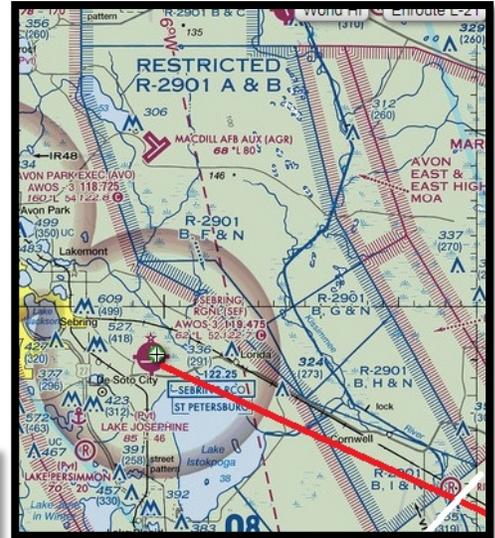


June 11, 2018 - It's a War out there!

Whenever I make the 70 mile flight over to the Sebring Regional Airport, for a breakfast or lunch, my direct route will take me over the very southern edge of the MacDill Auxiliary Air Force's restricted area. This is a fairly large closed off geographical area which is used for practice bombing and high speed military aircraft operations. While much of this coverage extends from the ground, up to and including 18,000 feet, the section that I travel through excludes the space below 1,500 feet. I will generally come through at the 1,200-1,400 foot level, as it is only another 10 miles until I approach the SEF airport boundary where I need to be at pattern altitude of 1,000 feet when I arrive. Most of the time this area is not "hot" anyway and if I take the time to contact ATC (Air Traffic Control) I can find out if there is even a need to be concerned about military aircraft working the area. Today, after I landed, I would not only find out that this restricted area would indeed be hot for the remainder of the week, but the why's and how's and intricacies planned for these exercises as well.



I pulled up and parked next to several military type jet fighter aircraft as well as a small black helicopter. As I began taking some cell phone photos I heard a voice behind me say, "No pictures are allowed, Sir". "That so!", I replied, not looking up or missing a beat with my picture taking, "And why would that be?" I turned around to see a rather big gentlemen grinning over at me. "Just kidding", he said, "you can take all the pictures you like". He then asked me about my own Highlander, mentioning that it resembled the Avid

Flyer experimental airplane, a model that he once owned. I told him that the designer of my Highlander used to work for Avid and that I am sure that some of the concept was "borrowed" from that brand.

He introduced himself as Jim Hosey and said that he was with **Blue Air Training**, the Las Vegas based company which owned and operated these aircraft. They are a government contractor which provides logistical aviation support and training to the military throughout the world. Their mission, here, is to conduct a week long training exercise for **Forward Air Controllers** over at the MacDill restricted area that I just came through. The company's employees, all of whom are former fighter pilots, will be taking their British built Strike-Master jets, along with a Romanian IAR-823 Brasov aerobatic trainer and a Vietnam era AH6 "Little Bird" attack helicopter into skies over that restricted area in order to perform "close air support" for a series of missions and scenarios. They will simulate actual combat situations that



require control and direction from ground based personal, most of whom are undergoing their final phases of training before being deployed to Afghanistan and other countries in the Middle East. These "student" FAC's will provide the command and control radio communications calling in these attack aircraft to drop "bombs" and machine gun fire on simulated ground emplacements and targets, while successfully avoiding the accidental strafing of "friendly forces" or civilian structures. They will also simulate air evacuation of "wounded" while in active combat operations. Since the operational cost of a modern fighter jet exceeds \$50,000 PER HOUR, it is far more cost efficient and expedient that the military use the services of an outside contractor that has the equipment and expertise to provide a virtual equivalent of modern day A-10's, F16's and F18's, all at a fraction of the actual cost. You could say that this is war training "on a budget".



The BAC-167 StrikeMaster jet was originally designed and developed in the late 1950's and priced for use as a trainer and light attack aircraft by the RAF and then marketed for export to various Middle East countries.

None the less, it's an impressive aircraft with a 40 thousand foot service ceiling and a 450 knot (500+ MPH) airspeed. It has 4 hard point mountings for bombs, rockets, missiles and such, as well as two 7.62 mm machine guns, all of which are used during the training exercises (although the bombs only emit smoke). While I was there the ground crew was also mounting FLIR (forward looking infrared) cameras to help assist in night operations. This was especially interesting to me as industrial infrared maintenance "hot spot" plant inspections was what I did for much of my adult working life. I also had a chance to photograph inside the cockpit of one of the jets and found it to have an obvious 1960's look about it, even though these machines found their way well into the 1990's.



It never ceases to amaze me as to what an interesting, diverse and all encompassing field that aviation, which I get to see and experience on an almost daily basis, really is. What starts out to be a routine morning flight for an order of blueberry pancakes with a side of bacon, turns out to be a learning experience with the opportunity see a whole different part of aviation that I previously never even heard of. And this is not just a onetime off chance occurrence. Almost every flight has me come across someone who is willing to share his or her experience with an aircraft, new ancillary hardware or an aviation industry function that is heretofore foreign to me. It is what makes this such an enjoyable avocation and well worth getting up early each nice morning in order to take a flight into a brand new experience. And the pancakes, waffles, omelets and hash browns are not all that bad either.

