Feb. 1, 2019 - It's a bird! It's a Plane!

It's PILATUS!!

Today's flight was to be a fairly routine one. First it was over to the Arcadia Muni Airport, some +85 miles to the West of my home field of Indiantown, for some very cheap avgas. Their self serve price was $3.35 per gallon or a buck and a half less than anyone else was selling it for. Usually when I fly to this nearby Florida airport, for a fill-up, it is with 6 empty 5 gallons gas jugs so that my total purchase of 50+ gallons, or so, will not only last me for a couple of weeks worth of flying, but the savings of $75 will go a long way in covering the cost of my breakfasts/lunches as well. After making this fuel purchase I back tracked to Sebring Regional, an airport that I just wrote about in my last blog on its LSA Expo event, for a quick lunch stop. It was somewhat along my return route anyway, and their outside seating was delightful in the mid-70 degree daytime temperatures.

It is only a 45 minute flight back to Indiantown and when I arrived I was surprised to see emergency vehicles parked on the ramp along with a enclosed box trailer with all sorts of electronic equipment

hanging out of its open lift gate. There were also a dozen or so personal, some in military garb, "attending to business". "Hmm", I wondered, "what is going on?" Then, as I exited the taxiway onto the ramp, I saw the reason for all of this activity. Parked, next to the pilot's lounge building, was a grey painted and unmarked single engine turbo-prop. And, behind it were a line-up of three additional emergency vehicles including a fire truck and another ambulance Now my curiosity was really peaked so after parking my airplane I wandered to one of the men who seemed to be orchestrating things and asked "Hey Bub, wasup?" "We're going to be doing some testing of the Pilatus for the next few weeks" was his response. He went on to say that this was part of US Air Force acceptance testing of the Pilatus

PC-12NG for reconnaissance and use as a military training aircraft. Now the Swiss Pilatus Aircraft Company has been around since before WWII, although the Pilatus PC-12 only goes back to the 1990's. It has become the best selling pressurized single-engine turbine powered airplane in the world, with almost 2,000 units delivered to date. Selling at around $5 million it can carry up to 1 ton of cargo or up to 9 passengers (6 in its Executive configuration). It's cruise speed is well over 300 MPH and it has a range of about 1,500 miles at up to 30,000 feet altitude. Needing only 1/2 mile of runway for its take-off the 6,000+ feet of grass runway at X-58 (my airport) would be more than ample for this particular airplane. It seems that this testing crew had just arrived from its

The Pilatus PC-12 corporate aircraft in its executive configuration flying somewhere over the Swiss Alps

previous test location of White Sands Proving Grounds in New Mexico where its performance operating on sand had been evaluated. This phase was to find out what it would be able to do on a grass runway. Test equipment, set up at various positions along the airfield would be taking measurements and recording landing touch-down to stop distances and times along with the total time and distance used in take-offs at various weights and weather conditions, including some on a flooded runway. (thus the explanation for the presence of a large tanker water truck accompanying the emergency vehicles). Most of the test crew were Department of Defense personnel along with civilian contractors and a flight crew of US Air Force pilots. There was to be a ground controller handling all radio communications so, for the duration my little airport would have a "control tower" of sorts, including a call-out of ground level winds on final (a nice touch). I was assured that our local airplanes would not be delayed by their operations and that they would only be flying during very specific weather conditions.

Here the Pilatus is on a short final to Runway 31 with an evident cross wind displayed on the sock.

Above we see the aircraft just before it's touch-down. I was amazed by the very slow landing speed, which I estimated to be at about 75 knots (85 MPH) and its ability to come to a complete stop in less than half the runway's length (under 3,000 feet). I was told that although there were only two crewmen aboard, there was significant weight to approximate a fully grossed out 10,000 pound airplane. Over subsequent days I would share my take-offs and arrivals with what turned out to be a very professional and courteous military crew and testing personnel. I don't know just how much money that this operation was going to added to the Indiantown economy but I suspect that it will be significant as each day there were 5 Martin County emergency vehicles and about 10 fire-men and EMS people in attendance and I am sure that the airport owner (it is strictly a private/public use airfield) will be well compensated for its use. As I have said before, it is ALWAYS an interesting and informative day when one fly's.

Below the PC-12 taxies back to the end of Runway 31 for another run in what is a full day of take-off and landings at X-58, the Indiantown Airport.