

A Pilot's Perspective

The View From an Airport Window

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June 30, 2019

In the not-too-distant past, there was a small airstrip carved out of the oaks and digger pines about three miles east of Redding, and just north of Redding Municipal airport. It's official name was Enterprise Skypark, and it was home for the zaniest, most fun-loving bunch of pilots, wannabe-pilots, airport bums and odd characters I've ever run into in one place. This motley crew was known collectively as the Enterprise Flying Club. I didn't own a plane then, but I had a pilot's license and had just transferred from Susanville to a new CDF assignment in Redding. After work one day I drove out there, liked what I saw, and joined the club. From '69 through '72, when a promotion led me away to Santa Rosa, the Skypark was a favorite hangout.

The runway was a bit narrow and not overly long, the taxiway was unpaved and there were trees bordering on all sides, plus powerlines and Highway 299E on the south end. Well, OK – you just needed to pay attention to business, carefully manage airspeed and not hesitate to go-around if you mucked-up a landing approach. Probably the hairiest landing ever made at the Skypark occurred when the pilot of then-Governor Reagan's official airplane, a large turboprop, which had been cleared by the tower to land at Redding Muni, mistook our dinky airstrip for Muni and barely roared to a stop in a cloud of dust at the extreme north end. Needless to say, the governor and his entourage de-planed and traveled by car over to Muni. The frazzled pilot took off by himself later, using every possible foot of runway on his takeoff roll.

One of the unique features at Enterprise was a good-sized club building which boasted not only pool tables, meeting-room and a small dance floor, but a rather-well stocked beer-bar and pilot-lounge. This, plus the fact that a good percentage of members liked their beer, pretzels and a good time, plus the inclination of the club's manager, Bob Lockwood, to hire friendly barmaids, made for a lively atmosphere. The bar business also helped pay the club's operating expenses. Although some of Redding's stuffier aviators looked down their noses at the Enterprise bunch and suspected all sorts of safety violations, that was not the case. I never saw one flying-member consume even one beer before climbing in an airplane. Sure, most of us, after a flight and after securing the aircraft, would walk into the clubhouse and have a brew or two. However, FAA's "8 hours from bottle to throttle" regulation was chiseled in stone and, to my knowledge, was never violated.

During my membership years, the club owned or leased an amazing bunch of airplanes: two Alon A2's (low-wing, 2-place, with sliding canopy), a Cessna 150, a Cessna 172, a Piper Cherokee 180, and, of all things, a 300-horsepower Bellanca Super Viking. I checked out in all of them, but generally scheduled the Cherokee 180 for most of my cross-country flights. Maintenance on these ships was handled by a pair of "Al's"—Alan Ewald, whose day-job was teaching aircraft repair and maintenance at Shasta College, and Al Knapik, an independent A&P (airframe and powerplant mechanic). Great guys and good "wrenches", as the saying goes. Al Knapik owned a 1947 Stinson Voyager 108-1 and I owned a Triumph GT6+ sportscar, and after a reasonable amount of haggling, I ended up with the Stinson and Al owned the Triumph.

Several part-time flight instructors handled checkouts, all phases of student pilot training, biannual flight reviews, endorsements for complex aircraft, tailwheel, night operations and so forth. Vic Clarke was one of them. He eventually ended up at Muni, flying cargo for Redding Aero; then moved up to Chief Pilot, Vice President and is now CEO of Redding Aero Enterprises, Inc.

Another instructor was G. G. Sluder, former Marine pilot, a genial, bald-headed, red-mustachioed bear of a man who looked intimidating but was loved and respected by all who knew him. He could build or repair anything, had an endless supply of funny stories and would offer to help anyone with a problem. Sadly, about the time I was moving to Santa Rosa, "G.G. the Great", as he was known around the club, was killed in a night-training accident not far from the Skypark.

Weather permitting, you could count on something special happening almost every weekend. The club organized one or two luaus each year, complete with roast pig, Hawaiian costume dress and music—the whole nine yards. Other group activities included breakfast fly-outs to various airports, flour-bombing and spot-landing contests, poker-runs, and pool tournaments.

Lots of good memories about a great bunch of folks. I remember Bud Pedigo, a highly skilled pilot who owned several airplanes including a pristine Cessna 195 with a big radial engine. Bud kept his planes hangered elsewhere, but would frequently fly his navy blue Starduster II, an aerobatic biplane, over to Skypark and hang-out with whoever was around. Upon leaving, Bud's standard takeoff in the Starduster was a steep climb followed by an Immelman turn (a half-roll back to level-flight heading 180 degrees opposite the direction of takeoff). And who could forget Lorna and her Luscombe, a pretty blonde and a pretty silver airplane that she flew beautifully ...

For many of us who fly, membership in a flying club is a sensible alternative to owning or renting airplanes. Until I could afford airplane ownership, it worked very well for me. Lately, I've heard a little talk about the possibility of a new flying

club starting up here. All it takes is one airplane and a bunch of people who want the opportunity to fly. I hope it happens.

(Dedicated to my friend and fellow-pilot Carl Faith, gone west 15 June 2019.)

