



Three Loves and Steamed Oysters: Joe Cook's New Year's Hangar Party

By Mike Jones

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It was a New Year's party, even if it wasn't New Year's Day. There was an abundance of exotic comestibles, the laughter of old friends and the roar of hard-working airplanes. This was Joe Cook's annual New Year extravaganza, at his private hangar on the first Saturday of the New Year at Pageland Airport in South Carolina (KPYG). Cue the champagne corks.

Cook is a giant bear of a man, a grey-haired grizzly with a southern accent. He loomed both over me and his petite wife, Nena, but after 44 years of marriage, she's used to it. Cook has 74 years on his personal Hobbs, and while he may not be nimble as he once was he remains unabashedly passionate about all things aeronautical. He invited me to chat in the back of his hangar — away from the giggles of the party and closer to the bar — as he shared his aviation story. Unexpectedly, it started badly: life got in the way, with college, then a war, then a business to run and a family to raise. But first, a word about the party itself.

Party Time

As January weekends go, it was cold but otherwise picture-perfect at Cook's private hangar at Pageland. For years now, Cook and friends have been

organizing this New Year's fly-in and pot-luck lunch. Cook originally threw the party in warmer months, but somehow the New Year's date seemed to resonate with the crowd. This Saturday, the hangar door was open, his antique airplanes glistened and pilots and partiers swirled on the ramp. Helping him were my friend, the exuberant Alex Mello of Oshkosh 2021-fame, and Billy Hogge, a charming fellow who inexplicably owns the Cirrus in a hangar down the runway. Nobody's perfect.



Photo 1: The steamed oysters were poured onto a wire rack for waiting guests. Here, Tyler Goodwin (black jacket), Kim Hogge (red sweater), Abdullah Bawagad, and his son Solomon.

My contribution to the luncheon had been simmering for a full day: a humongous, 20-pound crock-pot of my almost-famous Stratosphere Chili. It featured chunks of prime beef the size of marshmallows, five types of beans and enough chili pepper to launch

the unwary into the upper atmosphere. Not knowing who would be attending the fiesta, I ratcheted the spice down a notch or two. But it still had the kick of 100LL when it hit the tastebuds.

Flying to Pageland was easy but keeping the chili both hot and in the pot was problematic. I wrapped the crock-pot in a giant beach towel and used a fat bungee to lock everything in place. I raced to my hangar and plugged it in, simmering and bubbling while I preflighted and preheated. Once I was ready to fly, I wedged the slow-cooker between the seats and zoomed 30 minutes

southwest to Pageland, beans and beef swaddled in terry cloth. Before the prop had stopped I was jogging into Cook's hangar with my 100-foot extension cord. Mission accomplished, and not a drop spilled!

It turns out, the party really didn't get going almost until lunchtime. One pilot brought home-made corn bread. Another offered bunt cakes so enormous they looked like Goodyear airplane tires slathered in icing. Mello assembled a dusty griddle so big it could have its own ZIP code and fried his home-made crab cakes — all crab, no fillers! — while Lee Meyers used the other half of the grill to gently sizzle a ton of salt-cured North Carolina mountain ham. From the back of the hangar, Nena Cook served champagne for those souls unburdened with PIC duties.



Photo 2: Nena Cook and Alex Mello debate the fine-points of frying crab cakes.

But the party really didn't get going until Cook himself showed up. He delivered two 100-pound bags of fresh oysters: oysters as big as my hands and still wet from the sea. We power-washed them to rinse away sand and seaweed. Then Chefs Cook and Mello unceremoniously dumped them into an enormous steamer. In about ten minutes the shells opened and the hot, juicy, sweet meat was ready to gulp.

Gossiping like magpies, people flowed outside to watch the aeronautical comings and goings. There was a lively collection of airplanes sprawled across the grassy ramp, including my hard-working T210. Ben Burril flew his P-51



Photo 3: Ben Burril arrived in his miniature P-51, performing a snappy pirouette into parking. He plugs the exhaust pipes with tennis balls to keep FOD out of a very expensive engine.

replica to a wheel-landing with precision. Barry Thigpen arrived in his F1-Rocket, a highly modified, 260-hp RV-4 which climbs at 3000 fpm and cruises at 230 mph, and gave a few demo rides. The all-time “OMG” winner was Barry Kropelin who arrived in a shiny, copper-colored Cavalon gyrocopter. He demonstrated the

versatility of his German flying machine with a high-speed fly-by down the runway, but most of us were home in bed before he finished. Brace yourself, dear reader: some people even drove to the party. I feel like a sleazy tabloid reporter, reporting such infidelities.

