

# Oshkosh 2023

My son has always considered 22 to be his lucky number since he was born on the 22<sup>nd</sup> day of a summer month. Years ago I followed his example and became enamored with 23, my birth date. I found there was an enigma surrounding that prime number. In fact several books and a movie starring Jim Carey have explored the mysteries surrounding 23. I tend to dismiss the “Lucky 7” and “Unlucky 13” as baseless superstition but for some reason I keep bumping into strange circumstances and coincidences involving 23. It's probably a bad case of confirmation bias but there is no doubt that 2023 was a banner year for me.

For four years I had been collecting, fabricating and assembling parts and pieces with the goal of creating a unique flying machine to satisfy my desire to build and my compulsion to fly. I painted her red and named her Rooby. On the last flyable day of 2022 she earned her Airworthiness Certificate and took her first flight. Through the long winter I plotted and planned and dreamed of flying her to the home of unique aircraft, Oshkosh. Mike Busch, my Designated Airworthiness Representative drew a restricted area on the map around our home field for Rooby to prove herself. We had to log 40 hours of test flights in that area before she would satisfy the Federal requirements and be released to travel as a fully tested and inspected citizen of the sky. As soon as the long, cold winter began to ease its grip on our part of the planet we began the process. It was the best job I've ever had. We flew at every opportunity and carefully explored the edges of the performance envelope. I found Rooby to be a willing and capable partner with ample tolerance for my rather flat learning curve. My obsession for light weight in construction paid off with remarkably short take offs and landings and a very slow stalling zone. Unfortunately her slow maneuvering speed translated directly to cruise speed and we were passed by all but the slowest cars when we flew over the freeway. My happiest surprise was her stability. When she was properly trimmed I could put my hands in my lap and just watch her fly. This was completely opposite to my other girl, Miss Chaos. Aerobatic airplanes are designed to be unstable because stability is the enemy of maneuverability and Miss Chaos is aerobatic to the core. As Rooby's test hours built so did our relationship and we became quite comfortable with each other. When the magic 40 clicked on the hour meter in June we had a solid history in all winds and weather and I knew I would be proud to escort my lovely debutante to the cotillion which was Oshkosh. This is how it happened:

## Tuesday, June 6, 2023

Since I wouldn't be enjoying the comfort of my conversion van, the Oshkosh Marriott (Merry Yacht) this year I enlisted my friend Jim to carry some of the bulkier gear I would need. The Yacht with her big canopy tarp is usually our campsites' main shade so I bought a 10'x10' pop-up picnic shade at Wal-Mart. Rooby's spacious baggage compartment held my tent, air mattress, sleeping bag and a clothes duffle as a test should I wish to go airplane camping in the future but she would not hold the pop-up. I drove to Jim's farm with it and a big bag of clothes, even I can't wear the same pair of shorts for ten days.

The familiar farmstead welcomed me as it had on a regular basis for fifty years or more. The sun was warm on my back as Jim greeted me in the yard and we exchanged wise cracks. After a delicious dinner we adjourned to the Loom Room. Jim's mom, Betty was an ambitious weaver and accumulated so many large looms that his father, R.O. had to build her a house to hold them all. Now empty of weaving paraphernalia it's a spacious, well appointed music room where Jim spends most of his evenings. We picked a couple of acoustic guitars out of his ample collection and worked on

'California Dreamin' , the Mamas and Papas hit, for more than an hour. I have been playing the guitar for almost 60 years and Jim is the one who taught me the chords so we are very comfortable trading licks and tips. I even harmonized on the chorus. I know we played some other songs too but that's the only one I remember, it was late.

## **Wednesday, June 7, 2023**

Another lovely June day dawned and about three hours later, I woke up. Jim had coffee on and we walked out to his big farm shop to feed the cats and plan our day. Across the road from the shop Jim has a large vegetable garden so he gave me the tour. Some of his beans were ready to pick. We decided to drive out to the Glencoe airport to work on his airplane, Aunt Laura. When I had finished building Miss Chaos in 2002 I started urging Jim to build and Aunt Laura, a cute red and white Rans S-6es was the result. We put her together together, if you get my word play, in my shop in 2008. Jim accomplished her first flight in early 2009 at Two Harbors and I had the delightful duty of flying her test hours since Jim lives so far away. When she was ready to travel Jim came up and flew her back to his hangar at Glencoe. Now she was in need of an annual inspection and since Jim holds the Repairman Certificate we could make it legal ourselves. While installing new spark plugs Jim noticed the starboard carburetor seemed to be sagging and a closer look confirmed a tear in the rubber carb socket. Through the magic of cell phone technology a new part was ordered immediately and we closed up the hangar. Back at the farm there was grass to mow and weeds to pull so we stayed busy until dinner and wound up the evening in the Loom. I was sleeping in the Merry Yacht so it seemed like I was already at Oshkosh.

## **Thursday, June 8, 2023**

We spent the day doing farm chores which appear to be endless. After dinner we adjourned to the Loom again for the Thursday Jimmy Jam (my term). A core of local musicians and whoever is in the neighborhood comes to the farm Thursdays for electric rock-n-roll fun. I strapped on a red Gibson SG and joined the happy racket.

## **Friday, June 9, 2023**

I was on the riding mower about 9:00 or 10:00 when the brown UPS truck came up the drive and I knew it was quitting time. Sure enough, the new carb socket was in the box so we loaded up the tools and headed for the airport. Installing the part took longer than expected, (when does it not?) but by late afternoon we had Aunt Laura out in the sun for a trial run. This Rotax 912 had not run in quite a while so she cranked a bit before bursting to life. I was standing under the wing but there was so much noise and wind I couldn't get Jim's attention. When he finally glanced my way I shouted through cupped hands, "CHOKE!". As soon as he pushed in the choke knob the motor dropped to a smooth, low idle and we both grinned. It was sunny and warm but the crosswind was gusty so we agreed a test flight was inadvisable. We did however taxi all around the airport and confirm control continuity and brake effectiveness. Aunt Laura was back in business.

I was missing my own bed so after Jim fed me again I left the farm for points north. I had one important stop to make in Excelsior, a small town on Lake Minnetonka that Jim and I both consider our home town. A Minneapolis cover band called the "Rattlers" was playing in a craft brewery and fronting the outfit on this night was a powerful lead singer named Gina Frances. Gina is my daughter.

I have watched her perform countless times over the years and she never fails to impress. It was so nice to get a hug and chat a bit between sets, we don't see each other nearly enough. With all my errands checked off the list I set the Yacht on course for home and stood watch under the stars.

## **Tuesday, June 13, 2023**

As a hedge against some unforeseen circumstance that would prevent me from flying Rooby to the show I assembled the tarp structure for the Yacht. As dear as my desire was to accomplish that flight I would not let anything prevent me from attending Airventure 2023. I was thinking about it all the time so preparing the van seemed like a good use of my time. I had to straighten some of the steel conduit that forms the tarp support because a very nasty thunderstorm at Oshkosh '22 twisted it up pretty badly. I wondered how my little tent would withstand that kind of beating, there is always at least one good blow at our camp each year.

## **Tuesday, June 20, 2023**

I had been flying Rooby at every chance all summer and this fine day her Hobbes hour meter clicked over 40 hours. We had filled all the test cards and our practice now focused on the unique traffic pattern and short landing necessary at Beagle Field. EAA now calls the Ultralight strip the Fun Fly Zone but I always refer to it as Beagle Field in honor of the late Frank Beagle whose smooth baritone voice filled the PA speakers there for nearly four decades. Traffic patterns at most modern airports are rectangular with 90 degree corners and altitudes are usually about a thousand feet above the ground. At Beagle Field you must make either a 30 degree or 60 degree dogleg just before touchdown and the altitude is 300 feet. There is so much air traffic at Wittman Regional Airport during Airventure that the airspace is split into horizontal tiers 300 feet apart. This is strictly enforced because if we were to fly a little high and the 600 foot traffic got a little low there could be a very loud noise followed by aluminum showers. Nobody wants that.

## **Friday, June 30, 2023**

After some more fun landing practice I taxied Rooby over to the A/D building and rolled out the hose. It was a fine, sunny summer day and she needed a bath to look her best for the coming festivities. Even in a closed hangar those broad wings attract dust like a magnet. While wiping her down I found a couple small spots where the paint had been scuffed so I opened the Pontiac Red and touched them up. I also free handed a pair of bright red lips on her prop spinner as a remembrance of Fifi. Fifi's pout was famous at Beagle Field where she ruled the ultralights for ten years. I had to pass her to another doting caretaker in order to pay for all of Rooby's expensive parts and pieces. It broke my heart but my love for Rooby was beginning to fill the space left by her loss.

## **Saturday, July 1, 2023**

The only accessory left to complete Rooby's ensemble for the ball was her name painted on the cowl. I had hoped to enlist the great talent of my dear friend Phyllis who gave life to Fifi but she was unavailable so I took it upon myself. Since Rooby was largely a creature of my own creation it seemed appropriate. Sadly, I have the graphic talent of a garden slug so I found a kooky font on my word

processor program and painstakingly enlarged it, dot for dot with crossing rulers. Then I transferred it to a heavy magazine cover and cut out a stencil. I don't trust myself with paint brushes so I used black Sharpies and it came out okay.

## **Friday, July 14, 2023**

Rooby has a very large baggage compartment behind her rear seat so it would be easy to load too much weight for a proper balance. I carefully weighed the tent, sleeping bag and all the other camping necessities and ran the weight and balance calculations. Even with my tie-down kit and two stroke oil in back the result fit into the safety envelope. I would be strapping my small cooler and Boy Scout ruck sack to the back seat and they wouldn't affect the balance. Of course a test flight was in order and I was happy to find that a small nudge on the trim lever got me to hands off flight stability. The air was smooth and warm so I savored the peaceful moment and when we returned for landing the sun was an orange ball just over the treetops. I would be flying with the baggage compartment full for all the flights leading up to Oshkosh.

## **Monday, July 17, 2023**

I called Timm Bogenhagen at EAA headquarters to find out when Beagle Field would open for arrivals and was dismayed to learn that it would not open until Saturday, the 22<sup>nd</sup>. When I drive to the show I always try to get there on Thursday or Friday to snag my perfect camping spot and to watch all the incoming air traffic. Fortunately my Oshkosh family would make sure I had a place to pitch my tent. I spent the rest of the week studying the weather forecasts and fussing over my vacation check list.

## **Saturday, July 22, 2023**

When I woke to the alarm at 4:00 a.m. it was 46 degrees outside. The forecast was for clear skies so I knew it would warm up when the sun rose. I was excited to start the adventure so I drove to the airport before I called Flight Service for a briefing. There was blue overhead but Canada had been on fire all summer so there was significant haze. I wanted to take off at 6:00 to take advantage of the smooth morning air but the briefer said a light ground fog was further reducing visibility and VFR flight was not recommended. I pulled Rooby out anyway and did a thorough pre-flight inspection making sure my baggage was secure and her tanks topped off. I was wearing a multi-pocket airman's vest and all the pockets were full. At 7:00 I called Flight Service again and was given a conditional blessing to go. He said the fog was dissipating so if it looked good at Two Harbors it would probably get better as I went. We launched at 7:05.

The air was smooth and light winds from the west lifted us but also slowed us down. Rooby is no speed demon anyway so we actually were passed by some traffic as we floated down the expressway to Duluth. I saluted the lift bridge and turned southeast toward Hayward, Wisconsin. My first planned stop would be farther on at Medford, Wisconsin for fuel but I would overfly several other airports just in case I needed to land. There was not a cloud in the sky and Rooby was purring like a kitten. It seemed like we were both happy to be on our way to the big show.

