

Feb. 4, 2013 - Wimauma, FL, Phosphate Mines and a visit with old friends

While making today's 125 mile flight over to the Tampa area at my preferred low en-route altitude of 1200 feet, I suddenly began to detect a very distinctive and familiar acrid odor inside of my airplane's cabin. Looking down I immediately recognized the bleak moon like landscape of Florida's phosphate fertilizer mines. For years I had performed my infrared thermal imaging at many of these facilities and the slightest hint of that nasty smell still has my skin crawling even to this day. After a day spent in the field at these mines examining the 4,000 volt electrical system on which these two story house sized drag lines would operate, I would return to my motel at night with itching skin, running eyes and nose as well as a general burning of my mouth and throat. While certainly an industry necessary for the raising of crops and the growing of foodstuffs, this was one of the least enjoyed experiences in the 30 plus years that I operated my non-destructive testing business. These large mines still occupy vast portions of South Florida and until they are reclaimed to form beautiful lakes, ponds and forested lands, they are a blight and an eyesore, especially when flown over at low altitudes.

Today I was Flying over to the Wimauma Airpark, a private grass strip located just south of Tampa (which was clearly visible from the airports traffic pattern), in a small community at which an old friend now lives. This airstrip is also home to the Wings of Eagles Aircraft Delivery Co. which was featured on the Weather Channel's "Plane Xtreme" series. This company delivers small aircraft to South America, Europe and Africa. In fact they are currently getting ready to ferry a Cessna 182 single diesel engine airplane over to the African country of Niger for the same missionary group that my fiancée's parents once worked.

Lois is the widow of my longtime friend and an ex-partner in my single engine Piper Comanche, which I owned for 17 years. Gus died 13 years ago and I still miss our visits. Anyway Lois is now in a relationship with a very interesting fellow. Keith spent much of his working career in the communications field, first with the military and government, and then with several defense contractors, as he set up towers and antenna sites throughout the Bahamas, Caribbean and South America. While not a pilot himself, he has many diverse interests, including general aviation.

Keith is also a survivor of a near fatal airplane incident. Back in 1979 he was a passenger aboard TWA Flight 841 which was traveling from New York's JFK to Minneapolis-St. Paul. The Boeing 727 was at 39,000 feet when something serious happened to the aircraft's control system. It plunged almost 35,000 feet in one minute, and rolled 720 degrees while in a vertical dive. The Captain only regained control by extending the landing gear which helped slow the plane enough for the two pilots to jointly pull back on the yoke enough to right the aircraft at an altitude of 5,000 feet. An emergency landing at Detroit was made and upon landing it was discovered that one of the wing's leading edge slats on the right side had departed, thus causing a serious asymmetrical control condition when this slat deployed unexpectedly on its own. Lowering the landing gear at this tremendous speed did slow the plane enough to allow control to be regained, but the left main gear pretty much fell off of the plane when it was placed on jacks for examination.

Keith, along with 39 of the original passengers as well as the pilot and first officer, were asked to appear in a re-enactment of the event in a one hour docu-drama produced by CBS in 1983 entitled "The Plane that Fell from the Sky" and I had a chance to see that VHS video taping of the program when we returned from dinner that evening. The pilot had indicated to Keith that they were less than 5 seconds from slamming into the ground when he finally regained control of the crippled craft. I much enjoyed hearing the tail directly from Keith, and then viewing the TV program tape. And, of course, I always enjoy visiting with Lois.



Many of the phosphate mines look like moonscape



House sized drag line cranes work these mines



Downtown Tampa was visible while in the pattern



Here Lois, Keith and I are having an outdoor lunch