As things slowed down a bit, I button-holed our host, Joe Cook, for an explanation of the craziness of inviting scores and scores of people — many of whom he don't know — to a party in the freezing cold.



Photo 4: Barry Kropelin brought his Cavalon Autogyro, a gyroplane with side-by-side seating. With a ROTAX engine and available Garmin avionics, this is an exotic but practical flying machine. Photo Credit: Savannah Ritch.

Getting the Bug

Cook's tale started in the Vietnam era, which so many of us remember so sadly. After college, Cook was in the Army Artillery and went to Vietnam – “11 months, 17 days and 13 hours, if anybody is counting” — but came home safely. After that, he and Nena owned a mechanical contracting company in Monroe, NC, specializing in commercial heating and air conditioning systems. For forty years, the company prospered.



Photo 5: Barry Thigpen (right) flew his F1 Rocket to the picnic. An F1 can climb 3,000 feet per minute and cruise over 200 knots. A Cessna 150 pilot herself, Savannah Ritch enjoyed her ride in Thigpen's mighty machine.

“It was a pretty good company,” he said. “We got up to about 100 employees, doing lots of work in different states. But I’m the kind of person that likes to be hands-on and I couldn’t do hands-on across multiple states. So I sold it two years ago.” It must have been a very good business: they bought the land and built

this massive hangar in 1997. Today, he and Nena are semi-retired, and they enjoy hosting their friends at their Pageland palace.

In the early years, Cook had no interest in airplanes. But in 1992 his buddy “bugged him to death” to take an intro flight at the tiny Goose Creek Airport (28A) in North Carolina. Squeezing Cook’s long legs in a Cessna 172, “We flew around for 45 minutes, and I fell in love. I guess I went crazy over it. 28 days later I took my check ride.” Three days after that, he started on both his instrument rating and his multi-engine ticket. Cook was hooked.

Cook is a first-class mechanical tinker, at business, in his garage or in his hangar. "I'm good with mechanical things," he admitted proudly. He's restored dozens of old cars: Corvettes, roadsters, Mustangs, a 1956 Chevy truck, and currently a '74 Corvette convertible. Somewhere along the line he discovered the joy of restoring old airplanes. His first victim was a straight-tailed C-172 rescued out of a grass strip near Monroe, NC. He and a buddy trucked it to a friend's garage and — with the help of an A&P — flew it out of Pageland for four or five years.



Photo 6: Joe Cook's party brings out airplane enthusiasts of all ages. Tiny Piper Hogge scooted her pink jeep back and forth across the ramp and under the wings of the Nanchang CJ-6A, but always under the watchful eyes of mom and dad.

The restored C-172 was a great plane, but Cook wanted a "get up and go" airplane. He found the answer in the Cessna 310. His 1962 C-310 is his "all-time favorite airplane in the world" — trouble-free, sexy-sleek, fast, efficient, and justifiably famous for its massive useful load. Cook claimed, "It will pick up the world if you can get it inside the doors." Case in point: he took the 310 on a hunting trip. "We had five large guys, everybody was big like me. Plus the luggage, the guns, ammo, full fuel, and we flew all the way out to Kansas. We had a great shoot, loaded those guys all back, and came home without a hiccup."

Always a collector, Nena finally advised him he "had too many planes." That began a decades-long daisy-chain of purchases, swaps and sales: the 310 morphed into a Cessna 182, which became a Waco biplane, which suddenly was a Beech twin, and a Chinese aerobatic trainer, plus four or five others.

Cook flew a lot in the earlier years, but avoided two dangerous conditions: hard IFR and tight schedules. "I avoid hard IFR because I'm doing this for fun," he explained, adding it's just more interesting to see the world below.

Secondly, he avoided having to stick to a special schedule. "You read these stories of when people get in trouble, and a lot of them are based on having to get home."



Photo 7: Cook's hangar is so spacious and well-equipped guests just walked around to see what was there. Here, Natalie Mello, Steve Wilson and Victor Maynard admire Cook's restored World War-era Beech C-18 twin.

He remembers at Sun-Fun years ago when the sky was filled with thunderstorms, "big storms, one right after the other, continuously into the night." Importantly, these storms were not localized to Lakeland; conditions were even worse at home in Monroe, NC. But one of his

passengers was a specialty nurse who had a patient at death's door and she urgently needed to get home. Cook was feeling the pressure, but when the day of their planned departure arrived he told his passengers that he wasn't flying in convective conditions.

The next day was marginally better at Lakeland but unchanged at Monroe. Looking for a plan with a backdoor, Cook called the tower in Florence, South Carolina and learned it was marginally better there. Cook figured from Florence they could fly the rest of the way or rent a car; either way, the nurse would meet her obligations. His plan worked perfectly: the group flew to Florence, waited four hours, and things improved just enough they were able to fly into Monroe.