This would be the forth time I had made the pilgrimage by air but the most satisfying by far. In 1994 I spent twelve hours flying my first airplane, a Kolb Twinstar, in the general direction of Oshkosh

but with just a couple of maps and a tipsy whiskey compass for navigation we wasted a lot of time trying to figure out where we were. Northwestern Wisconsin is just trees and water and that Kolb liked to drift to starboard. At the John Moody Campground I camped in a pup tent and ate cold food but I got my first taste of the ultralight pattern and flew it every day.

In 2003 Miss Chaos was fresh from my shop so I had to go show her off. This time I had a hiker's GPS so we flew in a straight line most of the way. I still had my sectional map on my lap and when we flew over Hayward the map had to be unfolded, flipped over and refolded. As already mentioned, Miss Chaos is quite unstable and the folks on the ground must have thought I was doing an aerobatic exhibition because every time I released the stick to deal with the map she would dart off in some unexpected attitude. When we finally got to Beagle Field I did such a horrible landing that I just tied her down for the week.

By 2008 I finally got over my embarrassment and greatly improved my short field landings so Miss Chaos and I made the voyage once again. This time the hiker's GPS refused to catch a signal so I was back to finger-on-the-map navigating. Our arrival was only slightly less embarrassing but I did take her out in the pattern one evening.

From 2009 to 2019 I flew Fifi at the show but she was easy to trailer and I got to sleep in the Yacht. This trip would be special for a number of reasons: My first Kolb and Miss Chaos were built from kits and were proven designs. Rooby on the other hand was crafted from parts and pieces and my own creativity; I was a much younger pilot when I undertook those other flights, more physically capable and certainly more confident, perhaps a bit over confident; This would probably be the last time I would tackle this challenge and I wanted it to be as perfect as I could make it be.

All these thoughts swam through my head as we cruised smoothly over the forests and rivers and Rooby hummed. We got to Medford at 9:40 and the wind was still light from the west. We did a nice short landing and had to taxi a mile or more to get to the fuel pumps. The sun was warming the day nicely so I took off the flannel shirt I had under the vest and set to buying my girl a drink. She took four gallons in her starboard tank but when I put four in the port tank some dribbled out the vent. Confirmation that it was full, On the next leg I tuned the radio to the tower frequency at Central Wisconsin Airport but there was no traffic so I just stayed a few miles west and cruised on by. Stevens Point Airport was my next checkpoint and the air was starting to get a little rowdy when we flew over. Standard summer cumulus clouds were beginning to form as we turned east for Waupaca.

We did right traffic at Waupaca as noted on the chart and completed another acceptable landing. The airport manager came out to welcome me and offered me a bratwurst from his grill. I declined with thanks. I called Jim at camp in Oshkosh to let him know I was about a half hour out. I also called Cindy, a volunteer at Beagle Field, to make sure the strip was open for business. The sun was pounding down and making more cumulus so I didn't waste any time on the ground. My excitement level was climbing with the temperature as we launched for the final leg and the air was getting excited too. A few clouds ganged up in our path and at one point we flew formation with a rain squall but it wasn't very threatening.

I had gone over the OSH NOTAM (Notice to Airmen) thoroughly and had entered the GPS coordinates for the turn point I was to use to enter the approach path for Beagle Field. Now at the prescribed 300 feet above ground level with the EAA Museum in sight I could not get the GPS to call up those numbers. I knew I had to find Hwy 26 and follow it to the ultralight pattern but you can't see very far ahead from 300 feet so we danced around a bit. We crossed a couple of small east-west roads and I was getting nervous dodging cell phone towers and silos. Finally a larger two lane blacktop appeared and I cranked a hard left. This seemed familiar and when I saw the PlaneView gas station I knew I was almost home. When we hit the south leg of the pattern I pulled on a notch of flaps then turned north toward the field. Just as in my other three trips Beagle Field remained hidden behind the trees but I knew where we were and pulled on another notch of flaps. With a quick 30 degree turn around the power pole I yanked the throttle and settled onto that beautiful Wisconsin cow pasture.

I know I was laughing with relief, I might have been shouting. It was 1:00 on the dot so the trip was about six hours total. I was so tickled to have accomplished the goal I had been chasing for four years that my feet barely touched the ground. Rooby weighs about twice as much as Fifi did so I gladly accepted offered help to push her off the field and I was lucky to find the parking spot right on the fence that Fifi occupied for so many years. The pocket vest came off right away because the sweat was running down my back.

The tie down kit was the first thing I pulled out of Rooby's baggage compartment but I hadn't even pounded in one stake before Paul Rickert appeared with his van. I met Paul here about 25 years ago and we became family right away. Oshkosh family is the best because we don't even have to speak for 51 weeks to remain close. He helped me get her tied down and then loaded all my stuff in his van and chauffeured me to the John Moody campground on the other side of the strip. Jim had erected the 10x10 pop-up already and his kitchen was in its place against the chain link fence. It felt like home. We didn't stop to chat because those cumulus clouds were ganging up and becoming dark so I wasted no time erecting my tent and tossing in my gear. As if on cue the rain began to pelt as I sunk the last tent peg so I just crawled inside and listened to the storm. I felt blessed by the Oshkosh gods because if this gully washer had ripped through an hour ago it would have made for a very challenging arrival. I got out the battery powered air pump and inflated my mattress while the tent snapped and slapped me around. This tent has no windows but a screen section at the top is covered by a rain fly which, due to the gusty winds, sprinkled a dash of drops on my sweaty brow and it felt good. I made notes in my journal as the squall spent its fury then emerged to sun and cooler air.

Jim had thoughtfully brought a mountain bike for me so I took a little tour of the area. Every turn gave me a de-ja vu experience because, in fact, I had been there before. When I got back to camp the twins were finding mud puddles to splash their shiny plastic boots in. Six year old Amelia and Piper are the children of Mikey and Kristi Garrett. Mikey is the first person I met here in the Moody campground almost thirty years ago and we have camped together every year since. He was a teenager at the time who never stopped moving and never wore a shirt. He hasn't changed much. I watched him fall in love with Kristi and start a family but he is still the hyperactive teen inside. I got hugs from Kristi and the girls and we enjoyed one of the many mini family reunions I would experience all through the week. There are times in my life when I feel a little low about getting old or being broke but thanks to these fine friends Oshkosh week is pure bliss.

Speaking of getting old, I suddenly found myself in need of a nap so I plopped down in the tent and passed right out. When I woke it was time to start the charcoal for dinner. Jim had chicken and taters ready and was snapping beans fresh from his garden for the veggies. When dinner was ready it began to sprinkle lightly so we pulled the big wooden picnic table under the pop-up and enjoyed our family feast. Last year the twins had given Jim extraordinary grief about putting his elbows on the dinner table so he was primed and ready to catch them in the same act. They just giggled.

After dinner I pedaled over to Rooby's spot to see how she had weathered the squall and found a small puddle in her baggage compartment. Later in the week after a few more rain events I would discover the source. Rooby's ELT antenna did not perfectly fill the hole I had made in her upper fuselage fabric. Otherwise she was fine. Strolling back toward the Ultralight Barn bike parking I ran into a dear old friend. Rick Hayes is the expert airplane builder who made the Kolb Twinstar that carried me on my first Oshkosh journey 30 years ago. He told me one of his aviation buddies was now the custodian of Fifi and he pulled out his phone to ring him up. We had a nice chat and I warned him about Fifi's take off characteristics. I have a close family here but it seems like everyone at Oshkosh is at least a shirt tail relative.

Back at camp we relaxed as the sun went down and fell back into the well practiced routine of camp life. When Kristi took the twins back to their opulent motor coach for bed us old guys started yawning and it wasn't long before the air mattress started calling my name. It had been a very long and very satisfying day.

## Sunday, July 23, 2023

It was comfortable in my little tent so I slept until 8:00 and took my time crawling out. The sun was already climbing the eastern sky and there was a light westerly breeze. Jim was enjoying his coffee but no one else was at the table so I pedaled over to the Ultralight Barn to register Rooby. The gentle drone of arriving aircraft added to the ambiance. I poked my head into the little consignment shop in the southeast corner of the Barn and looked through the rack of used leather jackets. Twice in past years I have found excellent jackets for amazing prices but none of this batch excited me. At the counter in the Barn proper I explained my mission to a lovely volunteer. I knew Rooby was parked in row #1 but I could not say for sure which space so she said I should find the “Energizer Bunny”. Her coworker saw the puzzled look on my face and explained. The volunteer in charge of aircraft parking was apparently constantly in motion and never fatigued so they bestowed that title upon him. I walked up the rise to Beagle Field and gave Rooby a quick check and suddenly “EB” appeared on his golf cart. (The volunteers not only gave him the name but immediately shortened it to initials.) I recognized him as a long time flight line volunteer and we chatted for a bit.

Back at the Barn I filled out the paperwork and received my 22<sup>nd</sup> mug. A matter of pride with me these handled beer mugs have “Showplane Participant” and the year etched on the glass. The ones I have from 1994 to 2010 bore their labels on fine pewter badges but they became less fancy as years went by and in 2011 were eliminated in favor of etchings. These mugs mean a lot because they cannot be purchased, only awarded to pilots who bring their airplanes to the show. The only exception is 2020 because the show was pandemically postponed after they had been printed so none were awarded. In 2021 Steve Madgic came by our camp with boxes of them looking to give them away. I took two.

I loaded my prize in my back pack and pedaled back to camp, smiling all the way. I got home in time to watch 8 or 9 bush planes make smooth arrivals behind our kitchen. Since Beagle Field has become the “Fun Fly Zone” EAA has held short take-off and landing competitions after the evening ultralight session. Patterned after the Valdez (Alaska) STOL contest it draws balloon tired back country airplanes from all over and draws huge crowds to our little strip. It also has destroyed the quiet evening ambiance of our camp. We used to get out the guitars or enjoy some conversation after dinner but now you can't hear yourself think.

Mikey whipped up a lovely egg scramble for breakfast with shrimp, peppers and bacon on the side. The twins pranced around on the grass as cute as a Disney cartoon while mom kept them in sight. Paul dropped in for a while on his way over to the big show and the scene was complete. De-ja vu all over again. Incoming traffic was steady on the big runways but sporadic on our strip so we watched closely as a fast glass trike arrived, dropped in hard and actually lost a wheel! Trike is our name for any of the three wheeled buggies sporting hang glider type wings. They have evolved from very basic tubing carts to sleek fiberglass bodies with high speed wings. With practiced efficiency the ground crew showed up immediately and assisted the crippled craft to the exit. The pilot suffered injury only to his ego and checkbook. Common wisdom among pilots says one always makes his worst landing when lots of people are watching. I have proven that adage myself.

We watched eleven private jets fly over in formation with smoke on, two were Mig 17s, the rest included L-39s and T-33s. They performed a military break into landing formation and swung around to the downwind leg for runway 36. You never know what you will see arriving at Oshkosh but it will usually command your attention. It was becoming a perfect summer day with blue skies and light winds as we took our flight judge seats at the fence. All was right with the world. Beagle Field was busy and we graded landings for a bunch of trikes, a couple of gyroplanes and one bush plane with a radial engine. Overhead two A-10 warthogs made a couple of passes before landing on the big runway and the 148<sup>th</sup> Air National Guard anniversary F-16 made noisy afterburner passes.

Piper came over with hand colored cards for Jim and me. Mine had dragonflies and flowers and we complimented her art work. Jim filled the picnic table with snacks and we happily munched away while constantly scanning the sky. General aviation arrivals were nonstop except for the moments when controllers cleared the approaches for some blazing military action. It was easy to see how Wittman Regional Airport deserves the title of "Busiest Airport in the World" during Airventure. Mikey and Kristi took the twins for a walk so I pedaled over to the Barn for a new ball cap. I didn't have one with the mesh top and it was warm enough to justify the expense. Normally from Sunday on we are not allowed to bike on the flight line but I kinda sneaked down to the road and pedaled all the way north to the warbird area and nobody flagged me down. Even though the show didn't officially start til Monday there was a lot of foot traffic and the vendors were frantically hauling in merchandise on golf carts and trucks. RANS had their booth in the same spot as last year but no one was home. Riding back south I swung into the Antique/Classic area and there were quite a few historic beauties but no Staggerwings as of yet. The classic Beechcraft biplane is my favorite.

