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By Mike Jones

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Every August the entire aviation industry suffers a dreadful hangover. Our greatest party, AirVenture, has come and gone. We collectively awaken with a fuzzy brain and furry teeth. It's a price worth paying, but the reality is hard.

Spoiler alert, for those who have not been: Oshkosh is a grueling, sunburning, knee-killing, wallet-emptying marathon beyond imagination. There are 600,000 of your closest friends, all of whom must be housed, fed, entertained, educated, thrilled, and protected. More than 1,100 porta-potties are emptied daily. Products are sold, forums taught, meals cooked, even magazine articles written. By August the whole industry is as worn as the eraser on a bad golfer's pencil.

But pound-for-pound, nothing beats flying to Oshkosh. It's the Olympics, the World Cup, and Mt. Everest all rolled into one. For the average G.A. pilot it is one of the great personal aeronautical accomplishments. That said, flying the famed "FISK Arrival" is neither for the faint-of-heart nor the unprepared.

Unlike so many reports you will read in this newspaper and others in the next few months, this article is not about the Oshkosh airshow. It's just about getting there. There are ten thousand arrivals into Oshkosh. Every one of them is a story worth telling. Here's mine...

Help Wanted: No Snoring

The trip started on a sour note. My loyal and trusted wingman of prior years had the utter temerity, the gall, the brazen impudence, to have found a job. I mean, sure, everybody has to eat. And there is the house, and car payments. And there's the wife thing, I guess. But his surrender to Mammon was so sudden and complete it made both Wilbur and Orville spin in their graves.

Unwilling to fly the Fisk arrival with only one set of eyeballs, I needed a replacement co-pilot. And not just anyone would do; my standards are high. I started with an emphasis on travelling light, leaving more room for my junk in the airplane. Aeronautical skills were superfluous because that's Mr. Garmin's job. But conviviality was a "must." Snoring was a deal-breaker — sound travels a long way through the thin walls of a tent.

I found the perfect choice in Nick Phan. I've known Nick since he was a toddler but only recently had become aware of his interest in a flying career. A handsome, hyper-fit young son of a military family, he had accumulated 20 hours of flight time, which was only about 19,000 hours less than my previous wingman. Close enough, I figured. Plus, Nick's enthusiasm for the Oshkosh adventure was explosive. I knew he would view my aeronautical performances with awe and treat every decision from the left seat as sacred gospel. A handshake sealed the deal.



Nick Phan is a long-time family friend; we've been neighbors for to two decades or so. Only recently has he been bitten by the aviation bug but he's got it bad. Please send him your sympathies. And money.

The plane, however, was a bit more problematic. As documented in this newspaper last month, the annual inspection had gone well until a turbocharger clamp was snagged as defective. Can you spell “out of stock”? My frazzled, hard-working A&P released the plane back to me just hours before Nick and I were scheduled to depart. It was a close-run thing.

Once we had access to the plane, Nick and I launched into over-drive. We removed four of the six seats to accommodate extra camping gear; I was a little disappointed that Nick insisted on having a seat at all. We draped GoPro cameras around the plane like lights on a Christmas tree. We updated databases. We weighed everything: tents, sleeping bags, my stash of snickerdoodles, tie-downs, duffle bags, even our computers. In a “take the cannoli” moment we opted for a bigger cooler but left the beer, confident somebody in Oshkosh would have icy brews to sell.



On a beautiful Thursday morning, Nick and I launched towards Oshkosh on a two-day trip. Our first stop was a jaunt to the Air Force Museum in Dayton, Ohio. For Friday we would join up with two other pilots and fly formation to Juneau, Wisc. to join the “Cessnas to Oshkosh” mass arrival.

I felt like a bearded Father Time as I mentored young Nick. In just twenty minutes I showed him how to compute a weight-and-balance. He took twenty seconds to do the same thing using ForeFlight. Oops.

We discussed aircraft performance and density altitude. We estimated fuel consumption and selected routes based on forecasted winds. Age and experience scored a small victory when Nick’s flight plan took him into the side of a mountain outside of Charleston, West Virginia. Oops back at you, kid.