"That's why I normally don't take passengers anymore," he summarized. "I just don't need their schedules or their pressures."

Inside the Hangar

There is a lot of history in Cook's massive hangar. Currently there are three beautifully polished planes under the roof, plus an open shed with a couple smaller planes, and a hidden 1999 Corvette.

In the front of the hangar is a long and lean 1974 Nanchang CJ-6A made in China. The plane perches horizontally on its long-legged gear, proud and haughty, like the girl in high school you always wanted to kiss but never did. The CJ is a copy of a Russian Yak trainer and justifiably famed for its

rugged design, mechanical simplicity and beautiful flying characteristics. Once his plane arrived in the US, Cook had an IRAN inspection performed on it from top to bottom. He only did three things: he junked the clapped-out Chinese engine for a new Russian MP-14P radial, he painted it, and added an aux fuel tank. Cook has approximately 500 hours in the CJ.

"This plane is the most fun to fly," he said, patting it like a favorite horse. "But it's an airshow plane or a sunny day plane, not really for carrying lots of stuff and going places. In the sky, it's just a joy!"

The bright red Waco biplane is Marilyn Monroe-style "eye candy." Cook is not alone in admiring the history and the performance of Waco biplanes but the



Photo 8: After the enormous lunch, some members of the party sat in the sunshine and just chilled out. Here, Patrice "Freckle" Bruneau contentedly shows his Olympic-quality form.

Waco Company is no more. Cook's answer? Build one. Except (in those days) kit-building was new. Both plans and parts were incomplete and "owner support groups" simply did not exist. The whole job took fifteen years, even with a full-time A&P on the payroll. "There was so much that was ambiguous and not documented, and we just had to figure it all out," Cook remembers.

"I had a lot of help on that airplane," Cook adds amiably. "The welding was done by a certified welder; the fabric was covered by a guy who does it professionally; the painting was done by a real paint shop, the engine was done by a guy in Oklahoma. But we put it all together right here. We've flown it, and it's beautiful."



Photo 9: The Carolina Barnstormers are a group of dedicated aviators who fly (and sometimes drive) to as many weekend events as can be managed. Their snappy jackets, unforgettable mini-bus and irreverent humor are sources of enormous amusement.

The largest plane in the hangar is Cook's silver Beech 18 taildragger. This plane is less flashy and more cerebral and carries an interesting pedigree. An A&P school in Ashboro, NC owned three Beech 18 airframes upon which the students would practice their wrench-work. When that school went belly-up, Cook

bought all three of the unflyable wrecks to have a sufficient inventory of parts to assemble at least one complete airframe. Today, the shiny 9-seater is a showstopper, pristine and regal. Cook has about 35 flying hours in it personally and about 75 hours on it total.

"I guess the Beech is my last project," he said, a little sadly. "I promised my wife I won't do any more; I've lost my medical and can't fly them. There's no point in doing a project if you can't fly 'em."



About Pageland

"This strip is a little secret gem," Cook announces proudly. He started flying at Monroe, NC but couldn't get a hangar. When a friend mentioned the uncrowded runway at PYG, Cook and Nena drove down to check things out. They stopped at a convenience store only to be told by the lady behind the counter, "She's lived here all her life and there isn't an airport in Pageland."

"When we first came down here there was grass growing through the cracks in the runway, knee-high it was. We got some creepers and dug out every crack in the runway by hand, just me and this lady here," he recalled, smiling at Nena. "I know how to treat a lady to a good time. Come on, I said to her, let's go out and pour some asphalt! Amazingly, she said yes."

Since Cook's arrival, the Airport Authority has expanded the airport with another eighty acres. They've put in self-service fuel, installed fencing, added a VASI and runway lights, plonked in a rotating beacon, built an FBO, repaved the runway and added a turn-around at each end.

As Cook was wrapping up our conversation, I noticed he summarized his life as having three great loves. I don't think I'm putting words in his mouth to say he loves the little Pageland Airport. Cook feels the city has been very good to him and he appreciates all the efforts they have made to upgrade the facility.

His second love would be all things Cessna, certainly the 310 models but the high-wing designs as well, because of the excellent visibility from their cockpits.

But his greatest love is reserved for his partnership with Nena. "I've been extremely fortunate," he said. "I have a wife who is extremely understanding. She puts up with all my garbage and gives me all this free time to come down here and play."

That's not a bad life. Party on, Joe!

About the Author



Dr. Mike Jones is a 4,000 hour commercial-rated pilot who takes both his Cessna Centurion and his light sport taildragger to grass runways whenever he can find them. You always can reach him at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.