When I got off the bike back at camp I realized the airflow from riding was disguising the heat and immediately started to sweat. I laid my towel down in the shade of the pop up and took a nap. I woke refreshed but remained in the shade. Phil dropped in to chat while his pork loins simmered on the grill back at the Rickert camp. He is the consummate outdoor chef and always has something delicious in the works. As we talked a couple more gyroplanes arrived at Beagle and the monstrous Super Guppy touched down on the big runway. Created by NASA to carry huge loads the Guppy looks like a four engine prop driven airliner had been mated to a blimp and seems far too blunt to slip through the sky. You have to look closely to see the tiny cockpit windows on the round front.

It was a lazy afternoon and I wrote in my journal while Jim scrolled through his tablet. General aviation arrivals were slow but steady and we considered our options for dinner. I decided to check on Rooby and then left the bike in the shade of her wings while I strolled the Ultralight Vendor displays. The Eclipse Autogyro looked sleek and speedy so I engaged a nice lady from Tennessee who seemed to know all about it. She discussed its performance and showed me the enclosed trailer her husband had built to haul it here. Besides room for the aircraft the trailer had a nice kitchen and bedroom for their comfort when on the road. I had been toying with the idea of becoming a Minnesota Snowbird someday and this was one potential solution for going south with an aircraft in tow.

I rode back to camp and saw the Garretts returning so I put my hearing aids in to better converse with the twins. I no sooner had them in place when a pair of F-22s came whistling in and tore up the place for 15 minutes. The jet screams assaulted my poor ears so I yanked them back out. The girls called them "Ear Buds". Two Titan Tornados that had arrived at our strip in the morning departed as I was firing up the grill for pork chops. Jim made potatoes and broccoli from his garden. Another delicious repast. The wicked sun lost some of its power as it drifted down the western sky and the Garretts headed out to the movies. EAA erects a big inflatable screen and shows aviation themed films all week long. Top Gun Maverick was on the bill tonight. It was so nice to enjoy quiet all over the convention grounds after 8:00 as it used to be but we knew Monday would bring the "Twilight Flight Fest" roaring to life so we savored the peace. I noticed a twin engine military looking plane that I couldn't identify parked over by the DC-3s and Jim found it on the internet. It was a Lockheed Lodestar, big round engines and a twin tail gave it a unique presence. Oshkosh never fails to show me something new even after three decades of dedicated attendance. This is definitely my happy place.

## **Monday, July 24, 2023**

On the first day of the big show I was so comfortable in the tent that I skipped the morning briefing and didn't crawl out until I heard the mosquito-like buzz of the paragliders overhead. Jim helped me apply a new blood glucose sensor to the back of my arm as Mikey made breakfast. Pancakes



and sausages were on the menu and we ate with delight. When the bag wings lightly touched down and were packed away an antique biplane with a tail skid zoomed in. Tail skids are not permitted on the paved runways so we get to see some cool classics from our kitchen. Restorers of World War One vintage aircraft often put a little wheel on the back but this example was period correct.

It was a warm morning but a high gray overcast tempered the sun's power and kept us comfortable. The fixed wing ultralight session started slowly with only Mike Ostrander's perennial blue Quicksilver MX and one T-Bird making the first few laps. Since I parted with Fifi, Mike's Quick has been the only true conforming ultralight on the field and he flies every day no matter what. His signature climb out move is to take his feet off of the pedals and dangle them down in the slipstream to please the crowd. His signature landing move is to slip onto the grass and immediately whip a 90 degree turn to get back into line. With it's tiny tricycle gear wheels the Quick acts like a go cart and never threatens to ground loop. This also pleases the crowd.

Kristi came over dressed in workout gear and said she was on a regular program of running and walking every day. She looked fit and ready to go. A skywriter drew a happy face about a mile up and it stood out well against the darker cirrus clouds. Traffic picked up on our strip with the launch of a bunch of fast trikes. They were all sleek fiberglass bodies with 100 Rotax ponies supplying ample thrust but their wings were small for high cruise speeds and they took a lot of runway to leave the ground.

Doc, one of only two airworthy B-29 bombers made a high pass over the field north to south and his highly polished skin managed to twinkle even without full sun. The nose art of the Disney Dwarf made me wonder if there had been six others back in the day. I wouldn't want to fly Dopey. Jim took off on his Rukus scooter to go rent his electric mobility vehicle and I pedaled down to the central bike parking. We met as planned at the RANS display and got big hugs from Shelley. I bought one of their new Hawaiian shirts and Jim bought hats and tees for DeeAnn and Andy. We talked to Randy a little and drooled over the beautiful S-21s they had flown in from Kansas.

Continuing north along the flight line we toured the Warbird area and took pictures. Jim found out later that he had activated the wrong camera on his phone and was taking selfies the whole time. It was a very warm summer day but a fresh breeze made it tolerable. Heading back south down the flight line we toured Boeing Plaza at show center. The Dreamlifter and Super Guppy dominated the area and provided shade for scores of warm walkers. The Guppy's pug nose had been swung aside opening a huge portal into the cavernous cargo area. More pictures. Then we aimed right up the wide thoroughfare toward the main entrance casting curious glances left and right as we went. The Fly-Mart was our eventual destination and is always on our itinerary because there is always some tool or bit of hardware that we didn't know we needed. It is also the only place near show center where smoking is tolerated.

I was getting tired chasing Jim on his cart so we split up and I pedaled back to the Barn. I wanted to check the time of the afternoon briefing so I wouldn't miss it. I was really looking forward to showing Rooby my old routine at Beagle Field. Back at camp I shed my shirt and sat down in the shade. The Rotorcraft session was under way so it was a bit noisy but the down wash from the helicopters kept the air moving. Jim came back from returning his mobility vehicle and pulled some shrimp out of his cooler. We happily snacked and yakked and enjoyed the show. The twins came back from their tour with little battery powered fans that also shot a spritz of water for maximum effect. They shared with uncle Jim and uncle Engine.

The afternoon airshow started with the simulated intercept of a Cessna by an F-16 demonstrating what would happen if a general aviation pilot strayed into a restricted area. Good to know. High overhead multiple large formations crisscrossed at slightly different altitudes, Van's RV-6 homebuilts, T-34s, T-6s, and T-28s. Most of the planes left smoke trails that created a giant chessboard in the clear blue sky. Gate minder Tammi and her guy came over to spoil the girls with presents. It's always Christmas at Oshkosh if you are a princess and I'm so happy that our campsite seems to be the

center of these activities.

Meanwhile, four A-10 Warthogs departed in formation and whistled off to the south. In another, “Only at Oshkosh” happening, a U-2 Dragonlady spy plane appeared out of nowhere and made three very low passes down the runway. After the third pass she accelerated, set an impressive climb angle and held that attitude until becoming a tiny speck in the stratosphere. Several civilian aerobatic acts followed performing maneuvers that challenged the laws of physics. I watched from the road as I pedaled back to the Barn.

Everyone who wishes to fly on Beagle Field must attend a briefing each day. Had I been awake for the 6:30 am briefing I would not have needed to go to the 5:30 pm one but I wasn't so I did. After chaining the bike to the rack outside the fence I walked past the Barn up the hill to Rooby's spot. I gave her a thorough inspection and felt a sense of pride in her sleek lines and shiny red coat. Anticipation was becoming excitement. Of my three goals for this adventure I had only accomplished the first, Fly Rooby to Beagle Field. I was about to attempt the second, Fly In the Show. The third obviously was to Fly Home Safely. Satisfied that she was ready for goal number two I strolled back down to the Barn to make sure I was ready. Mark Spang has been volunteering on the ultralight crew for many years and he always gives a top notch brief. He makes sure you know that this is serious business but still manages to inject a little humor. This iteration was nearly identical to those I have attended for thirty years but for one detail. The pattern, the specific track we follow over the convention grounds had been slightly altered for the first time. I had read of the change while planning the trip so I wasn't surprised but it was nice to see it charted out officially. There were twenty three pilots in the big tent but most of the folks flying the evening pattern got the morning brief. When we were dismissed I got my wrist band and chatted with Mark about the good old days.

Back up on the hill I sat in the grass under Rooby's broad wing and watched the rest of the airshow. The sun was shining, the winds were light and all was right with the world. The airshow usually ends with a Heritage Flight that consists of four warbirds in close formation crossing the field at low altitude. Two or three of them are WWII fighters like P-51 Mustangs and F-4U Corsairs while the remaining one or two are modern Air Force fighters like the F-22 and F-35. When they concluded by breaking formation and banking away I grabbed Rooby by her three blade prop and pulled her toward the entry gate to Beagle Field. Mark Oswald of chapter 1221 appeared and helped me guide her in. It was 6:20 by my aviator's watch and my heart was pumping.

Three different flags can fly on the pole by the gate. Red means the field is closed, yellow recalls any planes in the pattern for landing and green means go. The red flies all through the afternoon airshow and can only be replaced by the green when the main tower calls and gives the all-clear. Six or eight of us were on the grass and more were being pulled in through the two entry gates. When I saw the volunteer put down his radio and lower the red flag I climbed into Rooby's cozy cockpit and fastened my seat belt. When the green flag hit the top of the pole I turned the key and Rooby sprang to life.

Well over a half million people come to Oshkosh every summer and they all have their one favorite thing. This is mine. As we taxied down the hill to the take off point I was overwhelmed by sweet memories and anticipation of those to come. We were number six in line and I left Rooby's starboard door open as we watched those first departures. My emotions were climbing into the summer sky with them. When it was our turn I latched the door, turned 90 degrees right and watched the flagger. A volunteer stands by the orange cone at the corner of the field and watches for incoming traffic. He or she holds a paddle with red on one side and green on the other, there are no radio communications on Beagle Field. When he pointed to the departure spot we rolled forward and turned another sharp 90 to line up with the runway. After another quick scan of the sky he flipped the paddle to green and made a sweeping motion obviously clearing us to go. Showtime!

I kept my toes on the brakes as I eased the throttle forward and just as it hit the stop I released them. Rooby bolted forward and my heart soared. Within seconds the rough runway rumble ceased

and she was climbing like a homesick angel. My attention was everywhere, our nose attitude, the instrument panel, the sky ahead, the bleachers falling away to our right and our campsite quickly disappearing to our left. My focus returned when we reached our mandated altitude of 300 feet and I pulled gently on the power to establish a quiet, level cruise on the westbound leg of our pattern. Three years away from this sweet circuit disappeared and it felt like I never left.

Rooby hummed contentedly and I swooned at the beauty of the experience. We floated over row after row of campers and motor homes in Camp Scholler and I knew there were lots of eyes on Rooby's shiny bottom. Off to the right the static aircraft displays filled the grounds and the EAA Museum rose out of the grass. I scanned the sky ahead and all around for traffic as we turned left to parallel Hwy 41 and head south. Now Rooby's clean new windshield offered views of miles of Wisconsin farmland under a clear blue sky. When we got to Hwy 26 we banked left again and Lake Winnebago swung into view. It was sparkling blue with white sails and powerboat wakes matching the white turbine blades of the wind farm on the eastern shore. I calculated our distance from the aircraft ahead and decided we would have an unobstructed approach for landing at Beagle field. Our turn to the north was actually a bit northeast due to the new pattern path and I tugged the flap handle to one notch. This lowered Rooby's nose a bit but I didn't change her trim setting because I wanted that back pressure on the stick to prime myself for the flare at touchdown. A second click on the flap handle when the grass runway appeared from behind the trees put us on the proper descent angle. I whispered a little encouragement to my darling for a sweet reunion with the earth but I knew I was actually talking to the pilot. I pulled the power to idle as we did the 30 degree dogleg and lined up with the runway. She slipped onto the grass more firmly than I might have hoped but there was no bounce so I considered it a successful landing. There was no question that we would taxi back and do it again. I relaxed my clenched teeth into a grin and gave a happy wave to Gary the gasman in the fueling shed. He gave the thumbs up, high praise.

