

## Cornfields for Clouds

By Phill Bragg

*After a half hour of relishing my view of the Illinois farmland, we passed just south of Decatur and in the space of fifteen miles or so I saw no less than six private grass airfields. I wanted to drop in and visit them all but, after already suffering a three-day delay, we flew on toward Macomb and Iowa. Another half hour passed and we were north of Springfield and the Abraham Lincoln Airport, careful to stay just north of their Class C airspace. A few more miles and the trouble began. At first it was just a flicker of the oil pressure gauge needle, but it caught my eye immediately. I don't have many gauges in my cockpit so, when one is out of sorts, it's really conspicuous.*



*We soon crossed over the rambling Illinois River that flows down from Chicago and it looked as if the oil pressure fluctuation had although I'd rather for any gauge but that one to flicker. Flickering airspeeds and altitudes I can tolerate, but not oil pressures. Oh, did it again!*

*'This ain't good', I said to no one in particular. In the eight years I had been flying the Fleet, I'd only seen that happen once and it due to an almost too low quantity of oil in the engine, which had been my fault.*

*'Surely, I had put enough oil in the Kinner's oil tank this morning', I said to no one in particular again. I distinctly remembered doing it. Well, apparently I hadn't because about the time I began surveying the endless cornfields below us for somewhere to land, the oil pressure gauge went to zero. Dang it!*

*We were only eight hundred feet above the ground, so there wasn't much time for decision-making. Those damn cornfields were everywhere. Then I saw the gravel road off the right wing which ran nice and straight, paralleling my course. I banked steeply and turned a hundred and eighty degrees to the right which set me up for landing on the road heading west rather than east, which would've had me looking directly into the low morning sun upon touchdown. At first I was going to shut off my motor with my mixture lever but decided against it. I knew if there were just a few quarts of oil remaining in my engine that it wouldn't seize up at idle power. And I might need a quick burst of power to salvage a poorly planned approach.*

*And indeed I did because, in my sloppy haste to get on the ground, I touched down in a three-point, nose-high attitude, which severely limited my forward visibility on the narrow road. If a pilot chooses, he can land a tailwheel airplane on the two main wheels, a tail-high attitude; it allows him to better see over the airplane's nose, among other things. Three-point landings are when all three wheels touch the ground at the same time. These are slower and theoretically safer, but make it harder to see ahead of the airplane. Well, I should have opted for a wheel landing on such a narrow, makeshift runway. That way I might have stayed in the middle of the road, but I didn't.*

*Thank the Lord that the ditches were gradually sloping and not the kind that drop straight down for a few feet. My tailwheel went in first, followed by my right main wheel when I overcorrected with too much right rudder. I knew that if my beautiful wooden propeller struck the ground my excursion would be over and I'd be taking the Fleet home on a flatbed trailer.*

*I had to add power to come out of that ditch and, by some as yet undiscovered law of physics, I managed to get my airplane back up on the dirt road without hitting any signposts or telephone poles with my wing. I made a quick mental note to thank the Illinois Department of Transportation for not placing their power poles as close to the roadside as they do in North Carolina.*

*Finally, we came to a stop smack dab in the middle of the road just short of a wing-high signpost warning of an upcoming railroad track. Lord have mercy, that was a close one! I finally shut my poor motor down, silently thanking it for its unfaltering effort when the chips were down. I was glad I hadn't shut it off prior to landing or I would not have been able to extricate us from that ditch.*

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*I sat there quietly for just a second in order to restore my breathing and check my underwear. Then I went into that mode with which most pilots are familiar: Let's get the hell outta here before anyone notices how badly we just screwed up! So, I unbuckled my seatbelt and climbed out of the cockpit to survey the damage to my flying machine.*

*My propeller had touched neither a blade of grass nor a clod of dirt. Unbelievable. But I had badly scraped the bottom of both lower wing tips. The right one while going into the ditch and the left one while coming out of it. There was no structural damage though, only cosmetic, which I could easily repair. My poor airplane; it tolerates a lot of ineptness on my part. I meekly apologized to it several times.*

