trainers doing their aerial "smoke on" over-flight at about 3 thousand feet. I have also inserted a photo of a single T-6 shot taken with my telephoto lens. A similar type of aircraft was also later operated by the US Air Force and Navy as the North American T-28 trainer. Dozens of these trainers are still in the hands and flown by private pilots today.



Another popular duo of WW II airplanes that were actually flown in combat and which are still seen flying the air show circuit is the Corsair F-4U which mainly operated off of carriers in the Pacific theater (portrayed in the 1970's TV series featuring Greg "Pappy Boyington and his "Black Sheep Squadron") as well in the early days of the Korean War. They had an inverted "gull wing" design which allowed for a beefed up landing gear to handle the rough drop-in approaches to an aircraft carriers undulating deck as well as to allow for better ground clearance to accommodate the very large propeller used on the plane. It also would allow for the placement of more under-wing mounted bombs.



Just below the Corsair, seen in my fly-by photo, is the British Supermarine Spitfire used to great advantage by the Royal Air Force. These are still immensely popular by the WWII private pilot enthusiasts with more than 50 still in airworthy condition. Interestingly enough on my home field in Indiantown, FL there is a facility dedicated to performing maintenance and rebuilding only for this particular warbird. And he never seems to lack business that keeps both of his two hangers full with his customer's airplanes.



Another popular airplane, seen at Sun n' Fun, that still survives today is the C-47 "Skytrain" transport also known as the Douglas DC-3 "Gooney Bird" in its civilian counterpart. I don't know how many of these are still flying today but most of those are probably being used for missionary work in third world countries and skydiver shuttling up to jump altitude. At one time they were also being used for aerial spraying and executive transport for small corporations. I have come across several that have been converted to turbo-prop configuration giving them much greater speed and efficiency. I would, one day, love to grab a ride in one of these historic airplanes.



Another transport flown at Sun n' Fun was the twin-engine de Havilland DHC-4 Caribou, developed by Canada in the late 1950's. Also flown by both the US Army and Air Force, after the Korean Conflict, it had STOL (short take off and landing) capability that allowed it to take off and land in as short as 1,000 feet and, yet, could carry cargo exceeding 4 tons at a cruise speed of 180 MPH and with a useful range of over 1,200 miles.



Of course most of us did not come to see transports or trainer airplanes. We wanted to hear and experience the roar and speed of "the jet"...and we were not disappointed. On the left is the Canadian de Havilland **Vampire** first flown in 1943, well prior to Germany's development of jet war aircraft. It had a single jet engine that gave it a top speed of better than 550 MPH. Used by the UK's Royal Air Force the wings and forward cockpit were primarily constructed of balsa wood and plywood giving it great strength and light weight. It's all metal twin boom empennage and high tail kept it from being affected by the jet's exhaust and give it good maneuverability. It was thrilling to watch this aircraft run through its paces some 75 years after its birth.



And speaking of "old" jets, the show's next demo was given by Randy Ball flying in his '50's era Mig-17. This fighter jet was developed by the USSR to counteract instability problems with the earlier Mig-15's, especially during tight turns in high speed maneuvers. During the Vietnam conflict the Mig-17 fairly well dominated the skies and proved to be an effective threat against the more modern supersonic fighters of the United States. With a maximum speed of Mach .89 (680 MPH) and a service ceiling height of over 10 miles this MIG was a formidable foe for us. Randy's flying included high speed runs, steep climbs and tight banking turns. With the afterburner ignited, a 10 to 12 foot long plume of flame could be seen at the rear of the plane's single jet engine.



To counter the Mig line of Soviet fighters the US developed, in the early '70's a small, nimble and highly maneuverable jet of its own, the General Dynamics/ Lockheed Martin F-16 Fighting Falcon! With a 1,300 MPH supersonic speed and a single engine power source (much like the Mig-17) capable of developing 28,000 pounds of thrust with the after-burner lit, this could take it a similar 50,000 foot altitude. Of personal interest to me, this is the aircraft which is used to intercept innocent, but highly un-informed, private pilots who inadvertently breach the West Palm Beach Presidential TFR (restricted) airspace when Trump is in town.

While much of the air show was devoted to military aircraft, both past and present, there were other jets that were strictly of a private nature. Two of them are shown below. On the left is the Jet EZ which is a variant of



the "Long-EZ" line of experimental home built airplanes (one of which sits just behind). My airplane mechanic is currently building himself one such model, which has a cruise speed in excess of 230 MPH. However this jet version is even 100 MPH **faster!** On the right is the Sonic Jet, a one seat personal jet capable of 250 MPH. It performed a nighttime fireworks exhibition, launching pyrotechnics from its airframe, that was spectacular but which I was not capable of capturing with my very basic camera. However there were a few of the night air show performers that **were** slow enough for me to photograph. Just below is one of them--**the paramotor.**



This is a powered personal "parachute" which you literally strap onto your back. After firing up the small engine on which is mounted a propeller, you take a few steps, and you become airborne. It will begin to fly at about 25 MPH and you experience the same freedom that a bird must feel. You can turn, climb, descend and land, all at that same 25 MPH. I briefly experimented with one of these machines back in the early 2,000's but came to the conclusion that at 60+ I was just too old to try to run with a 50 pound load on my back. I gave it up to wait until the light sport aircraft came into being.

In conclusion this year's visit to Sun n' Fun was another enjoyable one with perfect weather conditions, a spectacular air show and a chance to spend time with other pilots in the camaraderie of General Aviation, doing what we most like to do when we are not flying ourselves... watching others do it more expertly and with greater finesse. I now look forward to the arrival of **Sun n' Fun, 2019!**