Wheels Up... to Xenia?

Flying is more fun with more people, and prior to our departure we had devised a plan to join up with two old friends at Greene County, Ohio (I19), just outside of Dayton. Captain Karen Ewart is a CFII and the proud owner of the most over-powered Cessna 182 you will ever see in the sky. Her right seater was Dr. Rolf Wallin, an equally experienced aviator I knew from previous Oshkosh and Triple Tree adventures. We'd fly separately to the Dayton area and then join up for the next leg.

The sun was barely over the towering pines around the airport when Nick and I departed on the Thursday before Oshkosh. The sturdy Centurion easily managed 700 feet per minute despite the heavy load and high density altitude. We contacted Fayetteville Departure to activate our IFR flight plan, climbed to 8,000 feet, and popped in and out of IMC, all of which were new experiences for Nick.

"I can't understand what they're saying," he complained.

"Get used to it," I coached supportively.

It was a splendid morning for aviating. We watched morning fog swash through the steep valleys of West Virginia. Fat cattle placidly munched their breakfast as we swung over Ohio. Nick cycled the GoPro cameras on and off with alacrity, catching snippets of our progress. After three hours ATC pushed us into a hold, which was still another new experience for Nick. Eventually we flew the RNAV 25 and plopped down in Xenia.

The choice of Greene County was not an accident: fuel was cheap, motels plentiful, and the Air Force Museum was perched a few miles away. We raced to the Museum thinking a few hours wandering their displays would be entertaining. This was a big mistake, of the good kind.

Dear reader, take this to heart: the Air Force Museum is a jaw-dropping experience. Inspiring. Educational. Expansive. Comprehensive. Compelling. Intimidating. Did I see Air Force One? No, but it's there. Did I see the XB-70? Nope — which begs the question, how do you miss an airplane the size of a football field? Plan on spending a week. Wear comfy shoes.

From my perspective, having worked with many of the Vietnam era aircraft, the Museum was a home-coming. For young Nick, standing under a B-36 bomber and peering into the three-decker flying warehouse called the C-124, his hair caught on fire with excitement.



The Air Force Museum in Dayton is an enormous collection of (mostly) U.S. military aircraft, well-preserved and well-protected in enormous air conditioned hangars. I've seen B-52 bombers before but there's nothing like walking beneath one to realize it's enormous size. But the Museum doesn't stop there: in the same area was a F-111, a B-47, a B-36, and a B-50, and that's just a smidgen of the hardware on display.

The most amazing feature of the Air Force Museum? Admission is free. Nice to see our tax dollars being well-used.

We needed a hotel, Mexican food was on the menu, and a wicked overnight thunderstorm was in the forecast, all of which came to pass. Two thumbs up to Day 1 of our adventure.

Friday dawned damply, but beautiful VMC conditions. As I sumped rain water out of my left main tank — another first for Nick — we discussed our plans with Karen and Rolf. Our first destination was the “Cessnas to Oshkosh” mass arrival forming up at Dodge County Airport in Juneau, Wisconsin. With Karen and Rolf in the lead, we would fly as a flight of two northwest to Gary, Indiana and the shoreline of Lake Michigan, staring at the skyscrapers of Chicago before zigging northwest to Juneau. After a brief stop, Nick and I would continue on to Oshkosh itself.

Formation Fright

Karen departed first, which was a goof. While my plane is faster, her Cessna 182 climbs like the Space Shuttle. Even Nick’s youthful eyes could barely keep her in sight. Negotiating on the air-to-air “five fingers” frequency, we leveled off at 4,500 feet and eventually joined up. For two hours, we flew



Here’s a photo that needs explaining to the youngsters in the group. In between WWII and Vietnam, the old Soviet Union was perceived as a very real threat to the U.S. Both countries embarked on huge weapons programs. Some of them, like the dodo bird, were technological dead-ends. One such project was my favorite airplane of all time: the ten-engined B-36 bomber. The tales of this plane are endless, but one of the best was the original requirement to be “simple to maintain” by having just two main wheels, like the B-17 and B-29. Well, gravity being what it is, those landing gear and tires had to be enormous: the largest and heaviest aircraft tires ever made. They over-stressed the runways and were quickly replaced by more normal four-wheel landing gear systems, which you can see in the background over Nick’s left shoulder.

loose formation behind and below Karen's right wing. I kept my eyes glued on her yellow bird while Nick monitored the plane's gauges.



