

My Field of Dreams and Some Birds that Nest Here – by Tommy Richards

Following the tragic loss of my Wife of 43 years in a car crash in June of 2002, I dealt with the grief and filled the void in my life by immersing myself in my other two loves: work and aviation. The second involved intensive fooling around with airplanes of various sizes, shapes and speeds... I soon found and eventually purchased my very own airfield (aerial photo inset).

This particular airfield sits on 76 acres of rolling county-side about 4 miles south of Warrenton, Virginia – which is about 45 miles due west of our nation’s capitol and 30 miles southwest of Dulles

International Airport. It has been in continuous operation since the early 1930’s and is (now) home field for about 50 *Identified Flying Objects* – some of which qualify to be classified and registered as Airplanes.

There were only 3 hangars and about 20 flying objects here 6 years ago when I bought it. The photo shows a total of 7 airplane hangars (capacity of 3 to 8 airplanes each): 4 with checkered roofs, 2 smaller white (tents) near the left edge, a white/gray one drawn to show planned location and one with redish-tan roof near my residence – (which is circled) – although it is obscured by trees in this view. A stream runs across the property – just out view at top of the photo. My daughter Janet’s cottage is also just out of view at the top right corner.



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The 50+ flying objects: At the low end of the speed-and-weight range we have about 8 Powered Paragliders – this is a rig that I suspect few of you have ever seen – where you literally strap the 18-HP/25-lb engine with a 4-foot propeller across the back of your shoulders and take-off running with a specially-designed parachute which rises up and lifts you skyward at a speed of 20-25 miles per hour. They generally don’t fly too high or too far from the field. – photo below...

There is a bigger 50-HP, version with a frame with wheels and bigger ‘chute that carries a pilot and at most 1 (very brave) passenger. We have about 6 of these larger ones which also fly in the 20-25 MPH range. All these are referred to as “soft wing”. I own none of these, but have flown as a passenger and enjoy watching them.

The next step up the speed/weight ladder is what is called an *Ultralight* - which appears to be a vanishing breed – it is legally restricted weight-wise a maximum of 254 pounds empty and limited to 5 gal of fuel and a stall speed of under 28 MPH – and (now) must be single seat (pilot only). This type requires neither pilot’s



license nor registration to fly it and is thus not regulated by the FAA. Until February of 2008, this class was allowed to have 2 seats and a heavier weight – but these “fat ultralights” had to be used for “Training Purposes Only”... Of course this was impossible to enforce and was flagrantly violated.

We have been going through a transition of these overweight ones to have them legally registered in a new category – called *Light Sport* which requires the pilot to have a *Sport Pilot's* license. Speed range here is 40-80 MPH, Take-off and landing distance is 200-300 feet. All of these are kits (home-built). I have owned either totally, or in partnership, five of this type – 2 are/were 2 – seat trainers... am now down to partnerships in only 1 (a 2-seat trainer), having sold my interest in two (top photo) and two were destroyed in crashes in 2008. One crash resulted in the tragic death of a very good friend and co-owner of the airplane. The pilot/co-owner of the other escaped with a bruise and a deep gash in the forehead. He hasn't flown since. Both these crashes occurred on the field and immediately after take-off. (long story for each)

Three photos are shown at right – top one is me flying the blue single-seat Quick-Silver in which I sold my part ownership 3 years ago – but still occasionally fly it.

Next is from 5 years ago when I first test-flew a Purple/Gold (FHS colors) single seat in which I owned a share until we sold it 2 years ago. This pretty little thing has endured no fewer than 5 off-field landings in the 2 ½ years following its being restored to flying status. – all due to engine failure. Only two of these forced landings resulted in damage: one moderate - broken landing gear and frame due to landing in a rough field, another damaged the nose gear while making an emergency landing in a neighbor's (too-short) drive-way.

Bottom is (bearded) me 3 years ago landing the yellow 2-seat trainer that was destroyed in the non-fatal crash described earlier.

Next step up the speed/weight ladder is the factory-built General Aviation category that requires registration with the FAA and pilot's license to fly. There are about a dozen aircraft in this category based at my field.



They include the classic 1940s vintage Piper Cub (3), Aeronca Champ (2), Taylorcraft, Piper Clipper and a Piper Pawnee crop-duster that is now used to tow banners. Others include a Cessna-182 (4-seat), and a Cessna -150 (2-seat General Aviation trainer).

The slowest and lightest in this category (under 1320 pounds, fully loaded) are the Cubs and the Taylorcrafts that cruise at 75-90 MPH on 65 HP, burn auto gas, and carry pilot and one passenger. I am currently 1/3 partner in one of the Taylorcrafts. The top photo shows me (on right) with Ralph Kew, one of the other 2 owners as we are ready to fly on Thanksgiving weekend (2008).



I am the former owner of the 1949 Piper Clipper (4-seats) – shown in second photo - which is still at the field and my condition of sale was that I retained flying privileges.

I own two airplanes in this class - both Maules – built in Moultrie Georgia. Both hold 4 people and cruise at 150 MPH (wheels) or 130 (floats) on 235 HP while burning 12 gal/hour, \$4+/gal 100 low-lead Av Gas. I have flown this plane from my field to Florida and back twice. On one trip, 2+years ago, I swung by Birmingham - then flew from B’ham back to my field solo, non-stop in 3 ½ hours – over the Smokies at 11,500 feet at 200+ MPH ground-speed ...



All these in this class (except for the Cessnas) are Tail-Wheel airplanes – which “do better” on grass fields – but require more skill and attention to control on the ground (taxi, take-off and landing).



The final one (bottom – N747CL) is/was (see update) my newest – on amphibious floats (lands on water or land). This one was flown up from Moultrie by a friend and ferry pilot 3 years ago. I am now (occasionally) working toward getting a seaplane rating – which is required to fly it legally.



March 2010 Up-date (am I a sucker for a sad story) – A friend showed up just before Christmas 2009 telling me that he had just flown a really great airplane back from California – that he got a really great deal on... but he hadn’t told his wife yet. She had

told him if he ever bought another plane, she would kill him... anyhow, he couldn't sleep at night worrying that she would find out... so could I help him out by taking the plane off his hands? Well, I couldn't quite swallow this "whole fish", so I convinced another friend to go 50-50 partners (it required almost no convincing). As a result of my soft-heartedness, I am now 50% owner of the Mooney M-20A shown at right. I flew this solo to Nebraska and back by way of B'ham in Feb 2010. Because of the retractable gear and relatively small wheels, this plane does best on long, hard-



surfaced runways – so at least for now, I am keeping it at the county airport 7 miles southeast of my field.

May 2010 Update – The Sky-Divers Have Arrived A commercial sky-diving company began operating at my field, providing tandem jumps to paying customers for \$189/pop – video is \$79 extra. Paying customer is strapped to a professional licensed sky-diver and flown in an upward spiral to 10,000 feet, exits aircraft, free-falls about 45 seconds, chute opens at about 5,000 and float gently down to the ground.

Lest I forget – I can look forward at least once every summer to being wakened very early on a Saturday morning by the loud swooshing sound of propane burners heating the air that lifts hot-air balloons... By the time I can get dressed and go outside, I am greeted by the scene shown below – literally in my front yard --- what a colorful sight to behold!

Although we have none of this type based here, they will usually pick my field as either their launch site or targeted landing site for some of the activity that goes on at the Annual Balloon Festival conducted at the Flying Circus – that features an air-show every Sunday May-October - 9 miles to the southeast.