Pilots are taught to be smooth on the controls, make coordinated turns, hold altitude and airspeed during maneuvers and make good, safe decisions but none of that can be casually observed from the ground. Landings therefore, become the ultimate criteria and everyone is a judge. Knowing someone is watching adds a level of pressure to perform but at Oshkosh that level is sky high. Not only are hundreds and even thousands of eyes on you but many of those are pilot's eyes. It is hoped that well trained pilots are cool in stressful situations but that is not something that can be taught.

Our second take off was as exciting as the first but I was more relaxed and more present in the moment. The sky seemed bluer and the grass greener. Rooby purred. We found ourselves creeping up behind a couple of slower trikes on the downwind leg so Rooby executed a clever sidestep and we slipped past them. To me every flight is a dance and Rooby is a willing and capable partner. Traffic was light ahead so we repeated our landing routine with similar results. In the conga line taxiing for another go I waved to all the folks along the fence and got enthusiastic waves back. I have been on that side of the fence myself and I feel privileged when I'm on this side.

Since the STOL Circus has come to Beagle Field everyone tries to make their shortest take off roll and Rooby excels at this. Some bush pilots yank their flaps on as soon as they get rolling in an attempt to hop off the ground. I thought I should give that a try so as soon as the throttle hit the stop on our next take off I jerked two clicks on the flap handle and Rooby hopped but she wasn't at flying speed yet so the tires touched again before we established our climb. I should have practiced that move at home but I don't know when I'll ever need it and Rooby gets off fast enough without the theatrics.

The sun was sliding down the western sky as we floated around the familiar pattern and I decided three landings would be enough but I wasn't quite ready to quit yet. At the southeast corner we turned straight north instead of northeast and flew right past the strip. This is always an option and I exercise it whenever there is slow traffic ahead for landing but this time I just did it for fun. Scanning the Moody campground as we passed, I located the Rickert camp and the twin's motor coach. I made sure to savor the butter smooth air and fill my head with sweet sensations. We did all the same dance

steps on approach but this time Rooby's tires kissed the grass so smoothly I could barely feel it. I taxied to the gate wearing a huge grin.

When I led my girl from the dance floor a couple of strangers helped me park her. There really are no strangers in the Oshkosh family, maybe third cousins twice removed. As I secured her tail wheel to the tie down a face appeared by her rudder that reminded me of somebody. Danny Payne introduced himself and I could see his father, Bob in his eyes. The elder Payne is a talented A&P mechanic back home who has helped nearly every pilot at Two Harbors at one time or another. Danny was great to talk to so we chatted while I completed my tie down chores.

Riding back up Knapp Street rd. I watched the bag wings launch. My term for powered parachutes and powered paragliders is not a disparaging remark, merely a descriptive verbal shortcut. They get the early morning and late afternoon sessions because the winds are generally lighter. Para Gliders are foot launched and use elliptical wings while Para Chutes run three wheeled carts and square wings. They both cruise very slowly so they mix well. Their numbers at Beagle Field have swelled over the last decade so it's not unusual to see a dozen or more bright cloth bananas and pillows floating around the evening sky. Before the STOL Circus came to town this would be the end of flying for the day and the quiet would descend on our happy bivouac, no more. As the pilots touched down lightly on the grass they each bundled up their laundry and walked off the field.

The rumble started at the south end of the strip and grew as the gaggle of bush planes entered and taxied right past our kitchen. After watching the butterfly and hummingbird end of the flying spectrum all day these were the fire breathing dragons and it was rather a shock to the system. Like most denizens of Airventure I have an affinity for anything that flies and we do get a much more intimate exposure than the crowd across the field but like most old people I think it was better in the olden days. We finished another delightful camp dinner and sat around the picnic table trying to converse over the roar of Lycomings and Continentals at full voice. When the sun dipped below the horizon the STOL boys taxied off but it didn't get quieter, it got insanely noisier.

The piercing shriek of small turbojets made me glad I wasn't wearing my hearing aids. Of course we all jumped to the fence to see what was assaulting our ears. Two commandos wearing ridiculous battle gear came sliding down the strip at about two feet of altitude. It turned out their attack gear was what was holding them up. They each had large backpacks spewing swirling hot air past their legs and their Popeye forearms held more jet nozzles. It seemed these were directing their course as they twirled, hovered and made fast passes at each other. Fortunately, their crazy dance didn't last long, they were burning kerosene like a smelting furnace and didn't have much room for fuel in their camouflage suits.

When full dark descended the next act in the Fun-Fly-Zone took the field. The Airythmia Paramotor team hauled their laundry out and fired up their back fans. The large safety rings that surround their prop tips were lit with LEDs so we could see them and, more importantly, so they could see each other. This is what inspired Jim a few years ago to dub them "Electric Hula Hoops". They performed some nice formation passes and then lost their minds in a frantic tango dragging their feet in the grass and turning dizzying 360s. They turned so sharp and low that occasionally wing tips brushed the runway while their bodies were flung out like on a berserk tilt-a-whirl. Maybe they should call it the "Frantic-Fly- Zone".

You would think that would be enough "Fun" for one "Zone" but no, there was more. Thumping bass notes from a familiar rock song introduced the radio control whiz kids and the laws of physics were violated. This is the part of the show we used to refer to as the "Chain Saws" because the small, powerful gas engines sounded like the woods outside Red Green's clubhouse. This year however all but one of the RC models had switched to electric motors. We had become jaded over the years at their ability to hover, spin at mind numbing speeds and pull 20 Gs so we mostly ignore them. The chain saw sound was irritating but Jim said the electrics seemed less exciting. I think they use at least half of their battery power for lighting so there was no chance we might miss one zooming over

the kitchen. When all of their lithium was exhausted the PA got quiet and you could hear a chorus of relieved sighs all around the camp.

Kristi came over when all of her kids were in bed. (The twins and Mikey). She carried a monitor in case one of them stirred but felt relaxed enough to enjoy a beer. We don't get as many opportunities to chat as we used to so Jim and I put our elbows on the picnic table and listened to her sweet voice. The quiet evening began to make my eyelids heavy eventually so I fumbled with the tent flap and plopped on the air mattress. It had been one epic day and I expected the same again in the morning so I surrendered to sleep.

## **Tuesday, July 25, 2013**

I resisted the urge to roll off the mattress until the tent absorbed enough morning sun to get uncomfortable. I zipped open the flap and sat in the doorway for a while watching the bag wings fly. The temperature was perfect and there were no clouds in the sky but there was a light haze. The twins wandered by my door one at a time and wished me good morning. When I finally got my old bones moving I opened the twenty pound bag of ice that Tammi had dropped off, took the tupperware full I needed for my little insulin cooler and dumped the rest in Jim's coolers. Besides being the friendly gate attendant for the John Moody campground Tammi delivers ice at dawn from her mini van. I used to have to carry bags of ice on my bicycle so this is a welcome luxury.

As the bag wings landed a light breeze was rising from the southwest so the field volunteers reversed the pattern. Prevailing summer westerlies usually have us taking off to the northwest and making left hand turns in the pattern but taking off or landing with a tailwind, no matter how light, is never a good idea. Our camp is closer to the south end of the strip so we can scrutinize take offs and landings oriented to the northwest but in this situation we only see the departing traffic about a hundred feet overhead and we can't see the landings unless we step to the fence and look past our neighbors.

Jim was chatting with his sweetie on speaker phone and I heard her ask, "Are you looking at planes?" Jim chuckled and said, "You can't help it, every step is another plane!"

Landing at Beagle Field from the north end is always tricky. The dogleg to short final is 60 degrees instead of 30 and the slight elevation change doesn't seem so slight when you are going downhill. It takes longer to get your wheels on the ground when you're chasing the slope and it's harder to slow down once you do. We watched a couple of fast trikes almost run off the south end of the field on landing just because of that so the wise ground crew reversed the pattern again. Of course our next observation was a couple of heavier planes struggling to make it over the trees with the tailwind departure. Damned if you do, damned if you don't.

While we watched the Chinese fire drill on the grass Kristi chopped a bunch of veggies and taters for a morning egg scramble. The twins can be picky eaters at times but this went down well. Kristi's dad lives in Wisconsin so their Oshkosh trip usually includes a detour to his house and today was the day. They got dressed up nice and didn't dawdle too much getting in Kristi's car. We waved goodbye.

I biked over to the Barn to buy some gas for Rooby. The routine is: purchase a receipt in the Barn and hand it to Gary the gasman once you are out on the field. I walked up the hill to Rooby and hid the receipt in a seat pocket then gave her a loving once-over. Jim only rents the mobility scooter every other day so I was on my own for a tour of the grounds. Back at the Barn I bumped into Mikey also at loose ends without his girls but we headed off in different directions. My blood glucose was trending down so I coasted down Knapp to show center and strolled to the food court. I was first in line when Baskin Robbins opened and got a cup of vanilla. Ice cream is a treat for a diabetic so I savored it in the shade of the tall trees.

One of my goals this year was to find an inexpensive headset for Rooby's eventual passengers.

The new active noise-cancelling models start at \$1000 but I knew I could find a passive unit for much less at Oshkosh. All of the vendors have Airventure special deals and you don't have to surf the Web to comparison shop. I stopped in Hangar A for a visit to Aircraft Spruce & Specialties. They had one in the demo booth that felt comfortable and was reasonably priced but when I tracked down a representative he couldn't find one in a box. He offered to take my money and ship me one but I decided to do more shopping. I strolled the rest of the aisles and then walked across the grass to Hangar D. The four huge Exhibition Hangars at show center house vendor displays ranging from avionics to furniture and we always make it a point to check them all out. Jim used to take every catalog offered until he couldn't carry the weight but he got over it. In Hangar D I found the booth for iFly where I bought my GPS a couple of years ago. I talked with a lovely girl named Vivian about the difficulty I'd had calling up the coordinates for the turn point into Beagle Field. She carefully explained the steps I needed to take and then, when she saw the dumb look on my face she wrote her directions down and gave me her work phone number in case I still couldn't get it. Customer service seems to be a dying art but at Oshkosh it's always family friendly. Further on I found a display of headsets and checked them out. I didn't recognize any brand names but I liked the listed prices. The girl behind the counter was of Asian heritage and had an accent that didn't play well with my hearing difficulty. She was kindly patient with me and eventually my questions were answered and we made the deal.

Exiting the hangar the sun hit me and I decided to peddle home for a rest. The afternoon airshow began as I rode and I watched the skydivers descend with the American flag. Back at the bivouac I was stunned by an airplane out over the main runway. It wasn't moving! It looked like a conventional plane with wings and a tail but it was in a solid, silent hover. It began to move forward and accelerated northward towards show center and eventually I lost sight of it. I knew I had to see it up close on my next tour.

Jim and I sat in the shade for a while and I showed him my purchase. The sun was at its full power so I strolled down to the showers to rinse off the dust and the heat. I emerged refreshed so I walked over to check out another large old Lockheed twin tail next to the Lodestar. It had no data plate that I could see so I didn't identify it. One of the coolest things for me is the opportunity to see interesting aircraft that are not yet in my mental data base. Even way back in elementary school I read every book about aviation in the library so that data base is large and I'm always intrigued to find a new entry. Back under our shade Jim whipped out his tablet, entered the N-number I gave him and discovered the mystery ship was a Lockheed L-39-18-56. Mystery solved, new data entry.

I was surprised to see Kristi and the twins drive back in. She said that she hadn't felt well while driving so she decided to turn around. She relaxed in the motor home for a while and recovered quickly. The girls were a little disappointed that they couldn't do the Grampa thing but they recovered quickly as well.

