

Wingtips

Experimental Aircraft Association

Chapter 55



Chapter 55 Hangar - Mason Jewett Field

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50 FLAGS TO KITTY HAWK By Gregg Cornell

Late in 2002, I read about an EAA initiative that was to be a part of the Centennial of Flight celebration. That program was called “50 Flags to Kitty Hawk”—every state flag was to be flown to Kitty Hawk by a pilot selected by EAA. I immediately wrote my essay to enter the competition because I hoped to have the Glasair done and thought it would be great to fly the Michigan flag in a homebuilt completed in the Centennial year. Another Chapter 55 member, Mark Jacobs also entered his essay in the competition. Later in the spring, EAA announced that a pilot from the Detroit area had been selected to fly the Michigan flag.

We were all disappointed that a Chapter 55 member wasn’t chosen, but Mike Arntz contacted the pilot selected and arranged for the Michigan flag to be presented to him at our Mason Centennial Celebration in August. Senator Garcia was in Mason to present the flag on Saturday August 16, but the Detroit pilot was a “no-show”. Subsequently, Mike attempted several contacts with the selected pilot so we could get him the flag but he did not reply!

I kept an eye on the 50 Flags website to see when the Michigan flag would make it to Kitty Hawk, but every time I looked there was a blank for Michigan. We were starting to wonder whether Michigan would be the only state without a flag in North Carolina for the Centennial Celebration.

When I got home from the airport on Tuesday November 18, I listened to a voicemail left by Bob Warner from EAA Headquarters. Bob indicated that the pilot chosen to fly the Michigan flag to Kitty Hawk would not be able to get it there and he asked if I would be interested in making the trip. After careful consideration (5 seconds), I checked the weather outlook and called Bob back to let him know that we would get the flag to Kitty Hawk on Friday the 21st!

I immediately called Mike Arntz to tell him the good news. Mike and Renee had worked very hard to get the state flag presented by Senator Garcia at our Mason Centennial event in

August. Ironically, I was the “stand-in” for the flag presentation by Senator Garcia and now, we were going to be able to deliver that flag to Kitty Hawk! I asked Mike if he would like to be co-pilot for the flight and after careful consideration (1 second) he said YES.

After coordinating with EAA headquarters, the Park Service at Kitty Hawk, and the Michigan Aeronautics Commission, we were set to launch out of Mason for Charlottesville, Virginia on Thursday afternoon. Mike and I agreed to meet at the airport for a 2:00 pm departure. I was quite surprised when I got to the airport and found Mike standing next to the Saratoga with TV crews from Channels 6 and 10. They were waiting to interview us before we left. I soon found out that Mike and Renee had gotten a press release out the night before and it got a response! Tom Botsford and Mike’s friend Randy were also there to witness our departure. We loaded the plane, got the maps organized and were in the air by 2:15 pm.

The weather for both Thursday and Friday was forecast to be excellent and we were not disappointed. As we climbed out of Mason, it was clear and truly 50+ miles visibility. I filed IFR for the flight down despite the good weather because I like to practice working in the IFR radio environment. However, when I called for the clearance after getting airborne, the flight plan was not in the system. That is the second time that has happened to me after filing with DUATS on the Internet, so from now on I will call it in to Flight Service. Lansing Departure was very cooperative and got us a clearance quickly. Fortunately, the missing flight plan was the only glitch in the entire two days of flying.

We leveled off at 11,000 feet and cruised to Virginia with a 30-knot tailwind and a groundspeed of 180 knots. The air was perfectly smooth and the visibility was so good that when we crossed the border between Ohio and West Virginia, you could see the mountains in Virginia over 100 miles away. Our route took us just west of Toledo, east of Columbus, to Parkersburg,

West Virginia, over the Appalachian Mountains and into Charlottesville, VA. We landed at Charlottesville in a strong crosswind and witnessed a spectacular sunset behind the mountains as we refueled.

The FBO in Charlottesville was really nice and the service was great! After a short wait, the shuttle arrived from the Hampton Inn. The University of Virginia is in Charlottesville so it is a college town very much like the East Lansing.

We were up bright and early on Friday morning and extremely excited about the next leg of the flight into Kitty Hawk. We took off about 8:15 am and the weather was just like the day before, clear and 50!! We again climbed to 11,000 feet and after a short time we could begin to see the Atlantic coastline in the distance. Our route took us over Richmond, VA and then southeast toward Kitty Hawk. The coastline and terrain along the route made for easy visual navigation even though we had the good old GPS to verify our position throughout the flight.

After an hour and fifteen minutes, we could see the outer banks of North Carolina and had Kitty Hawk in our sights. We cancelled IFR with the Washington Center controller and switched to First Flight Field Unicom about 20 miles out. Even though we could see the Wright Monument and knew where the field was, we could not actually see the runway until we were half way around the final turn. There it was, 3000 feet of freshly paved blacktop in an area carved out of a forest of pines that stood at least 50 feet high. We landed on runway 2 and then back taxied to the approach end for parking. Our altimeter read ZERO—it was the first time I had been at a sea level elevation airport. The parking area is relatively small but it was early and we got a great parking space where we could get some pictures of the airplane with the Monument in the background.