The Air Force Museum is located on Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. Does the name ring a bell? That's "wright" — Wilbur and Orville lived in Dayton, and their original "flying field" was basically at the end of today's runway. The brothers rode out to the field on a public tram. They taught themselves how to fly, perfected their hardware, and opened the world's first flying school. Beautifully preserved today, visitors can walk across the meadow and see replicas of their hangar and their unique catapult launching system. Here, Karen Ewart and Nick Phan inspect the facilities.

Our beautiful skies gradually developed a broken layer below us. The Lake Michigan fly-way along Chicago's lakefront required us to be 1,000 AGL or lower. We had to get below the broken layer. Flying as a flight of two in IMC conditions? The right answer: don't do it.

While still in VMC, we broke formation in

different directions. Karen went east, found a generous hole, and demonstrated her exceptional skills by neatly spiraling through it. Safely to the west, Nick and I found a skinny canyon of clear air. I pulled the power back, dropped the flaps and the gear, and stomped hard on the right rudder. I heard Nick's gasp of surprise as the plane stood on one wing and slipped sideways, still another first.

For a long minute we held the pose. Nick held his breath. Descending at 2,000 feet per minute, farms get bigger in a hurry. Off-handedly, I explained to Nick the aerodynamics of a slip. I felt like "K" in "Men in Black", singing Elvis songs while driving on the ceiling of the midtown tunnel.



Nick captured this snapshot of Karen Ewart's handsome C-182 someplace between Dayton and Gary, Indiana. We had departed in beautiful VFR conditions, but a broken layer formed as we approached Lake Michigan. We broke formation, flew in opposite directions until we could descend, and then re-formed over an airport just south of Gary. Simple, safe and speedy.

At 1,500 feet AGL we cleared the clouds. I released the controls and the plane snapped back to normal. Nick restarted his heart. We re-joined with Karen over a near-by airport. Next waypoint: Chicago!

The lakefront fly-way is an amazing aeronautical gift to general aviation, a rarity in the U.S. and

unheard of in the rest of the planet. Our ADSB displayed a dozen planes simultaneously flying the route. In the bright morning sun, Chicago Approach welcomed everybody as they pushed Airbuses and Boeings over our heads. We trundled along primly, glued to the windows. The skyscrapers and stadiums were close enough to touch. We easily spotted individuals walking their dogs. No exaggeration: we peered *inside* offices and apartments. Perhaps people in those buildings stared back at us, jealous of our adventure while their coffee cooled in their hands.

45 minutes later, we plunked down on the long



The Chicago fly-way over lake Michigan is an aeronautical delight. The scenery is stellar and the controllers are friendly. VFR waypoints included in every GPS make navigation easy. Notice Ewart's C-182 in the center of the image.

runways at Juneau. Dozens of Cessnas crowded the ramp as they gathered for the Cessnas-to-Oshkosh mass arrival. Nick was in his element: inspecting other planes, meeting fellow pilots, and (of course) chatting with the very cute ladies organizing the self-serv fuel pump. Smart folks at that FBO.

Rodney Swanson and Gil Velez have orchestrated the C2O mass arrival for a couple of decades. Their procedures have been fine-tuned. Registration ended at noon, followed by a pizza lunch in the hangar and a detailed mission briefing. While Nick and I were unable to join the mass arrival itself, attending the briefing earned us a precious color-coded permit allowing us to camp with them in the North 40 at Oshkosh. Badge in-hand, Nick and I mounted up to fly the Fisk Arrival. Our plan was to be on the ground before the mass arrival, welcoming the team and helping everybody to park and set up camp.