A cloud build up began to darken the northwestern sky but it didn't look stormy so I went over to the Barn for the afternoon briefing. When I went up to check on Rooby I found a sheet of paper on her front seat. It was an official looking printed page that said she had caught someone's eye and urged me to enter her for judging. I see championship aircraft here every year and I knew Rooby would not rise to the top of that pool but I was elated at being asked. The people who create award winning aircraft are artists more than craftsmen and I'm bragging just to call myself a craftsman but the compliment sure felt good.

When the green flag went up over Beagle Field I taxied Rooby to the fuel shed and redeemed my receipt for six gallons. Gary was gregarious as always and held the nozzle when I scrambled up and down the ladder. The pattern was set up for downhill landings and right turns so I was hesitant to fly. When Fifi was my date for this dance we didn't care which way the wind was blowing, we flew every day but with only 150 landings in Rooby's log book I wasn't as confident as I wanted to be.

I taxied back up the hill but instead of turning off to the exit I went straight ahead to the take

off point, I couldn't resist. It's such a thrill to fly out of this airstrip I figured I would just deal with the difficult landing when it happened. The air had an afternoon bump here and there but the trip around the pattern was comfortable so I skipped the landing and went around again. I told myself I was making too much of this minor difference in conditions but I pulled on all three notches of flaps to get as slow as possible on the approach. Rooby slipped between the tall trees at the north end of the field and brought us down smoothly but when her wheels touched she still had flying speed and bounced up a bit. In a clumsy attempt to make her next touch smoother I gave a quick poke to the throttle and made it worse. I don't know how awful it looked to the landing critics but it felt plain ugly to me. I should have quit right there but I had to try again to sooth my pilot ego. Once again the launch and the trip around the pattern were thrilling and I tried to just enjoy myself but the results were disappointing. I had damaged my foolish pride beyond repair so I went ahead and did it for a third time. Rooby is plenty strong enough to handle my clumsiness and I suspect she might have been laughing right along with the landing critics as I tucked my tail and departed the field. You know what they say, "Any landing you can slink away from is a good landing"

After tying Rooby down for the night I started back down the hill toward the Barn and found another new wrinkle for the Fun-Fly-Zone. A rock-n-roll band was cranking out lame covers of classic rock standards on a small stage. They all wore Army uniforms so I asked the guy at the sound board who they were. He said the U.S Army actually sanctioned this band and a couple of others in different parts of the country. I guess there are more ways than one to serve your country.

Back at camp Mikey showed me video of my landings and they didn't look as bad as they had felt but they certainly weren't pretty. Dinner was pork chops on the grill with more garden veggies and potatoes. We dined at the picnic table as the STOL Circus cranked up on the field. The crowd at the fence across the strip was about ten rows deep so I'm sure this is the wave of the future for our dear old grass strip. The screaming rocket pack soldiers were next followed by the electric hula hoops and the RC chainsaws. Jim and I watched a King Crimson video and some political stuff on his tablet because it was the same show as last night on the field. By the time it got quiet we got droopy eyelids so we retired early.

## **Wednesday, July 26, 2023**

My wake up call was a guy rolling by on a golf cart (probably our campground host) yelling about a storm coming. I jumped into action and peeled the fabric off of the pop up shade. Jim was securing his area and I borrowed his Ruckus scooter to go check on Rooby. As soon as I hit the perimeter road some big, fat raindrops slapped me in the face. The downpour didn't really let loose until I had checked Rooby's tie downs and secured her control stick. Riding back was like taking a cold shower and I got drenched. We sat in Jim's truck for about twenty minutes of thunder and heavy rain. There was no big gust front so we probably could have left the picnic shade up but it's better safe than sorry. A few sprinkles persisted as we began to restore the camp and Jim put on the coffee. The overcast lightened and a couple of tiny blue holes appeared in the sky.

The main runway started launching a lot of GA departures but our strip remained closed while the ground crew did an FOD walk. Foreign Object Debris on the runway is a possibility during storms and the close inspection was standard procedure. I walked up the hill to the Rickert camp and had a chat with Paul and Phil. They had listened to the storm from their cozy beds in Paul's camper. Back at camp we didn't feel like cooking so Jim and I each had a cold brat and slice of leftover pizza for breakfast. The Ford Trimotor was making regular trips with paying passengers but the overcast stayed dark and except for a departing trike our strip was quiet.

Jim took off on the Ruckus to pick up his rental mobility scooter and I pedaled down to show center. We met at Exhibition Hangar D and cruised the aisles. I talked to Phil Lockwood at his booth

about my high EGT readings in Rooby. I had not been able to use all the power that her Rotax 582 could provide due to these Exhaust Gas Temperatures.

Outside we spent some time at Magni Gyroplanes and asked a lot of questions. A long term fantasy of mine was to grow old enough to become a Snowbird but I couldn't go south without a flying machine and gyros don't need a huge trailer. Jim picked up on my interest and went so far as to pay for a demonstration flight out of Fond du Lac airport later in the week. We cruised just about the whole length of the flight line but the little wheels on Jim's ride didn't like the bumpy grass. The clouds were thinning and the sun was beating down so we split up and I pedaled back to the Barn.

I picked up a "Judge Me" sign and went up the hill to put it on Rooby's propeller. Coming back through the Barn I bought a T-shirt. For the last several years EAA has produced one with 60s era psychedelic art work on a black background. I call them "Hippie Shirts" and I get one every year.

The afternoon airshow started with a bunch of smaller military birds, grasshoppers, motor gliders and one UC-78 "Bamboo Bomber" flying circles over the field. When they were recovered 4 A-10 Warthogs strafed the field with ground based pyrotechnics. I wish they would fire that Gatling gun but it's so nasty it could probably do damage just firing blanks. Formation aerobatics came from the T-28 team and many unlimited class birds took their turn bending the laws of physics. The show continued as I pedaled over to the Barn for the briefing. When I got my wristband I went up to check on Rooby and found a couple of signatures on the "Judge Me" placard. I assumed that meant judges had looked her over. The Heritage Flight at the end of the airshow consisted of two F4U Corsairs and two F-22 Raptors. The modern jets dwarf the WWII classics but they keep up.

The breeze was northwest so I had no hesitation taking Rooby out for a ride. I pulled her out next to a blue and yellow Aerolite 103 and talked to the pilot while we waited for the green flag to go up the pole. She had quite the story. As with all sectors of aviation females are underrepresented here at Beagle Field but this girl was very special. Her name was Alina Scott and she had flown her ultralight from home to the show and was flying in every session. This would be impressive if she lived 50 miles away but in fact, she lived in South Carolina. She had made 42 short flights in 6 days to cover the vast distance at 45 miles per hour. Her father had shadowed her journey on the highways to support her effort. I have a feeling we will be hearing more about her in the future. Oh yeah, did I mention she was 14 years old? Just another example of the outstanding people you meet at Oshkosh.

I got in the conga line behind her for take off and soon Rooby was singing her sweet song to me. Since we were making left turns and landing uphill I was relaxed and happy. We passed Mike's blue Quicksilver and his feet were still dangling down in the breeze. We made three circuits and each landing was far better than yesterday's performance. We got a jaunty thumbs up from Gary at the fuel shed, high marks. We sauntered off the dance floor satisfied and happy and got willing assistance maneuvering into the parking spot. Item number two on my three goal agenda for this trip was completely fulfilled and the evening air was intoxicating. The bag wings had perfect conditions for their evening ride as I saw on my ride home.

Wednesdays are famous at our little camp for Spaghetti Night. I make a gallon of my best, meatiest sauce well in advance and freeze it in plastic containers. These usually keep the bottom of my cooler cold but I could not carry a huge cooler in Rooby so I delivered them to Jim for transport. Paul and Phil came down with delicious pizza that Phil had made in his charcoal fired pizza oven. They also brought Austin, a young man who was camped by them and didn't seem to have any dinner plans. (Oshkosh etiquette). Jim hung a battery lamp in the pop up so the ambiance was enhanced and we all enjoyed our Italian banquette. Good food, good friends, pleasant conversation but wait, there's more.

Wednesdays and Saturdays at Airventure host the "Night Airshow" featuring aerobatic performers with blinding lights and even pyrotechnics on their craft. We have great seats even though show center is far to our left. Most performers pick a turn around point on the south end of the field directly across from our easy chairs. I feel bad for the thousands who walk a mile or more to sit on folding chairs then carry them a mile back in the dark. A show like this, at this scale doesn't happen



anywhere else in the world though so it's worth the effort.

As dark was falling a pair of F-22s did a bunch of very low passes with full afterburners and the ground shook. Once it was completely dark a Mig-17 did some extremely fast passes and his afterburner made it look like his tail was on fire. Bob Carlton did his magic trick with the jet powered motor glider. He sneaks in silently then flips on all his computer controlled lighting and fires up the jet. Matt Younkin flew his ballet-smooth routine in the big twin Beech lit up like a cruise ship. Other performers made fat trails of sparks from their wingtips and shot fireworks to boot. The last act either started too late or had a very precise flight path because he was still flying as the ground based fireworks began to launch. He dodged and swerved past the trails of rockets soaring skyward but managed to retire unscathed. Any sizable metropolis would be envious of the July 4<sup>th</sup> type display that followed. They burned enough gun powder to sink a battleship with colors and shapes overlapping and clapping like thunder. We oohed and aahed with everyone else even though this was not our first night rodeo. Since we were the old hands we knew what was coming as the last missile fizzled. The cherry on top is always billed as the "Wall of Fire" where the pyro-nuts light off all their left over napalm at once. This year it didn't seem as apocalyptic as usual and we both commented on it. Ten minutes later another, larger inferno ignited but it still didn't live up to our expectations. Perhaps a fuse failed somewhere and they were both supposed to happen at once.

We pulled our camp chairs back under the shelter and talked in hushed tones to respect the sudden silence. Jim's phone rang or beeped or tweeted, whatever these newfangled things do. It was rather late for a call and when he answered I heard him say, "Mikey! What? Where?" He walked out from under our cover and looked up. "Engine, check it out!" he exclaimed so I scooted right out there and looked up myself. Almost exactly north to south a bright light traveled across the high heavens. It wasn't as fast as a comet and it was a lot bigger. "It's the International Space Station!" he said then thanked Mikey and hung up. We watched closely and it seemed to have a tail but I think that was just the flash bulb hangover on my retina. It was that bright. Suddenly it just extinguished and disappeared into the black sky. What an amazing climax to a day of sky watching. I wondered out loud if EAA had enough pull to get NASA to alter the station's course or if it was just the Angel of Oshkosh doing us a favor. I went to bed with the certainty that I had experienced one of the best days of my life.

## Thursday, July 27, 2023

It was hot and noisy in the tent at 7:30 but I just unzipped the door and went back to sleep. An hour later I faced the day. Jim had finished his coffee and said he had booked his discovery flight with Magni Gyros on Saturday. The wind was out of the south again and I hoped it would turn around by afternoon so I could fly Rooby without making downhill landings. Young Alina was making great landings in her Aerolite 103 and I felt a pang of jealousy. If I still had Fifi I would be right out there with her but then I wouldn't have Rooby.

Out on the main runway the Super Guppy took off to the south so we got a great view of her lift off and climb out. That airplane looks like a comic book character with her huge body and blunt nose. Mikey wasn't around to do his morning chef act so we ate cold chicken and brats for breakfast. Still satisfying and very simple. Jim said he heard Mikey come home about 2:30 in the morning so we figured he must have been at the beer tent. In his younger days he spent every night closing down that place and he was always bugging me to come with, I've still never been.

