

July 16, 2017 - Sebring Regional Airport, FL., and a gathering of Highlanders

One of the benefits that accrued from my "precautionary" landing of about a year ago (July 30, 2016-- "Just Another Day at the Office") was that I had a chance to meet up with a bunch of fellow pilots, from that small private airport community which I unexpectedly "visited", who get together for weekend breakfast flights. Almost all of them are current or recently retired airline pilots and most of them fly the Van's RV Experimental airplane... many having built the aircraft themselves. They are an interesting group of aviators and I am always fascinated by their tails of the unusual experiences that have occurred while plying their trade. Today one told me of the time that he lost an entire wheel assembly off of a Convair 440 that he was taking from Ypsilanti, Michigan to Boston, MA. They were never even aware of the separation of one of their main gear wheels until after they pulled up to the gate at Boston. Interestingly this same airline captain had also lost an entire jet engine, immediately after taking off from Boston, later in his career. Now in aviation parlance "losing an engine" usually means that it malfunctioned or quit working, requiring a shutdown with a possible return to the airport or another suitable facility along the route. However in this case it meant that the engine, complete with its housing, mounting and all ancillary lines, tubes & hoses separated itself from the wing and fell straight down into Boston Harbor. Of course this required an **immediate** return to Logan along with some very intense subsequent examination. Anyway, the point is that I am always entertained at these breakfast meets. Today one was scheduled for nearby Sebring Regional, an airport only 66 miles from my Indiantown, FL base strip. The only downside to these Sunday morning gatherings is that these guys like to get together real early, usually requiring me to climb out of bed at 5:30 or 6:00 AM. They do this for several reasons. 1. Flying this time of year (summer) is best be completed prior to noon when the thunderstorms take over the Florida peninsula. 2. Flying is so much more enjoyable early in the day when the air is still and the winds light. 3. Most of these guys are married and there are "honey-do lists" to be completed... even on Sundays.

This morning I was in the air shortly after 7:00 for the 45 minute flight over to Sebring. The air was extremely smooth and the scenery was extraordinary. Sebring is located in the lower middle portion of the state and the airport is a joint-use facility with an international automobile raceway literally abutting what was originally a WWII B-17 training base. Almost every weekend, throughout the year, there is a race being run with its early spring 12 hour endurance event being the highlight of the season. This weekend, other than the usual breakfast assortment of fly-ins, I expected clear sailing along my route, which took me just to the north of **The Big "O"**, Lake Okeechobee. (see photo to the right). The city of Okeechobee is a famous "snow-bird" resort area with literally 10 thousand motor home and RV trailer hook-up sites located within the county. And no wonder, the lake, its many ponds, golf courses, fishing camps



and other recreational facilities makes for an ideal place to be during the cold, harsh winters of the northern states. The two photos immediately above follows my course along one of the many canal waterways that traverse the state and eventually feed into the Big Lake or to either the Gulf of Mexico or the Atlantic Ocean. Of course so many linear miles of canal will require locks to handle the rise and fall of the elevations and in the photo at the lower right is one of the typical water control dams and just beyond a lock which appears to have both its gates in the closed position. This would generally indicate that a small boat is inside that lock getting ready to be either lowered or raised, depending on its direction. There is so much to see when traveling low and slow in a private aircraft. The landscape is ever changing and the views, in the crispness of early morning flight, are simply breathtaking. My flight this morning was conducted at 1,200 feet, in order to maximize that experience.

Before you knew it I was at Lake Istokpoga, which abuts the Sebring Airport. This is just another one of the many large lakes that make Florida the water wonderland of vacation living year round. This lake covers 44 square miles. By comparison Lake Okeechobee covers 730 square miles and is the largest in Florida. Actually today's group of flyers will usually meet at the Okeechobee County Airport for their fly-in breakfasts and that is a field which I travel to often, as it is only 35 miles from my home base. However its Landing Strip Restaurant is currently undergoing some major renovations, and will be closed for the next two months. The only shame is that its outside patio, which is delightful during the cooler months, is now being enclosed and that will make it a bit more complicated when I bring Becky, my Silky Terrier, with me when I go there. However as a registered and certified Service Animal, she is legally entitled to go wherever I go.

Since it was a very still morning at 8 AM, when I arrived, I elected to do a "straight-in" to runway 32 for my landing. Planes were operating on both runway 1 and 32 at the same time and, while these two do intersect, the aircraft that were landing on the shorter 32 were all, like mine, small and capable of stopping well before that intersection. In fact two of the airplanes landing immediately in front of me identified themselves as Highlanders. Now, with far less than 500 of this brand of airplane out there today that is akin to arriving at a local diner and finding 3 Ford Edsels in their parking lot.

When I pulled up into the ramp area I found that the two Highlanders had parked together but I could not join them as my RV buddies had two of their planes next to them. So my top photo shows only the red rear tail of my mount... way off in the distance. The middle picture is of me in front of one of those Highlanders. One of the planes was from Tyler, TX. while the other was from, of all places, Okeechobee! When I got into the restaurant I walked over to the table at which the Highlander pilots were seated and spoke briefly with them. It's always enjoyable talking with other pilots, but especially so when they fly the same machine as I do. When I built this experimental airplane back in 2007 I originally also configured it as

a tail-wheeled craft but after 215 hours of flying it with that conventional gear, I decided to opt for the easier to manage nose gear and moved the main's back and put on the front trike conversion. This gave me an easier plane to land, but at the cost of the distinction and stoutness of the tail-dragger. By comparison, my plane looks wimpy but it is much easier to get in and out of and when I drop stuff (cell phones, wallet, keys, etc.) they do not automatically travel to the rear of the fuselage and into the tail section, which then requires removal of an exterior panel to retrieve. Anyway the two planes fly very similarly except for the landings. And while the Highlander is promoted as a 100 MPH aircraft, mine travels more in the 85-90 MPH range. While I could get it up to One Hundred, it would require a burn rate of better than 7 gallons of gas per hour and I am sufficiently happy with the 5 GPH that I currently get. By comparison the Vans RV, which most of my commercial pilot buddies travel with, will get twice that... or 200 MPH!! Why that is even faster than the Twin Comanche that I used to own. But I guess that if you are coming from piloting a Boeing 767, a MD-80 or Airbus A320, as did most of these guys, and are used to traveling at 500+ MPH, then the Vans RV is no big deal. As for me, the only time that I get to see those speeds is when I let their still working cohorts take me there on Delta, American, United or Spirit.