*Checking my engine oil level, I found it to indeed be at a fourth of its total capacity. Yikes! How the hell had I miscalculated that? Fortunately, I had plenty of extra engine oil on board, which I added to my oil tank as quickly as I could, hoping to get back in the air as soon as possible. Landing on a public road isn't exactly illegal, particularly in an emergency, but I knew it could take on a circus-like atmosphere once deputy sheriffs and newspaper reporters began to arrive. We were hidden for the time being by the impressively tall corn. I stowed the now empty oil cans, double-checked my engine oil quantity, and, just when I thought I'd abscond unnoticed, a vehicle approached. It was coming over the slight rise in the road where I had touched down just minutes earlier. I saw the middle-aged couple inside the big SUV as they pulled slowly alongside the Fleet, wide-eyed amazement on their faces.*

*'I bet you didn't think you'd see an airplane sitting here this morning, did you?' I said jokingly.*

*'No, we didn't', the woman replied, laughing. 'Do you need some help?'*

*I explained that I was about to start my engine and they could help me with that. So the man walked over and helped me spin the Fleet around so I could take off toward the east. It was my only choice since the railroad track and several signposts blocked a westward departure. The Kinner sputtered to life easily, happy to have ample oil no doubt, and I climbed in and buckled up while the nice gentleman held my tail section. I gave him a thumbs up and then he and his wife, as we'd planned, drove back up to the top of the rise to watch for any oncoming traffic.*

*Once they were in position, I added power and was fifty feet in the air as I passed over their heads, waving to them. I banked to the left toward Macomb and realized I had not even asked their names. They had been graciously instrumental in my expedient departure from amidst the towering cornfields. I guess they had a good story to tell now and, of course, ample pictures on their cellphone.*

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This story is taken from the Spring 2016 Fleet Club-Letter. It is excerpted from Phill Bragg's upcoming book, *Cornfields For Clouds*, the next installment of his Fleet biplane series. It will be available in December, 2016. His first book, *Needle, Ball, and Alcohol*, was published in 2014, and may be purchased at <http://www.amazon.com/Needle-Ball-Alcohol-Biplane-Excursion-ebook/dp/B00RXZGSZQ>. The book tells the story of a cross-US flight Phill and his friend Wayland Cooke took in a Fleet during the hot summer of 2012.

## Chapter Work Project

Our chapter work project on Gary S.'s RV8 will begin on the afternoon of May 5. More info will follow. If you're interested in working on the project, contact Gary at [gandtschroeder@hotmail.com](mailto:gandtschroeder@hotmail.com) or call his cell at 381-3492.

**Next Meeting:**  
Tuesday, April 12

at **Chapter 39 Clubhouse**

**6:30 Hangar Talk**  
Gary S. will provide treats.

**7:00 Meeting**

**Program:** Jerry Densmore (our safety officer) will give a presentation.



## Chapter 39

### Officers

President	John Glasford
Vice President	Mike Harmon
Secretary	Gary Schroeder
Treasurer	Scott Christiansen

### Volunteers

Newsletter & Web Manager	Molly Benkert
Young Eagles	Brenda Nolan
Safety Officer	Jerry Densmore

**Tech Advisor** Jerry Densmore

## For Sale

Cessna 1971 150L TT7002 Engine  
TT7002 TSMOH 450 TSNP 450 02/2016  
Extensive annual  
Plane is flown regularly and is priced to sell. Call or email for further details.

Hanger at 49B Sturgis SD airport. 3  
Cessna/Piper etc airplanes fit nicely.  
Recent Hydraulic Door.

Bear Butte Flying Club  
P.O. Box 145  
Sturgis SD 57785

Bruce Bowen Sec/Treas 605 490-  
1139 [bgunssturgis@gmail.com](mailto:bgunssturgis@gmail.com)

## Have you paid your 2016 chapter dues?

A number of you haven't. Checks should be made out to EAA Chapter 39 and mailed to Scott Christiansen at 13091 Mission Hill Loop, RC 57702



### April Birthdays:

Steve Berke—20<sup>th</sup>  
Marv Hyde—25<sup>th</sup>

## TREASURER'S REPORT

*By Scott Christiansen*

Balance brought forward.....	\$2141.66
Income:	
Dues x 4.....	80.00
Donations for Grove.....	110.00
Balance on hand.....	\$2331.66

# March Minutes

By Gary Schroeder

- Meeting was held at the Club house
- John called the meeting to order at 7:00
- Minutes read and approved
- Treasures report given, balance \$2141.61
- Al Neal's Birthday this month

## Old Business

- The brochure was discussed and Arie showed us a draft to get our suggestions
- Milo advised the Tri-motor should still come, but it is not confirmed yet
- Gary will send Molly an email to schedule times to start work on the RV 8 for those interested
- Molly needed more articles for the newsletters.
- John requested new ideas for meeting programs and will set up a planning meeting. He will send out an email to let us know the time and place.