Jim was without his electric wheels so I took off alone about 11:00. I stopped at the Barn and walked the ultralight vendor displays as the sun started to cook. I ran into Mike Makepeace, an old hand at Beagle Field. He was working for Fisher Flying Products in their booth. I asked him if he was going to be flying today. He told me that the last time he flew this pattern was the day a couple of years ago when he snapped the left wheel off of his Fisher Dakota. I had witnessed that unfortunate

crosswind landing so we gave it the old Monday morning quarterback treatment and shared a chuckle.

I rode down to show center with the goal of buying a current Green Bay Sectional. It was time to start planning my return flight and I wanted to check out a few different options on the map. There was not a single one for sale on the whole convention grounds. Once absolutely essential for any cross country flying the FAA produced navigational chart had been made obsolete by GPS technology. I had plotted the trip down on an expired copy that couldn't, by Federal Regulations, be in the cockpit. Rooby sports a very modern GPS unit with a large color screen and it was certainly my main Nav-Aid on the way down but a map spread out on a picnic table lets me see the big picture and make routing decisions. Plus it's an open invitation to any pilot passing by to come over and offer suggestions.

In Exhibition Hangar A I ran into Dave and Carmen Smith. Actually they saw me and had to shout to get my attention. I inquired about the Sea Plane Base where they camp near their C-185 float plane. Camp life is more laid back down there and they would be happy to escape the crowds after a day touring the convention grounds. A sheltered cove of Lake Winnebago, the Base is a fifteen minute bus ride south along the shore and has a lot of huge shade trees for comfort.

I wandered up to the Fly-mart for a smoke and found Dan and Diane Murphy at their Blue Feather welding torch display. The day was getting hot so their offer of a chair in the shade was gladly accepted. Dan said he had been doing well with sales and had plans to increase production. I strolled a couple of aisles then decided to create a breeze on my sweaty body by biking home. Pedaling past the Antique/Classics I saw that a couple of Beech Staggerwings had arrived and I admired their sculpted lines.

I was relaxing in the shade of our pop-up when Jim and Mikey came home giggling. They had been at the beer tent beating the heat. Jim had a picture on his phone of his smiling face surrounded by the bikini clad waitresses. I decided to go to the showers for relief. On the walk back I watched two F4U Corsairs trading strafing passes down the runway with two FA-18s. The pyro crew on the ground gave each pass a stuttering machine gun burst and an impressive explosion. One might become jaded after days of amazing flying demonstrations but I was still thrilled. Mikey came over with a WAC chart of Wisconsin because he heard me complaining about not finding a Sectional. The WAC chart is larger scale and has less detail but it shows all the airports and that's all I needed.

Our old buddy Vern stopped by with some tastes of his vintner's art. He entertained us with his stories when he could be heard between roaring afterburner passes from the FA-18s. I have heard most of his tales before so I slipped away to attend the evening briefing. The wind was strong out of the southeast so I apologized to Rooby and left her tied down. The last thing I needed for my poor downhill landings was unpredictable wind gusts.

A couple of spots down the fence young Alina stood by her Aerolite 103 giving an interview to another young lady with a smart phone. The interviewer was doing a professional job and asking smart questions. When she lowered her phone for a moment I took the opportunity to butt in and compliment Alina on her flying. She smiled and looked back at the reporter who had her camera running again. There were only a few brave aviators pushing their birds onto the field and I wished I had the confidence to join them. I also hoped that Alina would not feel pressured by the reporter to go fly in these conditions. I don't know if she felt pushed but she did push her Aerolite on to the field with help from her father. He was not objecting so I kinda felt like a weenie for not flying but I did not change my mind. The reporter had followed her inside the fence with her phone shooting the whole process. She was standing to the left and behind the cockpit when Alina fired up her motor. I gasped as the spinning prop nearly separated her hand from her arm. She was blind to the danger however and just casually stepped aside so the Aerolite could taxi away. I sat by Rooby and watched as Alina made one excellent landing after another. I still wasn't tempted to join her.

Back at camp we grilled pork chops with more taters and veggies from Jim's garden. The Twilight Flight Fest was just as noisy as always but the electric hula hoops found the breeze too challenging and demurred. One of them came out on the field without his wing, fired up his backpack

motor and opened smoke canisters on his legs to blow a cloud down the runway. Jim got droopy lids and retired early. I got new neighbors on the north side of the Yacht and we chatted for a bit. A fellow motored by on a golf cart and warned of a big storm coming so I made sure the camp was clean and secure but I didn't drop the shade canopy because the last storm hadn't been so bad. In the middle of the night my tent started dancing and snapping and the rain pelted. Thunder sounded very close and I caught occasional sprinkles of spray in the face from the vent at the top.

## **Friday, July 28, 2023**

I woke to the sounds of a busy airport. I sat on the tent floor beside my air mattress to pull on my shorts and realized I was sitting in a puddle. After piling most of my stuff on top of the bed I mopped up with the shower towel and crawled out to a disaster. The pop-up frame was twisted into a pretzel on top of the picnic table. Jim and I yanked it back into the general shape but three cross braces had pulled their rivets and dangled uselessly. Mikey came over with some short boards and gorilla tape to affect repairs, he said he had done this before.

The ultralight pattern was pretty busy and the overcast was heavy so it was muggy but not terribly hot. I rode over to the Barn and went up the hill to check on Rooby. She was standing tall and fine but there was a small puddle in her baggage compartment. Everything else inside her cabin was dry and I puzzled on that for a bit before riding back to camp for breakfast. Mikey whipped up a delicious egg scramble for us all with bacon on the side. The twins picked at their portions and ignored their mother's urging to eat. I suppose you don't need to consume much when your stomach is the size of a walnut.

Jim scooted off to pick up his mobility vehicle and I pedaled down to meet him at the RANs booth. When I got there he was involved with one of their techs in a discussion about mounting his ADS-B antenna in his S-6. Shelley gave us both big hugs and we talked for a while in their shade. Rolling back towards the center we found the yellow plane I had seen hovering over the runway. It was called Wisk and had several electric fans on its wings half of which could pivot to vertical. We admired it for a long time because it was in an air conditioned building.

The clouds had completely disappeared from the sky and the heat was oppressive so we motored over to the Garmin tent which was also cool. Jim had questions about integrating his ADS-B unit with his GPS and we waited and waited for a tech to talk to. Just like when you're on hold for any service representative on the phone, when we finally got some attention we were immediately referred to someone else and went back on hold. Even though both units were Garmin products nobody seemed to have any answers. They kept telling Jim to go back to the people who sold him the gear and he kept telling them he bought it here from them.

I got overheated and split with Jim to peddle for camp but I stopped to check on my girl on the way. In the ultralight area I spotted an Easy Riser. Two wings with no fuselage and a pusher prop, this design is one of the earliest ultralight contraptions and was the preferred ride of John Moody, UL pioneer and our campground's namesake. While I was checking it out a B-52 bomber lumbered over for one pass and departed to the south. From the smallest to the biggest in one glance at Oshkosh.

I stripped down at home and wiggled my toes in the shaded grass. Out on the main runway five jet fighter types taxied for take off. In matching winter camo livery, four L-39s were led by a much larger Sukhoi Su-27 in a formation take off. The Russian fighter looked menacing, the L-39s just looked fast. After they departed three Mig-17s did a formation take off as well and came right back around for some very fast, afterburner passes. The pyro guys on the ground tried to make it look like they were dropping bombs but they couldn't get the timing right because the Migs were so fast. The Su-27 and his snowflake wing men did a couple of formation passes and then the Pyro guys got a break as several much slower B-25s did bombing runs.

The sound of multiple helicopters got my attention and as I looked to the trees that block my sight line to the south one Army Blackhawk slid slowly into view. I kept my eyes on the trees as seven more emerged and made a stately procession up the main runway. All had their doors open and armed soldiers inside. The last two dangled troops on rappelling lines. "Security will not be an issue today." I thought out loud and made myself chuckle. A C-47, the military version of the DC-3 came right over our camp from west to east as the Blackhawks cleared the area. A KC-135 tanker, fueling boom extended, flew up the runway with two F-22s in tight formation. Two FA-18s ripped up and down the runway with burners lit and it was noisy!

I was getting low on smokes so I took Jim's Ruckus to the Planeview gas station. The Highway Patrol was working the intersection of 26 and 41 and I got nervous because the Ruckus doesn't have a license plate but they paid me no mind. I noticed the wind was getting gusty when I rode back as it rocked me on the little scooter. Back at camp we watched a pretty decent storm march across the northern horizon west to east but the sun was shining on us and the airshow continued. Jim cut up taters and veggies to go with the ribs Mikey was supposed to be grilling. He had left them sitting on the grill and left camp to see Patty Wagstaff. He told us when he got back that his girls HAD to have Patty's autograph so his jump in daddy points made up for his drop in chef points.

The Heritage Flight consisted of two P-51 Mustangs and one F-22 Raptor and after their break off the Raptor really tore up the joint. Vern dropped by again with more stories and sipping treats. Dinner turned out to be delicious if a little late but I had abandoned the thought of flying Rooby anyway. The storm that had passed to our north earlier was spawning others in its wake so Beagle Field never even raised the green flag. After dinner Mikey and I both took the fabric off of our pop-up shades and we all watched the storm approach. Lightning just lit the clouds at first but soon it was splitting the sky and thundering mightily. The huge drops at the front of the system started landing like hand grenades so we all took the hint and retired to our bed rooms.

I felt rather giddy sitting in my dry tent as the rain picked up to a deluge and I took the opportunity to pile up my bags and clothes so only the bottom layer would get wet. I savored the rare experience of being right in the teeth of the storm without suffering discomfort. When I crawled onto the air mattress I pulled up my sleeping bag just to increase the cozy factor. The tent was dancing like the tube man with skinny arms at the auto dealer sales event and there was no delay between the flash of light and the crack of thunder. As I began to nod off I realized that I could still see the lighting with my eyes closed! The vent on top of the tent spit a light sprinkle on my face from time to time but I slept like a baby.

## **Saturday, July 29, 2023**

My dreams were sweet and I woke to the whisper of fans driving air into huge balloons inflating on the grass strip. The storm was but a memory and it had left a calm, warm morning in its wake. The Saturday morning balloon launch is tradition at Beagle Field and there are usually eight or ten colorful participants. Whether they depart or slowly deflate again is dependent on the breeze. A wind from the west would push them over Lake Winnebago and even worse, Lake Michigan so that's a no go. I stuck my head out of the tent flap and watched a couple of them depart safely to the southwest then flopped back into bed. It would have been a mad rush to attend the 6:30 pilot briefing but as it turned out, I should have.

I rolled out at 7:30 and put the fabric back on our picnic shade while Mikey did the same to his. Kristi came down the camp road in her workout gear glowing from exertion. She had participated in the "Runway 5K", another Saturday tradition, and was happy with the results posted on her smart watch. The bag wing bunch filled the blue sky with color even though a breeze was freshening. The twins were playing video games at the picnic table as the fabric flyers landed and the runway behind

our kitchen got very busy with ultralight and light sport fixed wings.

Kristi is a talented stylist and she has kindly attempted to tame my vanishing hair for many years. She came over with her tools in hand and sat me on a high camp chair. I don't spend much time looking in mirrors but lately I had been seeing an old, scraggly, homeless vagrant so I was happy to sit up straight and still. It didn't take long for her to remove the scraggly homeless vagrant part but there was nothing she could do about the old.

Jim has a tent pitched in the bed of his pickup so he borrowed Paul's van to drive to Fond du Lac for his discovery flight in the Magni Gyro. We had cheese balls for breakfast and I rode over to the Barn. Rooby and I had a big trip to accomplish tomorrow so I pulled her cowl and checked everything carefully. It was a beautiful morning and a family of four came up to admire Rooby. When the father asked if they could sit in the grass under her wing to watch the ultralights fly I said "Yes if you give me a hand sumping my tanks." He was happy to hold the plastic container under Rooby's belly while I opened the drain valve in the cockpit. The only drain in her fuel system is a knurled knob on the gascolator behind the back seat. These little valves can drip if there is even the tiniest bit of grit so I checked to make sure the flow was stopped and found no water in the sample.