In the interagency command center overlooking runway 34/16 at Redding municipal airport, everyone was on edge -- partly due to an outbreak of major wildfires, and partly due to the scene framed by panoramic tinted windows: a DC-4 airtanker, inbound from the east, a red cloud of retardant suddenly blooming below the airplane's belly as the pilots jettisoned a partial-load. The number four engine's prop was feathered. The bad engine was coughing out gray smoke as the tanker turned downwind at mid-field. Far off to the east, pyrocumulus clouds towered in the August sky north of Mt. Lassen. At first glance they looked like thunderheads. They weren't. They were convection columns from new fires which already exceeded 1000 acres each and were on their way to becoming monsters.

"Tanker 54, Redding tower, cleared to land runway 16. You're still trailing smoke."

"Roger. Is fire equipment standing by?"

"Yes sir -- it's in position."

"Okey-dokey, here we come -- turning final."

We watched as 54 lumbered in across the runway threshold. The pilot-in-command eased his ship down, cut power on his good engines, and the massive Douglas settled on its main gear, rolling a long way before the nose wheel touched down on baking asphalt. No sweat. Airport firefighters quickly extinguished the small engine fire.

One snapshot from a memory-book crammed with images ranging from funny to inspiring, from pastoral to tragic -- scenes from an airport window in the 80s and 90s ...

My job was Emergency Command Center Chief, Sierra Cascade Region, CDF (now CAL FIRE). My crew and I, together with our Forest Service counterparts, provided coordination, communication and logistical support to our respective agencies as they dealt with wildfires and other emergencies. Our building also housed the Redding smokejumpers, a fire weather office and the USFS North Zone fire cache. It was a unique assignment, sometimes a stressful one. One thing that helped me unwind was briefly checking out things "beyond the glass". As a pilot myself, it was not lost on me that our own ramp area and that of the adjoining Redding air attack base provided one of the best shows in town, what

with the activity of assorted airtankers, air attack planes, lead planes, firefighting helicopters, smokejumper aircraft and call-when-needed “civilian” charters.

During “big busts,” we were smack in the middle of a wildfire war-zone. Our own staffs were heavily reinforced. Around the clock, fire overhead, hand crews and supplies from throughout the state and nation continually arrived and departed.

Clad in hard-hats, lug-soled boots and Nomex fire-gear, young men and women carried bulky fire-bags containing personal protective equipment, spare clothing and other essentials. From one fire to the next, as long as the season lasted—that was what they did, and what they loved doing.

When fire activity was slow, the airport was still a fascinating place.

I recall the cold knot in my gut as I watched an Air National Guard F-4 land short and blow a tire one morning. The fighter, out of control, slewed wildly down runway 16, then veered off into weeds and dirt, kicking up a huge roostertail of dust. A sudden flip-over and fireball seemed inevitable. Luckily, the Phantom remained upright and eventually plowed to a stop. The pilot was Dean Martin, Jr., later killed in a weather-related accident in southern California.

I witnessed one fatal crash – a pilot in an airshow formation of T-34s misjudged his recovery from a low-level diving turn and slammed into the runway. The sheared-off engine and propeller bounced toward the packed rows of spectators. Fortunately, they didn’t get that far, but a few people were hurt by flying debris.

Comedy relief was provided by the bounces, hair-raising flares and nervous overcontrolling of student pilots as their instructors sought to teach them the techniques of landing an airplane. I smiled but didn’t laugh, knowing my own ability to botch a landing was alive and well.

The downstairs smokejumper unit, a.k.a. “the animal farm”, was home to a free-spirited bunch of brawny, gung-ho dudes (and a few extremely fit females) who enthusiastically performed morning calisthenics on the ramp below. When they felt left out of the action, the jumpers would toss up little bandanna and rock parachutes in front of our windows. This meant: “Hey, dummies – don’t forget the jumpers!”

The airfield’s open spaces were populated by all sorts of critters – hawks and coyotes hunted rodents; once in a while a roadrunner would go streaking by; after dark, jackrabbits by the dozen would infiltrate the lawns and landscaped areas around the Operations building and romp around at the edge of the night-lighted ramp.

Twelve to sixteen-hour workdays were often necessary during fire season. Many times I watched both sunrise and moonrise from our overlook, thankful for a quiet minute or two to gather my thoughts and do a little contingency planning.

Through those windows I saw Air Force Two touch down, and Clint Eastwood's Gulfstream taxi by; I watched the Blue Angels and the Thunderbirds perform; I saw low passes by P-51 Mustangs, Corsairs, Harrier jump-jets, A-10 Warthogs, U2s and many other military types; I watched helicopters practicing autorotations and smokejumpers boarding their Twin Otters and Sherpas; I marveled at the skill of the airtanker pilots, whose camaraderie and rugged individualism are of a bygone era and who, in my judgment, earn the riskiest dollar in aviation.

From an airport window you can see a helluva lot, and I only saw a fraction of all there was to see. I actually did work once in a while.

But not when the Blue Angels were executing their line-abreast loop ...

Correction to the previous column: Tulelake airport, although owned by the City of Tulelake, actually sits on the Modoc side of the Siskiyou/Modoc county line. Tulelake leases the airport to Modoc county, who manages it.