

March 20, 2015 - " Ford Tough" - Flying the Ford Tri-Motor, Fort Myers, FL

Stepping back in history is always an interesting experience. With flying this is usually accomplished by visiting a museum featuring aircraft from a bygone era. I have seen many in my day, and have even written about several in this blog. However more enjoyable is getting to fly in one of those old classics. I had just such an opportunity recently when I discovered that the EAA was conducting an around the US tour of a Ford Tri-motor "airliner". In conjunction with the Florida EAA Chapter 66 it was going to have this airplane available for flight bookings at Fort Myers over 3 days in mid-March. I told my downstairs neighbor, who years ago flew a Cessna 182 Skylane, about this opportunity to experience commercial flying as it was in the 1930's, and he was immediately "on board". We planned a trip over to Page Field, via my airplane, on Friday, March 20th, in order to catch one of the early flights in the Ford before grabbing lunch at nearby Mel's Diner. I have learned that when one is dealing with antique airplanes one cannot assume that things will go smoothly all day long. Mechanical problems do occur and it is better not to be on the days first flight, or to count on there even being late flights. We were aiming for mid morning booking number 3.

It is about an hour and a quarter trip across the state with my Highlander and we were airborne by 8:30 in beautiful clear and crisp late winter Florida weather. A listen to the AWAS (automated weather advisory system) advised that winds were favoring runway 23 and we were cleared for a straight in landing while we were still 5 miles out, and asked to follow the Ford Tri-motor which was on short base to final. So we were, at least, assured that the airplane was up and completing its first flight of the day. After taxiing over to Base Operations, the big FBO at Page Field, we got on line to purchase our tickets (\$75 per adult) for trip #4, which would take place in about an hour or so. We watched them load the 2nd flight of the day and then went inside of the terminal building to get a cup of their complimentary coffee, as well as to make a "reverse coffee break". Back outside we joined up on the queue for our departure, all the while taking photos and video as flight #3 departed. We were given hand outs containing the history of our particular airplane, a 1928 5-AT-B, serial number #8. It was first operated by Transcontinental Air Transport (TAT) and named *City of Wichita*. In April of 1931 ownership was then transferred to the Transcontinental and Western Air (TWA) which helped develop TWA's route system. Over the next few decades it operated in Honduras by TACA Airlines and then went into private ownership in Mexico. In the mid '50's it returned to the US for extensive

Ron & me in the Highlander



repair, restoration and rejuvenation and, in 1964, became part of the Harrah's Hotel & Casino's static display of airplanes and automobiles. Now it is in a partnership between Liberty Aviation Museum in Port Clinton, Ohio and the EAA in a lease agreement working to showcase this historic aircraft in tours all around the US.





There are 18 available passenger seats in this beautiful main cabin, and all were full for our flight. Known as the "Tin Goose", due to its corrugated metal surface, our ship was powered by three Pratt & Whitney Wasp, 9 cylinder radial engines, each producing 420 horsepower. While this airplane has a top speed of 150 MPH, its normal cruise is 90, or just about the same as my little home built.

Our flight lasted about 20 minutes, and once we were airborne we headed to the west and out over the bay. We only got to about 1200 feet and this altitude gave us marvelous views of the wide waterway



between the downtown and the beaches. It was exceptionally quiet inside the main cabin and the views out the large house type windows was extraordinary, even with the engine and landing gear in my field of view (I occupied the first seat, just behind the co-pilot.) The cockpit

appeared to be roomy although the instrument panel rudimentary. The flight controls looked more like those in a car with a steering wheel rather than a airplane yoke. All too soon the flight was over and we were back on the tarmac. Nothing left to do but to walk over to Mel's Diner for lunch and then it was back to my airplane for return hour and a quarter flight to my home field.