## New Business

- There was discussion about a memorial for Grove and to have his name on the wall at Oshkosh. There as a motion by Dan for the chapter to pay \$350.00 for the name plate and donations are welcome. Second By Tim. The motion passed. Molly will send out an email that we will have a donation can at the next two meetings. (**See editor's note.**)
- There was discussion about the Young Eagle background checks to help clarify what is required.
- Pete offered his Wag Aero Cubby as a project the club could work on.
- Robert Allen will be the speaker in May about changes in the medical regulations.
- It was brought up the Bear Butte Flying Club is going to dissolve and the aircraft are to be sold.
- Dwight advised that Ameri-King had their TSO rescinded, so lots of equipment may need to be removed or replaced.
- Matt advised the Powder River MOA will be very active for a while, so confirm when it is active and keep an eye open for traffic.

## Program

- Matt showed us tons of features using the Foreflight App on an iPad. What a great and informative presentation.

- Meeting adjourned
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**Ed. Note:** Oliver is doing the bio for Grove's memorial plaque and will share it at our April meeting. Donations may be given or mailed to Scott Christiansen at 13091 Mission Hill Loop, RC 57702. The chapter will make up the difference between donations and \$350 cost.



# Project Update

By Pete Shouldis

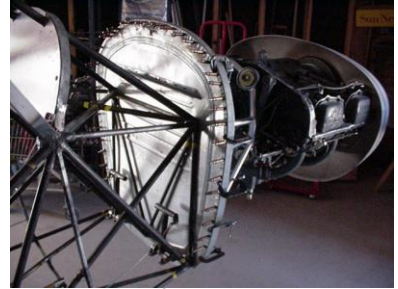
The RANS S-7 is still a work in progress, as it has been for a long time!!!! The U-Haul is my portable hangar/storage.



header



header tank



firewall



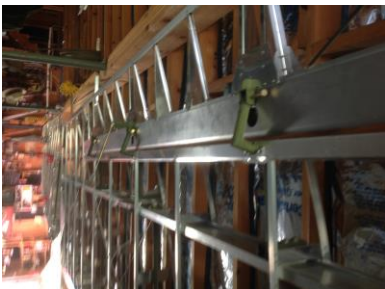
tail feathers



nose and boot3



wing tanks



Wings with ailerons



wings



ring

## In Memoriam

Two of our long-time friends passed away in March

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**Grove Rathbun**



Grove earned his private pilot's license at 17 and had 65 continuous years in the air. Grove joined the US Air Force in 1954 and honorably discharged in 1955. He was a member of the Air National Guard in both Duluth, MN and Pittsburgh, PA for more than 27 years, flying fighter jets, retiring as a Lieutenant Colonel with a rating as Command Pilot in 1981. He continued his love of flying in his own Cessna 182. For his knowledge, professionalism and safety record, he was named a "Wright Brothers Master Pilot" by the F.A.A. in 2005 for having flown 50 or more years. He served several terms recently as the president of the South Dakota Pilots Association.

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I met Bill Mitchell in 1966 when I got stationed at Ellsworth AFB.; he was the very first Sgt I worked under on EC135's aircraft. I know Bill was stationed at Ellsworth in 1957 and was one of the first crew chiefs to pick up new KC135s Tanker Aircraft from the factory that were assigned to Ellsworth AFB. Bill was also assigned to Guam AF B. He always like building his own aircraft and flying them. He had built a couple small Cessnas and then a Champ. While in Guam, he built a Midget Mustang; he crated it up and I brought it back to states for him. His last assignment was back at Ellsworth AFB were he was Alert Branch Chief. Bill retired in 1971 as a Senior Master Sgt. He then went to work at B&L Aviation as head mechanic. I worked with him there over the years inspecting aircraft for major annual inspections to be air worthy. While there he built several aircraft for different pilots, worked with Vern Kraemer, and restored old aircraft. From there Bill was picked to go work on the new B-1 Bomber Aircraft in California, where he was an inspector on the assembly line. Bill then retired from Rockwell Corporation and moved back to Rapid City.. He still worked on aircraft and flew them until his later years. It was hard for him to sell his aircraft, as he had such a love for flying and building them.

**Bill Mitchell**



*By Roger Scott*