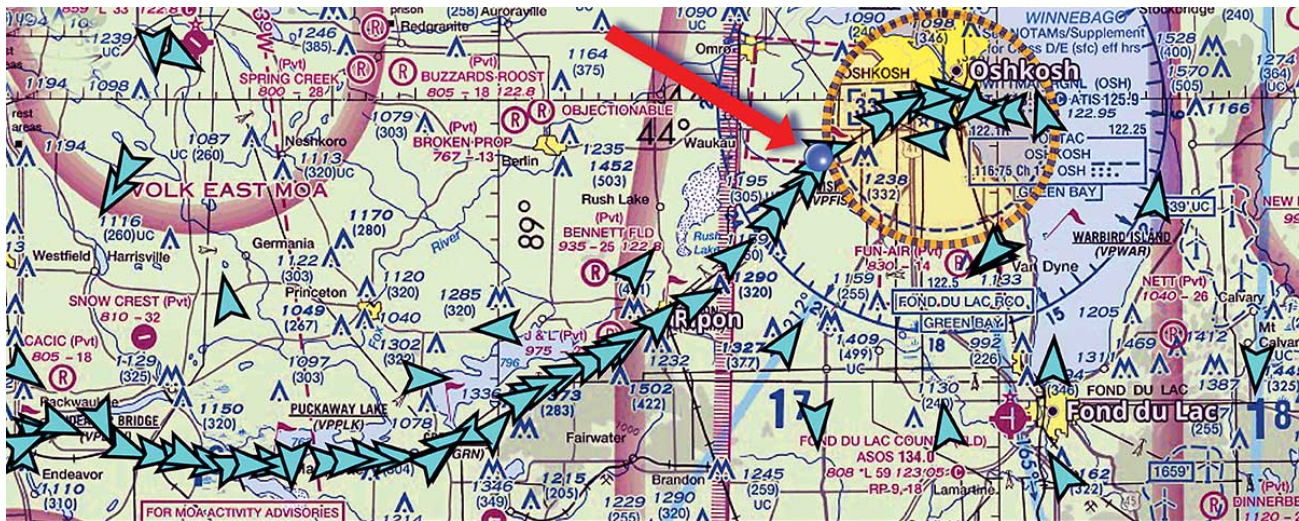
Fun at Fisk

The Fisk arrival into Oshkosh is simultaneously both ridiculously simple and intensely challenging. Things that make it simple: It's always VFR, GPS waypoints make navigation is easy, and everybody uses the same altitude and airspeed. You don't even need to talk on the radio... just shut up and listen.

But it's wicked hard, too. There are literally thousands of airplanes converging on OSH, forming a "conga line" along the route to Fisk. Some pilots are more experienced than others. Most follow the rules but some don't. Most planes work great but mechanical problems have happened. Most pilots have read the NOTAM but a few cowboys arrive without it. It is essential to turn off the autopilot, ignore the GPS, get your eyes outside the cockpit, and fly precisely. You did it as a student pilot. Now you're doing it for real.

"Red and white high-wing, rock your wings!"

I swing the yoke back and forth — another first for Nick, who was not expecting this gyration. My bad.



The arriving traffic into Oshkosh is supposed to use the strictly regimented FISK arrival. I snapped this screenshot when I was directly over FISK (red arrow). The procedure starts at the city of Endeavor, WI, which is 47 miles southwest of OSH: yep, 47 miles at 90 knots. The next pearls on the string are Puckaway Lake, Green Lake, Ripon, and then Fisk. From Fisk the controllers direct you to the appropriate runway. Every arrowhead on this photo is a plane. Notice at least six airplanes aiming at Endeavor Bridge, and what may be two airplanes flying the hold around Green Lake. The one lonely plane far off-course near Bennett Field could be a real problem if he tries to make it into Oshkosh.