We were met by the Park Service and after some photos at the airplane they escorted us to the flagpole near the visitor center.



Mike Arnst and the plane used to fly to Kitty Hawk

There was a gentle breeze blowing as the Michigan flag was 48th state flag to be hoisted up the pole. Mike and I were very proud and thankful we had been able to complete the mission on behalf of EAA Chapter 55. The state flags are flown for a while at

Kitty Hawk and then sent to EAA in Oshkosh where they will be on display for the future.



The State of Michigan flag flies on the pole at Kitty Hawk

We were then free to wander the grounds and for the next couple hours, we did just that. The day was clear, sunny and the temperature was 75 degrees—what a great day to be at the site!!

Shortly after we raised the flag, five Army Blackhawk helicopters arrived and created some excitement. The Blackhawks carried forty or fifty Army troops who had come from the Washington, D.C. area to tour the site.



Blackhawk choppers bring in troops for a visit

We saw the site of the first four flights and got a good perspective of how short that first flight was—120 feet is not very far! We had the good fortune to see the Wright Flyer replica that Ken Hyde and Scott Crossfield had brought to Kitty Hawk for test flying. In fact, it had successfully flown a distance of 119 feet the day before. They were scheduled to fly again on Friday, but the winds were too light, so the Friday flight was cancelled. We were able to see the replica in its newly constructed hanger and met Terry Queijo, one of the pilots who will reenact the flight on December 17. Interestingly, she was the pilot for the next unsuccessful attempted flight on Tuesday

November 25. Fortunately, she wasn't hurt but the airplane nosed over on liftoff and was badly damaged.



The Wright Flyer replica and pilot, Terry Oueijo

After some gift shopping, we climbed the hill to the Monument for some pictures of the area below. When we got to the top, Mike swore that hill had to be 600 feet high—when we got home, I read that it was 90 feet! Even from 90 feet, the view was spectacular and we could see the entire site.

Many new temporary structures have been and are being built for the upcoming December festivities. They are expecting 35,000 visitors for the events on December 17. Chapter 55 will be represented at that event as Dan Schiffer, one of our new members based at Mason, will be flying his T-6 to the site where it will be on static display for the celebration.

From top of the hill we could see our Saratoga on the ramp and the new pilot facility built this year by AOPA. We could also see the 800 foot circle of sand and soft soil constructed for the first flight reenactment which will take place on Dec. 17th. There was a marker in that area measuring the 119 feet achieved by the replica flight completed the day before.

Reluctantly, we descended back to the ramp to prepare for the return flight. We knew we would have at least a 30-knot headwind on the way back and we wanted to reach Mason around sunset. However, it was such a beautiful day at Kitty Hawk, it was hard to leave.

When we returned to the plane Tony Milius, a professional photographer, was waiting for us. He was originally from Grand Rapids, Michigan and wanted to make sure he got some pictures of the Michigan flag bearers.



Mike Arnst and Gregg Cornell present the State of Michigan flag to Kitty Hawk rangers

After a few more pictures and conversation, we were back in the Saratoga and ready to go. Mike and I had been sharing the flying and he was to make the takeoff out of Kitty Hawk. He realized that he needed a “little” more right rudder as we yawed left after liftoff, but corrected quickly and we were on our way at about 12:45 pm. Mike has quite a bit of Saratoga time and it was great to have him on the trip to share the flying and navigation duties.

We filed a VFR flight plan back to Charlottesville, VA for refueling (First Flight Field has no fuel or services) and leveled off at 10,500 feet for cruise. We were greeted there with about a 40-knot headwind and a 110-knot groundspeed. Oh well, we were not in a hurry and the scenery was great! After a quick stop for fuel in Charlottesville, we were climbing west towards the Appalachians by 2:45 pm. We had filed VFR to Mason and after crossing the mountains, we set the GPS for direct Mason which was 2 ½ hours ahead. We kept in contact with Flight Service along the way and as we neared the Cleveland area, we initiated VFR advisory service with Cleveland Center. Since it was Friday evening, we suspected there would be a lot of airline traffic around Cleveland and Detroit. We were not disappointed, there was a LOT of traffic and we were glad to be with ATC for flight advisories.

As we approached Mason, the sunset to the west was spectacular—blazes of red and orange lit up the clouds on the horizon and the airline contrails lingered 20,000 feet above us. We were blessed with a great mission, spectacular weather, wonderful camaraderie, and a safe flight—it doesn't get any better than that!! As we descended into Mason, we picked up a little light chop, but my landing on runway 9 was smooth (if not a little long) and our adventure was at an end. Well almost at an end, fortunately we remembered to call FSS on the way home and closed our VFR flight plan and then the flight was officially at an end. It was a “once in a lifetime” experience for Mike and I and one which we will remember for the rest of our lives. Later that evening, as I completed my logbook entries, I realized that those 9.1 hours logged on Nov. 20 and 21, 2003 were the best hours of my 2600 total hours over 34 years of flying!! It really doesn't get any better than that.

