

March 31, 2011 - Sun n' Fun - Lakeland Florida

This year's EAA's Sun n' Fun Expo in Lakeland, Florida started off without much "sun", and with absolutely no "fun"! Because of a forecast for severe weather, I decided to make the 200 mile trip between West Palm Beach and Lakeland Florida by car. When I arrived at about 3:00 PM on Thursday, 3/31, what I found was mind boggling. There were sheriff department, EMS and emergency vehicles all over the place. I tried 3 times to enter the grounds at Linder Regional airport where the event was being held, only to be told 3 times that the field was closed, the show had been cancelled and to "move on". I finally found a place to put my car at an adjacent commercial building's parking lot (everyone had apparently been sent home there as well). I opened the trunk to retrieve a set of well worn coveralls that I keep there in case I have to change a tire or do some crawling under the auto. Armed with a clipboard and my camera bag, I started toward the entrance gate, only to be stopped by a sheriff's deputy. "Where do you think you are going?", he asked. "Hey man", I said, "there's work to be done in there." He looked at me a bit perplexed and said, "Ok, but be careful, there are some power lines down". For the next hour I strolled around the grounds, taking a photo every now and then, before finding my way over to the "food court" tent, which was still open (despite having no power) and which sheltered several hundred people from the intermittent rain that was still falling. Here I also found the staff from Just Aircraft Company, which is the manufacturer of my Highlander airplane kit. I asked their creative genius, Troy Woodland, how the three planes that they were demonstrating in the Light Sports Aircraft area had fared. "Frank," Troy earnestly told me, "You wouldn't believe it. Half the planes in the LSA mall were either destroyed or badly damaged, but ours came out just fine, and they weren't even tied down!" "But, how could that be?" I incredulity asked. "He just chuckled, "Because we had put them in the Piper aircraft hanger." Apparently they were placed in there the evening before because of the bad weather forecast, and safely rode out the storm.

The following morning I began my drive over to the field from my motel room, some 33 miles away. The first 30 Interstate miles took less than a half hour. However, immediately after leaving the expressway, I was in a back up that just inched along. Three hours later I was still over a mile away from the airport and finally just parked by the side of the road and did the remaining 45 minutes, on foot, over to the entrance gate. Friday was absolutely gorgeous with bright blue, cloudless skies, a warming sun and unlimited visibility. If you did not know, you would not have a clue as to the horrendous weather of less than 24 hours prior. Massive clean up operations had taken place throughout the ensuing evening with literally hundreds of volunteers and paid contractors picking up debris, re-setting various tents, booths, displays, re-stringing power lines, and carting away dozens of damaged and destroyed airplanes, representing hundreds of thousands of dollars in losses. And you would have never guessed it from the number of people that were already making their way onto the grounds. (Apparently they came a different route from the one that I had taken). I spent another hour capturing photos of the devastation and ongoing clean up operations.



This is the General Aviation camping area



The volunteer's RV campground was also hit



Here a Cessna 172 sits atop a Bonanza



This twin Sea-Bee had its gear collapse

I saw planes that had been picked up and tossed atop other planes. I found one small airplane that was blown across a field and was now lodged under the tail section of a larger DC-3, making both incapable of being flown out. I saw airplanes on their backs, on their noses, without tail structures, without wings, with broken, bent or missing landing gear. I saw one small light sport aircraft that was literally broken in two. Many had been moved to a "boneyard" located well away from the display area and out of sight of the onlookers. There sheriff deputies were manning strategic gate areas making sure that only those that had business there were behind the security tape. While I found it all disheartening I did capture many dozens of photos, only a small few of which I have posted here.

I strolled over to the Just Aircraft display and took a picture of two of their demo airplanes, (the other was out flying potential customers) one with me sitting on the front wheel of a bush-gearred Highlander. I then went over to the air show area to spend the next four hours viewing and photographing the private and military aircraft that were performing as if absolutely nothing ungainly had happened. There were a large number of viewers sitting or standing on a grassy field adjoining the active runway, or milling around the static display of airplanes on the now completely dry parking apron. While I again took dozens of digital images, unless you are an affectionado of things military, you will have to be content with the few pictures posted on the next page of this article. I was especially interested in the P-3 "radar domed" AWAC that was parked on the apron. Its civilian counterpart, the 4 engined turbo-prop Lockheed Electra was the very first commercial aircraft that I ever flew in when I returned from Fort Knox, KY to my New Jersey home, on Christmas leave, during the winter of 1961. I also had a chance to fly the cockpit simulator of this sub-hunter when I was doing some work for the Navy Dept. in 1982 and have 30 minutes of P-3 time signed off in my logbook. The plane shown here was owned and operated by the Department of Homeland Security.

During the Friday air show I was intrigued by the F-22 Raptor, a supersonic jet fighter that has slow flying traits that would put my little Highlander to shame. I saw that airplane do things that I just couldn't believe. At one time its pilot was able to literally stop it in mid-air. In an extreme nose up attitude, he was able to hold it almost motionless using pure afterburner thrust alone, and then was able to slow turn it on its axis so that it seemed to do an aerial ballet before thundering off at breakneck speed. The highlight of the afternoon was a performance by the Navy's precision flying team, the Blue Angels. Proceeding the Angels was a overflight by the Marine Corps C-130T Hercules "Fat Albert", the teams logistical and crew transport. Then the six F-18A Hornets took to the runway to begin an hour long tribute to what this airplane can do in the hands of experienced Navy aviators. From "low and slow" fly-bys to ear splitting full throttle afterburner head to head crossovers at closing speeds of well over 1,000 MPH, this was one awe inspiring aerial demonstration. It really does fill one with pride seeing what our military's "best of the best" is capable of and makes me "glad to be an American, where at least I know I'm free". Despite the weather and destruction encountered, I am glad that I got to see this year's "Sun n' Fun", even if I had to leave my own airplane at home.



A small single was jammed under a DC-3



These airplanes were now in the "boneyard"



Bent and broken airplanes were everywhere



Owners were trying to pick up the pieces



Just Aircraft's planes came thru unscathed



Here I am at a newly completed Highlander



Many people crowded the airshow performance area, while others walked the static display



The F-22 Raptor gave an impressive performance, as did the Marine's "Fat Albert" C-130T.



The day's highlight was a performance by the Navy's Blue Angels in their F-18A Hornets