I left the smiling family in the grass and walked back down the hill to the Barn. The ladies behind the counter bring in a huge box of bakery pastries every morning to go with the coffee and I purchase one every year. I can't possibly eat the whole thing so I usually get it on Monday and take a bite each day but I hadn't been up early enough til this fine morning. I found the Energizer Bunny out in front of the Barn while the rotor craft took the field. He has been volunteering in the ultralight area for a number of years but if I ever got his real name it's lost in the dark canyons of my memory. We were shooting the breeze when a cloud of black smoke rose from somewhere south of the runway. Our view was blocked by the hill so EB jumped in his cart and sped off.

I retrieved my bike from the rack out on Knapp Street rd. and found myself dodging emergency vehicles of all colors. I had to sneak around several on Ripple road to get in Tammi's gate. Rumors were rampant but nobody knew anything for sure. All air traffic ceased and it got very quiet. Surveying the immediate area I saw that the two Lockheeds and a couple of DC-3s had departed and there were empty parking spots all over the field. The turbine powered Grumman Goose and the red and white Widgeon were still sharing their spot on the grass. I expected I would see empty spots in Camp Scholler when I went flying in the evening pattern.

Since there was no flying traffic to watch I pedaled back down to the show and found a present for Tammi at the Fly-mart. I get her a little something every year to thank her for delivering our ice. It's usually a gag gift like bendy straws but I found a nice leather notebook last year for two bucks. I settled for a hokey wall thermometer with a Cardinal painted on it. The sun was warm and I felt my blood sugars dip. A quick look at my monitor confirmed the drop so I headed over to the A&W booth for a cone. The line was pretty long and I couldn't wait so I fished the half melted rescue bar out of my pocket and sat in the shade. The Fly-mart is on a slight rise so I let my eyes wander over the convention grounds for what I expected would be the last time this year.

I did a similar scan of the Antique/Classic area and the Contemporary rows as I pedaled back up Knapp. When I got to Ripple road I was met with several uniformed law enforcement types who forbade my left turn for home. Whatever had caused that black smoke earlier certainly brought out all of the cops. I explained that I was just going down to the camp entrance but they said orders were orders and that was that. The sun was still brutal so I persuaded the least stern looking one to let me push my bike through the ditch to a spot under the black walnut trees. I sat in the shade until some other poor soul who just wanted to go home attracted their stern attention and I slipped away through the shadows.

It was still early afternoon and the silence on the field was eerie. Someone said that two rotor craft had suffered a mid-air collision but nobody had any details. Kristi offered me a sandwich while the girls were eating lunch but I was still buzzing on my rescue bar so I declined. About the time that

the afternoon airshow would normally start I saw a flash of silver and looked out over the main runway. A highly polished Lockheed Constellation departed to the south glimmering against the blue sky. Whenever there is an incident that requires rescue vehicles the airport must shut down until they are available again but a departing classic airliner probably doesn't require such precautions.

Jim came in from his discovery flight and I asked him how he got past the police blockade on Ripple road. He said he sat on the road for almost an hour before he called Paul. Paul directed him down Knapp to an entrance in the security fence past the Barn and when he got there he was initially refused entrance but Paul ignored their warnings and opened the gate. Paul is a physically imposing presence and I suspect he's used to getting his way. They drove the perimeter road right past the north end of Beagle Field and came in the back way.

Kristi made a sandwich for Jim and he related his gyro experience. He said it was similar to a fixed wing in handling but he couldn't get used to the shake from the rotor. It did accomplish a very short landing but the take off run seemed long. My little fantasy about being a snowbird was losing its novelty anyway. When we heard that one of the accident aircraft was a gyro that sealed the deal.

About 3:00 the authorities apparently decided they didn't need every single rescue truck at the scene of the incident and we saw several rumbling up the taxiway to show center. The afternoon airshow started with the roar of two Mig-17s in full afterburner. The snow camo Sukhoi fighter jet and his friends did another impressive formation take off and returned to pass over the field. Jim got out the rest of his shrimp and we snacked happily. There was a cumulus build up to the northwest and about 4:00 it sprinkled a bit but the sun came back out and brought the heat. The twins were practicing cartwheels on the grass and trying to ride their bikes without training wheels. They both did pretty well. Then they came over to the picnic table with Oreos and shared with their uncles.

When I biked out Ripple road to go to the briefing it was open to traffic but police were still stationed at the intersection. Mark Spang was obviously shaken as he addressed the few pilots in attendance. He told us the incident was indeed a mid air crash and three of our brethren had perished. The site was sealed for the NTSB and since it was under our traffic pattern we could not fly over. Fatal accidents are extremely rare at Oshkosh and I don't think any have happened in our little corner of the convention. Mark said we might not even get to depart the show tomorrow but if winds favored a take off to the north, away from the incident site we might get permission. I checked on Rooby and found a note from Kevin, a seasonal neighbor back home.

Back at camp we heard that there had been another accident, a T-6 had supposedly spun into Lake Winnebago. The T-6 was the advanced trainer for fighter pilots in WWII, preparing them for the P-51s, Corsairs and the like that only had one seat. She has a reputation for being a tough teacher but many survive today in civilian hands.

The airshow continued but the mood around the grounds seemed darker than what the bright, sunny day should foster. A KC-135 did a mock refueling run with a huge C-17 and several solo aerobatic acts left twirling smoke trails on the blue sky. Every few minutes a fighter jet would test our hearing with a screaming afterburner pass.

Old friends Dana and Meredith Holladay dropped by with their daughter Alex. They own a flight school in Florida and usually can only squeeze a day or two at Oshkosh out of their busy schedule. Alex was twice as tall as the last time I saw her and the spitting image of her pretty mom.

When the Heritage Flight ended the airshow I rode back over to the Barn to make final preparations for tomorrow's departure. The crew allowed me to taxi Rooby to the fuel shed to top her off. Gary the gas man filled me in on his health challenges and we said our farewells. We have enjoyed a lot of ten minute conversations over the years, he at the hand pump and me at the nozzle. Its' amazing how quickly a little kindness can form a lasting friendship. When Rooby had drunk her fill I taxied back up the hill and tied her down.

Back at camp Mikey was cooking chicken and sweetcorn when Jim got a call from Steve Wattnem. Steve and I shared a hangar for many years until he retired and moved away from Two

Harbors. I don't know how he got Jim's number but Jim gave him directions to our spot. A few minutes later he appeared with a friend and a gift for me. The square bottle in the brown paper bag made it obvious. I used to bring two liters of Cuervo Gold for my ten day vacation and nearly finish them both but my appetite has diminished. This year I only brought one and I would be going home with one and a half. It was nice catching up with Steve and as we talked another visitor showed up with a gift. Mike Ostrander of the blue Quicksilver MX handed me a can of beer. EAA, in honor of its 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary had printed special labels for Stone Arch ale. This one celebrated ultralight aviation and Mike was proud to point out his plane on the label. He even signed it for me.

The Night Airshow was as brilliant as Wednesday's and our conversation was punctuated by oohs and wows. All too soon the Wall of Fire ended the celebration and we said goodnight to our guests. I took the fabric off of the pop-up shade and collapsed the frame. I had my hand in the wrong place when I released the button to telescope one of the legs and got a nasty blood blister. Just another souvenir. I shoved all my clothes into bags and got organized in the tent but I had one more thing to do before retiring. It is a longstanding tradition with me to stroll the entire Moody Campground when it gets quiet on the last night. It's bittersweet. I feel blessed to have experienced another magical week in aviator heaven but I am sad that it's ending.

## **Sunday, July 30, 2023**

I woke at 6:30 feeling refreshed and excited about the day. Jim was folding his tent so we could start loading his pickup box with most of what had been our happy home away from home. The day was clear and warm but the breeze was coming directly from where I was going so I braced myself for a long, slow trip. Paul and Phil came down the hill in Paul's van to tote my load over to Rooby. Phil had a tiny Champion spark plug on a key ring that he found in the Fly-mart and gave it to me. I said I would have to pierce my ear and wear it. When my untouched ukulele went in the van Phil commented that we hadn't played any music all week so I opened the case and strummed a couple of chords. Kristi brought the twins over for goodbye hugs and wishes for safe travels. Those girls are so sweet my blood sugar went up twenty three points.

I heard someone call "Jerry!" and did not respond. No one calls me Jerry here. When I heard it again I recognized the voice and turned to find Nancy Jacobsen standing by Paul's van. She and her husband Rick had been the Campground Host volunteers for the whole thirty years that I have been camping here but sadly, Rick had recently passed. Nancy hadn't attended the show this year but a memorial had been arranged for Rick today so she made the trip from Omaha. I told her I had flown my new girl to the show and she asked me what color she was. I just said "I named her Rooby". We had a big hug and wished each other well. When Jim's truck was stuffed Paul drove me over to Rooby's spot and I packed her up.

Editors of the aviation magazines we all subscribe to like to examine aircraft incidents and accidents in an attempt to prevent similar bad outcomes. They often describe the details as links in a chain any one of which, if broken, might have averted the disaster. The first link in my chain was my excited and perhaps a little nervous attitude. This led to the second link, inattention to detail. I had filled Rooby's tanks last night so I assumed they were still full. I found out much later that Paul had noticed the sight gauges in Rooby's wing roots and told me they looked low to him. That's the great thing about hearing loss, surprises! He assumed I'd heard him so he helped me pull her out on the field a bit before 9:00. It was a beautiful summer morning and I was on my Field of Dreams. Rooby sprang to life, she was as excited as I. I fumbled with my shoulder harness as we taxied downhill to the take off point. Just before we got there Gary ran up alongside and stuffed a gas receipt in the open window vent. When I turned my attention to the flagger he already had the green side of his paddle pointed at me so I swung into position. I felt rushed, another link in the chain.

There is a mnemonic I always recite before take off: BRATTT. I had just fastened my Belts, The Radio is not necessary at Beagle Field so I skipped that, Altimeter setting is different depending on which end of the field you're on so I skipped that, get the picture? Links in the accident chain were adding up fast. Traffic is the first T and the flagger took care of that so I skipped it, Tankage means check the fuel tanks and I knew (thought I knew) they were full so I didn't look. The last T means Top in Miss Chaos since she has a tip over canopy but for Rooby it means door latches. I didn't skip that one but I was still feeling rushed so I waved at the flag man and hit the throttle. We climbed quickly to 300 feet and turned onto the crosswind leg of the pattern. I took one last look at the convention grounds before turning south to exit the course. We flew five miles down Hwy 26 at 300 feet as required then began climbing and turning northwest for home. I punched in Steven's Point on the GPS since that airport is directly in line with Medford, our fuel stop.

That was when I checked my fuel level and about had a heart attack. Rooby's fuel gauges are clear tubes plugged in to the tanks at the top and bottom so they fill to the exact same level and offer a quick scan in the cockpit. I checked them twice, three times and each scan reported the same condition, nearly empty. Fuel exhaustion and mismanagement is the most popular way to ruin a pilot's day and every time I read such a report I swear it could never happen to me. Doh! I didn't waste any time wondering where all that gas went, I needed a new plan. Steven's Point was nearly 60 miles away and I couldn't return to Oshkosh so I altered course to Waupaca. At 30 miles it may have been out of reach as well but it was my nearest alternate. I pulled the power back to the most fuel efficient setting and began searching the ground for potential landing sites. Farm fields would be full of mature crops on the cusp of August and the roads I saw were not very wide or very straight. Mostly what I saw was trees. I knew there was freeway to the east but I wanted to stay on a bee line for the airport. The headwind was mercifully light at this early hour but it was still a headwind.

A flash of orange caught my peripheral vision and I turned my head to see a cute light sport high wing pass under Rooby's belly and continue on a northwest heading like nothing had happened. Most likely another Oshkosh departure. She had approached from our five o'clock so I might not have seen her sooner but it reminded me that the ground ahead was not all I should be looking at.

