

July 25, 2016 - Night Flight... (around South Florida)

One of the things that I enjoyed, back when I was flying "real" airplanes, was making a business trip during the evening hours. Those night flights would fill me with both dread and delight... and not always in equal measures. There was always a bit of foreboding as I would roll down the runway, guided only by its perimeter lighting, only to lift off into an abyss of total darkness for several seconds, until above the tree line and its welcoming twinkle of lights from the homes, roadways and shopping centers of the surrounding community. Then climbing up to my selected altitude, which at night and for safety concerns would often be in excess of 10,000 feet, I would have only the subtle glow from the instrument panel and the outside pulsating of my wingtip strobes to light the way. At that altitude I could see the brightness from large cities, some 50 miles distant, outlined against the almost complete blackness of the countryside below. Upon reaching my destination airport the alternating white and green of its rotating beacon would welcome me to its proximity and the bright runway lighting would give me the guidance to enter correctly into its traffic pattern. These same runway lights would also be my indicator as when to flare for landing. Once on final I would concentrate on what lay in front of me, as my peripheral vision would be awaiting for the moment when those runway lights, which were whisking past at 60+ MPH, would make a noticeable sweep away and upward, indicating the point when touchdown was imminent and which was my clue to begin to bring the plane's nose up in preparation for that satisfying sound of the squeak of wheels on the pavement. All that would be left, then, was to follow the blue taxiway lighting that would take me over to the terminal or operations office where I would shut down and tie up the aircraft for the evening. The end of another satisfying and often enjoyable journey of several hundred miles in the solitude and oneness of a pilot and his airplane. Today, due to the limitations of my Light Sport Pilots rating, made necessary because of health issues which prevent me from being able to maintain a medical certificate, I am precluded from night flight. However, I am still allowed to extend late afternoon flying until 30 minutes beyond "official" sunset...and I occasionally do so.

Today was one such occurrence as I made an hour and a half sojourn around southern Florida with a trip up to the St. Lucie Nuclear Power Station, then back down along the inter-coastal waterway, towards the West Palm Beach Skyline, and then over to Peanut Island, before turning back toward the West for my return to the Indiantown Airport. Peanut Island was the 1960's location of the South Florida underground bunker, which was built for then President Jack Kennedy while he was visiting his Palm Beach winter home, in case of the dreaded nuclear bomb attack by the Soviet Union. Today the shelter is operated by the Palm Beach Maritime Museum and is open for tours to visitors as an example of Cold-War era

concerns for the President's safety. I arrived back at my Indiantown Airport base exactly 22 minutes after sunset and while still "legal" my ground reference was greatly reduced by dusk and the absence of any runway lighting at this grass airstrip. While my airplane does not have any landing lights, the strobe pulses from my wingtips provided an adequate indication for the arrival of touchdown and the landing was not at all bad. While not quite like the multi-hour night flights of yester-year, this short evening excursion at dusk was a refreshing reminder of the solitude that being alone and at one with your craft that flying at dusk offers the private pilot.

On the following pages are some of the photos that I captured today. Remember they are all taken under conditions of very low lighting and are therefore somewhat dark. It was a "night flight", after all!

After today's 7 PM departure from my home field I traveled alongside a portion of the inhospitable swamp land that makes up much of South Florida.





The North Palm Beach General Aviation airport is located close to my grass strip and it does have lighted & paved runways.



The Jupiter Inlet is one of several ingress points between the Atlantic Ocean and the Inter-coastal waterway. Note the red lighthouse on the left.



Singer Island is an upscale community of high end homes and oceanfront condos that are part of the Palm Beach culture



The Inter-coastal waterway runs for almost the entire length of the Florida peninsula. This view is toward the south and West Palm Beach.



Man made Peanut Island is located inside of the harbor of West Palm Beach and is home to JFK's underground nuclear bomb bunker



I am still 8 minutes away from touchdown as the last glimpses of twilight linger on the horizon and glint off of my engine's cowl