

December, 2011 - Year End in Review Wrap Up

Well, I have found that this has been a fairly unfulfilled year with regard to the flying of my Highlander. Very little of it was done, due to a series of modifications that I wanted to have performed on the airplane. These took a LOT longer than anticipated and put the aircraft out of service for much of the past year. But now that I have the plane back I hope to make up for lost time.

Right now the Highlander is in south Florida at a small grass field located next to nearby Lake Okeechobee (the largest lake in the Southeast). I hauled it down with my motorhome after the completion of a conversion from tail to nose wheel. After 200+ hours of flying it as a tail dragger I decided that I was getting too old to have to deal with a possible ground loop due to strong crosswinds. Once I proved to myself that I could again handle a tail wheeled aircraft I was ready to transition back to the trike geared configuration that I have become comfortable with for well over 5,000 flying hours during the past half century.

Due to the unique design of the Just Aircraft Highlander, this conversion is not a difficult task since the company that designed the airplane had already made this provision in the fuselage mounting points and had the nose wheel hardware readily available. However, because I have need to transport my airplane in an enclosed trailer we quickly found out that this nose conversion would bring the tail up so high that it would hit the ramp door when loading and unloading the plane. This required a change to the lower profile Escapade (a sister ship to the Highlander) gear, which took more time to convert. In addition I wanted to explore another unique modification... this time to the engine. Ever since I installed the 120 horse power 6 cylinder Jabiru engine I had been struggling with cylinder head and engine oil overheating problems. Try as we could we just did not seem to be able to find a proper fix for this. It seemed that I was always near the high end of the temperature range and on several occasions, ventured into the red "do not exceed" limits.

The eventual fix came with an change out from the original finned air cooled heads to a recently designed liquid cooled modification. This kit came from a Australian based aircraft engineering company called Rotec. Since the Canadian industrial transportation giant conglomerate Bombardier Inc. (who produces the Lear Jet, as well as other business transportation products) also manufacturers a widely used light sport aircraft engine known as Rotex, I now refer to my engine as the Jabirutec. I love this conversion as I now have all of the power and sound of the original design, and at least 100 degrees cooler temperatures on the cylinder heads and 25 cooler deg. on my oil. I am finally a happy ~~camper~~ flyer.

I made my very last tail wheeled aircraft logbook entry not with my own Highlander, but, instead, at the controls of a 1953 Piper PA-18 Super Cub. I had an opportunity to fly this craft from Sunquist Aviation at nearby North County Airport in West Palm Beach. We flew with the entry door wide open and it was a blast. The controls are a lot lighter than on my Highlander but the airplane's 108 HP Lycoming engine was much more sluggish. None the less it was an exhilarating hour long flight and while I am not sorry that I have gone back to the nose gear, I will always have fond memories of the past 3 years flying my taildragger.



My opportunity to fly a 1953 Piper Super Cub.



The hardest part of this flight was the climbing in.



I used my "big bus" to bring the plane to Florida



The nose wheel conversion makes the plane look quite a bit smaller, but it is much easier to land.

Now that I have my plane back with me, I am re-familiarizing myself with the techniques of being airborne once again. While, like riding a bike, you never really lose the basics, it takes a while before you begin to feel really comfortable in the environment after a long absence. I have begun by making a series of short trips of from 50 to 100 miles from my base at the Indian-town airport. This has included trips over to Sebring for the annual Light Sports Aircraft Expo as well as to nearby Okeechobee where there is the added benefit of a really spectacular KOA campground at which to base the motorhome. Over the next few months I will begin to widen out my trips and hope to make a 450 mile flight back to Hilton Head for a board meeting that I have to attend at the end of April. Now for someone who had flown his 125 HP Cessna Skyhawk down to Mexico City and Acapulco and his single engine Piper Comanche to California and even to Cabo San Lucas in Baja Mexico and the twin Comanche over Cuba to the Cayman Islands, this may not seem to be such a big deal. But don't forget, that was a different time, when I was young and adventurous. My reflexes are slower, my visual acuity and hearing are diminished, and my mental calculation and reasoning capabilities are more taxing at 71 than they were at 17 when I first started my adventure into flight. In many ways a basic 100 MPH nose wheeled airplane which lands at 40 m.p.h. is a whole lot easier to handle at this point in my life.

I am glad that I am still able to exercise my freedom to fly, even if it is going to be a great deal more limited than in the past. I hope to be able to continue with this advocacy for at least another 3 years before I finally give in to accepting that there are some things in life that eventually have to end. Meanwhile I will continue to go to events such as the Sebring *Light Sport Aircraft Expo* and Lakeland's *Fun n' Sun*, which I have enjoyed over the past half dozen years. Florida, my current operational state, has a lot of places to see and explore. I have a bunch of old friends that have settled down here full time and I will enjoy hops over to their nearby airstrips for day visits. While future trips may not be worthy enough to incorporate into this travel blog, they will offer me the opportunity to see this beautiful land of ours from up above. My travels now will probably be conducted low and slow, but there is something really spectacular about flying over the countryside at 800 to 1,000 feet at 80 to 100 m.p.h. You can see so much of what is going on below. At times you can even smell a new mown meadow, or burning sugarcane fields, and even the distinct odor emanating from a field of grazing cattle. This is something that the average person will never experience and it makes me glad that on a summer day back in 1957 I happened upon a small grass airstrip in Orangeburg, NY and had the presence of mind to stop and help a pilot wax his small 2 seater airplane, for which he offered me the opportunity to take my very first flight into what has become my Adventure of a Lifetime.

While I will probably no longer be contributing articles to this travel blog, as I will no longer be making the extraordinary trips to exciting places, that I did in 2008 and again in 2010, I will keep this website open for another year or so, just so that friends and family can access what has become a very special place of remembrance for me. I have enjoyed being able to write about my very special trips and the opportunity to visit some really amazing places throughout this wonderful country of ours.



I am still attending aviation shows and events



This is me with a new Highlander from Just Aircraft



My bus is here

This is the Okeechobee Lake KOA that we visited



The campground gave us the opportunity to enjoy the motorhome w/ our two dogs as well as to fly.