“Good rock!” is the award given by ATC as pilots plow over the Fisk waypoint at the proper speed, altitude and spacing. Fisk is a hilltop in a cornfield about eight miles west of Oshkosh. It is staffed with volunteer ATC controllers who make the Oshkosh dance work with just the simplest of tools: a radio, binoculars and decades of experience.

Do not mess with the controllers at Fisk. They are the gorgons defending the approaches to Oshkosh itself. If everything goes well, they genially assign you a runway and a frequency... ours was, “Follow the railroad tracks to Runway 27, monitor 126.6.” Screw up and the dragon roars; you will be sent to purgatory over Green Lake, a hold from which pilots never return. Bring lots of fuel.

I turn slightly left and head towards Runway 27. Altitude and speed are perfect. I’m glued to the magenta line on the Garmin. The airport looms on the horizon. Suddenly, Nick is in my ear.

“Aren’t you supposed to be following the railroad tracks,” he asks, “not the GPS?”

He’s absolutely right. I’m half a mile left of course. Gently muttering about “cockpit resource management” I sashay to my right and rejoin the railroad tracks. Another “oops” for the youngster, NOTAM in his lap.

There’s one last gauntlet for the arriving OSH pilot: landing on your assigned dot. Unlike most airports where a landing plane owns the runway, as Oshkosh planes are assigned colored dots as targets. This means as many as three planes can land simultaneously, which increases the airport’s capacity. They also have planes landing on the taxiways next to you. It’s a hair-raising reminder why your instructor had you practice spot-landings all those years ago.

On downwind, Nick is staring at the scene below, almost hanging out the window. Giant things-with-wings glimmer in the distance at Boeing Plaza. Lake Winnebago shimmers off our nose. Parked warbirds line the runways below us. Hundreds of colorful tents bedeck airplanes already encamped. The perennial audience at the intersection of Runways 27 and 36 acerbically judge each pilots’ skills. It’s the greatest vista in all of aviation.

You know the drill: on downwind to Runway 27, keep the quarry on your left. Nick snaps photos and grabs video. Tower delays my base turn until a warbird is clear. Finally, I get an easy clearance: “Red and white high wing, cleared to land, Runway 27, anywhere you want.”

Not a dot? Land anywhere? Words rarely heard at Oshkosh. The controllers must be impressed with my style.

I finesse my descent, aiming for the green (middle) dot on the zillion-foot long runway. I add a bit of power. I extend my glide. Suddenly I’m too slow, the stall warning horn is blaring, the right wing drops and I drift to the right. The



Nick snapped this image as we flew right downwind to Runway 27. Runway 18/36 is in the distance on the left; that's where most of the airshow activity is concentrated. Adjacent to it is Boeing Plaza where the biggest show planes park. In the center of the photo, just on the other side of Runway 27, are sixteen rows of G.A. aircraft. Those are early arrivals camping in the North Forty. All that grass will fill up with planes in the next day or two. Camping aircraft will wrap around the end of Runway 27 and fill the grassy spaces at the bottom of the photo. The Cessna Base Camp is the white tent at the far-right edge of the photo on the far side of Runway 27 (red arrow); Nick and I were the very first Cessna campers to arrive.

green dots flits by under the left wing as the plane runs out of lift. I flop on to the tarmac gracelessly, like a mackerel on the deck of a fishing boat. The controllers are hysterical. The camping judges stare as we taxi along, open-mouthed. Nick's looking at me, his eyebrows asking, What was that?

Ooops.

I power-up and dashed off the runway on to the grass. Like an out-of-step performer in a well-rehearsed flash mob, I camouflage my Cessna in the herd of other planes taxiing to the North 40. In minutes my fiasco is forgotten by everybody except myself. And Nick. Nick's got quite a memory.

No copilot's perfect.

About the Author



Dr. Mike Jones is a 4,000 hour commercial-rated pilot who enjoys camping next to his 1979 Cessna Centurion at airshows. Additionally, Jonesy has just completed his doctoral degree from the University of Florida and officially graduated on August 11th. His dissertation had a long boring academic title but the gist of it was a statistical analysis of the management of G.A. airports. He's always accessible at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.