Twenty three nervous minutes went by before I saw Waupaca's welcoming runway and by then no fuel was in the gauges. I radioed a straight in approach for runway 31 and Rooby set me down gently. With her tail wheel on the ground whatever fuel remaining went directly to the rear withdrawal fitting so we had enough to taxi to the pumps. When I pulled off my headset I realized how much I had been sweating. I hopped out into a warm, sunny day, walked over to the shade of the hangars and gave myself a stern talking-to. "How could you have been so stupid!?" Then I reasoned the better question was "How could you be so lucky as to survive such a colossal blunder?"

When I walked back to the pumps Matt, the airport manager strolled over. I was about to pull the AvGas (leaded aviation fuel) hose out of the cabinet and he asked, "Would you rather burn MoGas?" (unleaded auto fuel). I said I always prefer MoGas but I didn't see it here and he offered to go get me some at the local gas station. He put three red five gallon gas containers in his pickup and drove off. I was flabbergasted, that kind of service is unheard of at most airports but it turned out to be just another link in an unending chain. Rooby's two stroke Rotax engine needs oil mixed with the gas and I use Amsoil 100 to 1 Sabre oil. I climbed up on a ladder left by the pumps and measured the correct amount for seven and a half gallons into each wing tank. At home I always put in the oil first so the churning fuel from the pumps mixes it well. Soon Matt returned and handed the gas up to me on the ladder. It's a little awkward reaching ahead and tipping the heavy plastic cans to hit a three inch hole so I poured deliberately and spilled only a little on Rooby's fabric wings. When I finished and returned the ladder to its place I was happy to see the fuel sight gauges full to the top. Matt and I went into his office and settled up with a credit card and copious thanks.

The wind was rising out of the northwest when I finished a thorough walk around inspection and mounted up. I felt good, ready to resume my trek homeward. Oblivious to the fact that I was still



adding links to a potentially disastrous chain of events I chose runway 31 even though it was the short one and then opted for an intersection departure shortening it further. Rooby doesn't need much real estate to become airborne. A truly penitent sinner for my earlier transgressions I fingered the beads of my mnemonic rosary twice. B.R.A.T.T.T. Everything looked good so I announced my intentions on the Unicom frequency and brought in the power. We were off and climbing in mere seconds and I experienced the thrill that I always get when leaving the planet. At about 300 feet the power seemed to sag a little so I gave the throttle a quick bump to make sure it was wide open. The trusty Rotax motor burped and slammed to a dead stop. Legacy aircraft with their direct drive, low compression engines often see the propeller windmill when they fail but a high compression, geared engine stops immediately. It got real quiet. Fortunately I had spent six years slapping my students on the back of their helmet if they failed to lower the nose of the Dragonfly fast enough when I simulated a power loss so I didn't hesitate. I jammed the stick all the way forward and Rooby responded. Now looking almost straight down I realized barely any runway remained. I maintained the steep angle to build speed for the flare and when her wheels chirped on the pavement I hit the brakes hard. We only traveled about twenty three feet off the pavement into the grass before her momentum was spent. Crickets chirped. I started breathing again. Perhaps I uttered a curse, I don't remember.

Like the idiot I was proving to be I cranked the starter with no result then just sat still for a moment composing my thoughts. Finally I threw off my belts, opened the door and stepped out. The ground was rather soft so I could only move one wheel at a time, pulling hard on one wing strut, then the other snaking back to the pavement. Once there I could just pull on the propeller and go straight. There was a bank of hangars 50 yards away so that's where we stopped. I should have been agitated beyond furious with myself but the sun was shining, the breeze was blowing and I was standing on my own two feet. Life is a long, strange trip and I'm still on the bus. Amen.

I dug in the baggage compartment for my tools. I had only brought a 3/8 wrench and a Phillips screwdriver but that was all I needed to open the top engine cowl. Everything looked completely normal so I wiggled wires and felt around for fluids but found no anomalies. Two stroke engines are the essence of simplicity, all they need to run is gas and spark. I didn't have a spark plug wrench so I went for the carburetors. The Amsoil lubricant I use is blue in color but in a 100 :1 ratio it barely stains the premium auto gas I burn so when I pull the float bowls from the bottom of the carbs I just see fuel. Not this time, it looked like grape jelly.

A light bulb began to flicker over my stupid skull. In the fueling process I had poured all that oil into empty tanks and with nothing to dilute it the oil just formed a nice little puddle around the aft withdrawal fitting. The gas went in slowly without the pressure that I get from the pumps so the oil saw no good reason to disperse. There was enough clean gas in the lines from the tanks to taxi, pray and launch but at 300 feet it became straight oil. Two strokes don't run on oil, I proved that. All they need is gas and spark but it must be clean gas and a strong spark.

I had the culprit, I needed a plan. It came to me slowly as I walked nearly a mile around the hangars and back to the terminal. Matt was sympathetic and kindly loaned me what I needed plus his pickup to haul it all. With borrowed wrench I pulled the spark plugs and wiped them down. Matt had suggested that I burn off any remaining oil and loaned his propane torch for the job. I let the plugs lay on the engine block in the sun and started draining the fuel tanks into the five gallon cans that had brought gas from the gas station. The only drain in the system is that little knurled knob that I had operated only yesterday back at Beagle Field for a sump check. In the bright sun I could see the stains on Rooby's belly trailing away from the drain hose. Another culprit caught, this stupid little valve was the gas thief. I had to open and close it a dozen or more times because I could only take five gallons at a whack. The valve sits behind the back seat so I had to throw my baggage out on the grass, tip the seat forward and reach down and back. I opened it as quickly as I could then dived under the fuselage to line up the flow with the small opening in the red can. The breeze fought me by blowing the stream around so I got wet arms and an occasional spit in the face for my efforts. With all three cans filled I

climbed the borrowed ladder and refilled the tanks going in reverse order so the most polluted fuel went in last. I was sure I had depleted my allotment of dumb luck for the day so I repeated the process two more times, it took an hour of precious daylight.

With decent fuel in the tanks I turned my attention back to the carburetors. With the float bowls on I ran the electric fuel pump for two seconds, then removed them and dumped out the grape jelly. I repeated the process several times until the gas looked clean. The spark plugs went back in and I crossed my fingers. Whispering sweet nothings to my girl I turned her key. She spun and spun but didn't speak. It was a warm day but the engine was cold so I gave the primer a quick pump and boom, she fired! I worked the throttle as she spit and sputtered and pumped black smoke from her muffler. Finally she gave a rush of power and settled into a smooth idle. I was elated, I had atoned for my sins and I had my sweet Rooby back with plenty of daylight remaining. I should have known there was more trouble to come.

Loading the ladder, tanks and borrowed tools I drove back to the terminal to give Matt the good news. He gave me a golf cart ride back out to my girl and wished me safe travels. Installing the cowl and packing the bags took a while but soon I was back in Rooby's cockpit and ready to go. She wouldn't start! I had cranked her starter so long the first time that the battery had given up the ghost. I took a moment to remind myself that life was good and compared to our other misadventures a dead battery was merely annoying.

I dug the tools back out, removed the battery and began walking. For a guy who planned to go by air I was sure doing a lot of foot travel. Matt was surprised to see me but of course he had a charger with an AGM setting and set me up. I plopped into a soft chair in the cool terminal with reading glasses and a magazine but I didn't read a word, I was out like a light. I slept for twenty three minutes and when I checked the charger it was showing a green light. Matt was kind enough to run me back out on the golf cart and for the third time in one day I thanked him and said goodbye.

This time the stars were in alignment and soon we were taxiing for take off. Putting lessons learned to use, I chose the longer runway and started right at the beginning. Rooby lifted us gracefully into the afternoon turbulence but I didn't take a deep breath until we were half way to Steven's Point. Soon the wonder of my high perspective crept back into my consciousness and I smiled, no grinned. Popcorn clouds peppered the deep blue and left shadows of dogs and elephants on the forest canopy below. Progress was slow but eventually Medford airport appeared and Rooby did a nice short landing on a mile long runway. Of course the pumps were on the other end so I opened the door while we taxied, and taxied. Rooby drank her fill and I calculated (hoped ) that we would have enough daylight to get home. I was assuming the wind would go down as the sun lost its power. I didn't bother to taxi all the way back down the runway, just went a hundred yards or so, spun around and blasted off.

This was the long last leg of an eventful journey so I got comfortable and watched the forests and rivers of northern Wisconsin slip by below. The drone of Rooby's motor became a monk's chant and I experience an overwhelming sense of peace and serenity. I knew that there was nothing in the world that I would rather be doing and I savored the feeling. Shadows lengthened on the ground and the clouds thinned to blend with the Canadian wildfire haze as we slowly winged north. Out of that haze I spied the unmistakable curve of Park Point, the longest fresh water sandbar in the world. Home? Not so fast. The bumpy air had smoothed nicely but the headwind persisted and our progress was painfully slow. The sun had become an orange ball as it slowly lowered itself into the haze and the point remained distant. I caught myself stealing furtive glances as the ball grew bigger and sank lower in the sky.

When at last we flew over the Sky Harbor runway the orange ball had not yet touched the tree line and I knew we would make it. There were a few late diners enjoying the evening on the deck at Gramma's as we banked over the lift bridge and headed up the shore. The headwind became a friendly crosswind and our speed over the ground improved greatly. The streetlights were on in Duluth but I could still see well. I normally would take the shoreline tour but instead I put TWM into the GPS and

made a beeline. The sun had become an orange slice on the horizon when Helgeson Field came into view but seven clicks on the radio's transmit button turned on the airport lights. A beautiful sight. The windsock was limp so I set up a long final approach for runway 33 but when we got close 5 Whitetails strolled out on the grass. Sheesh! We gave them a good buzz job and swung onto a downwind leg for 06. The approach was good, the runway clear and Rooby kissed the pavement sweetly. After dragging that heavy chain of events all day, link #23 finally broke it and the disastrous event was averted. The tension bubble in my head exploded and the sparks spelled out RELIEF!

When I shut my girl down at the hangar I thought I heard a contented sigh, I'm sure I did. I walked right up and planted a kiss on her spinner and patted her cowl. I swore a solemn oath that I would not put her in that kind of jeopardy again and she just smiled. When the Superior Dragonflyers was operating we would end each long day with a "debrief" at the Palace Bar in Superior and our first toast was always, "No blood spilled and no metal bent!" That seemed appropriate for this long day.

The FAA cites "Education" as the main reason they allow us to build our own airplanes and creating Rooby was like a Bachelor of Arts degree. Operating Rooby has me on track for a Master's Degree but I'm not there yet. I think the learning is more important than the label and I continue to learn with every flight. Education is never cheap but I will gladly pay whatever is necessary to continue my studies.

My father was a pilot and one of my earliest and fondest memories is listening to him tell flying stories to his friends. That lit a fire in me that burns to this day. A pretty girl can grab my attention but if she's standing next to an airplane, I'm studying the plane. Like my father I've always been just a working wage earner so I assumed studying and dreaming would be the limit of my participation but also like my father the dream finally drove me to figure out a way. Once I achieved my certificate I couldn't afford airplane rental fees and I was disappointed. Then I learned about the Experimental Aircraft Association and everything changed. I'm still on the bottom rung of the income ladder but now I can fly on any good day for a few dollars. Through the political lobbying efforts and educational programs of the EAA a regular guy like me can fulfill a monumental dream and I'm grateful. The yearly convention is my pilgrimage to this amazing institution and my reunion with like minded friends who have become family.

I have lived a lot of really good years and done some amazing things but 2023 could very well have been the best year yet. I'm thankful to my son for introducing me to his lucky number choice. I'm also very grateful that mine is 23. I hope your lucky number works out for you and I hope your dreams come true.

.....Happy Landings!.....

