



The 2021 Cessna Mass Arrival at Oshkosh

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By Mike Jones

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About two months ago in this journal I reported on the preparations for the Cessnas2Oshkosh “mass arrival” which was planned for the 2021 AirVenture celebration. It happened and, much to my delight, I participated. As Cessna fans, you can be proud of your friends and colleagues who flew this mission.

For the uninitiated, here’s the quick 4-1-1 on the mass arrival. The idea is to celebrate all-things-Cessna by simultaneously landing a huge gaggle of Cessna airplanes at the Oshkosh show. The planes launched in a tight sequence on Saturday, July 24th from the Dodge County Airport (KUNU) in Juneau, Wisconsin, about thirty miles south of Oshkosh. ATC at Oshkosh briefly dedicated one runway exclusively to the C2O arrivals. After landing, we all camped together in the North 40. But before all that could happen, an unruly gaggle of Cessna pilots had to get their birds and butts to Juneau.

With 100+ planes in the sky simultaneously, prudence would suggest every plane should carry at least two people for safety. A fellow Cessna driver put me in touch with Capt. Alex Mello of American Airlines. We met, we flew, we bonded, wherever the winds and wings would take us.

Alex is a pilot's pilot. Lean and handsome, with a wicked sense of humor and an engaging smile, in his airline uniform he looks like an actor sent from Central Casting. Sure, he flies the heavy metal up in the flight levels, but that's just to pay the rent. His greatest joy is low and slow, exercising other peoples' airplanes when they're too busy to fly. This gives him access to a stable of Cessna singles, one twin-engine 310, some odd-ball Pipers, a couple of



taildraggers, a historic Stearman and a Piaggio turboprop from Italy. He is one of the few people with a type rating to fly *Tinker Belle*, a 60,000 lb. World War II C-46. With a resume like his, there was very little me, my Cessna, the weather or crazy Oshkosh pilots could do to throw him out of step.

Friday, July 23rd

It was time to fly. On Friday, the forecasted early morning fog did not materialize so by 9am I was airborne for the easy-peasy 19-minute hop to Monroe, NC (KEQY) to scoop up my wingman. Sure enough, things went wrong immediately. Sipping my java in

glassy-smooth air, I dialed up the Monroe ATIS only to learn that my forecasted fog had migrated to roost at Monroe. That airport had gone from CAVU to muck in the 30 minutes I was pulling my plane out of her hangar. Flying over the airport I could see the Appalachian Mountains, 70 miles to my west, but I couldn't see the runway a thousand feet below.

Fortunately, the controllers at Charlotte are consummate professionals. They found a spare minute to bequeath unto me Ye Olde IFR clearance. '91N and I shot the ILS like an express train, popping out at 500 feet. Alex was standing by the FBO with all of his luggage and gear. Backpack in hand, he looked like his Mom had dropped him off to wait for the school bus.

We grinned and waved, refilled coffee mugs, and in minutes were airborne. Our first way point was Wabash, Indiana where we had scheduled to meet other Cessna fliers on their way to Juneau. We told Charlotte Approach we were the



Mike Jones (left) and Captain Alex Mello cruise together on their way to Juneau in Jonesy's 1979 Cessna Centurion T210.

mythical *Wabash Cannonball*¹ and, laughing, they gave us direct-destination. Life is good.

It took us four hours to cross the gnarly Appalachians of West Virginia and the square-

rimmed farms of Ohio and Indiana. Alex worked the helm and played with the avionics. The burly Continental ran cool and contentedly while I tossed empty beer cans out the window. We plopped into Wabash Muni to find all our buddies already had come and gone. Discouraged but unfazed, we gobbled a packet of crackers and continued on.

¹ The *Wabash Cannonball* is a mythical tale from the late 1800s when iron-anything was the high-tech big-money dream job. The myth explains that Paul Bunyan's brother, Cal, was the finest locomotive engineer in the world. He created a train so fast that it arrived at its destination before it left; he called it the *Wabash Cannonball*. Sadly, on one final proving run it rocketed straight off the planet and into space, never to be seen again, making it a fitting metaphor for some of my recent landings.

With Rocky Mountain forest fires killing the visibility, we filed IFR with Indy Center and were rewarded with a long, circuitous route almost to Iowa. Cumulus build-ups kept Alex busy diverting left and right all the way to Rockford, IL. We flopped into Juneau tired but satisfied with our decision-making. Alex knew half the people in the FBO and introduced himself to the rest while I registered with the C2O offices on the second floor. A quick bus trip got us to our hotel, to dinner, a cocktail and a good night sleep.

Saturday, July 24th

Saturday started bright and early back at Wisconsin Air. The ramp was packed with Cessnas of all colors, sizes and vintages. The line for fuel stretched fifteen planes deep as Mike, Logan and Esther pushed waiting planes to the pumps and scampered up ladders to reach awkwardly high fuel caps. A few wayward visitors dropped into the mix, such as Georgian Steve Lowe and his blindingly-shiny 1946 Erocoupe. Jared and Tanya Newman flew their fat-tired Carbon Cub from the western slopes of Colorado. A small cluster of Civil Air Patrol officers patrolled the flightline, recording departing N-numbers to match with the ones which landed at KOSH, ensuring no off-airport emergency was overlooked. Even a Bonanza arrived, saw that he was out-numbered and out-classed, and shuffled back into the clouds.

The Juneau FBO had filled an entire hangar with tables and chairs for our convenience. The hospitality of the local EAA Chapter #897 exceeded all



The local EAA Chapter, #897, rolled out the red-carpet for the Cessnas to Oshkosh family. Here, Josie (left) and Julie Boelter sizzle up sausages and pancakes for 200 hungry flyers.

expectations. 93-year old Cleo Kohlhamer, aided by Josie and Julie Boelter, cooked pancakes and sausages. Jeffery and Gloria Schmidt worked the cash register. A huge coffee pot kept the conversations humming. Old friends

“Life is either a daring adventure or nothing at all.”

**— Helen Keller,
“The Open Door”**

greeted each other loudly; new friends asked about planes and airports.

The conversation became a little tighter, a little more tense, as the 11th hour of the morning approached.

This marked the final cut-off

for pilots to arrive at Juneau to join the arrival. With paperwork, insurance forms, fuel and such, a hard-stop is arbitrary but essential. Of the 142 aircraft registered 22 dropped out due to weather, mechanical troubles or life in general. If Foreflight is to be believed, there still were five Cessnas inbound to KUNU when the 11 o'clock bell tolled. Even so, the grand-total of 115 planes was a C2O record.

Once the clock ticked over, Julie and Steve Wolf posted the master assignment list showing every pilot, every plane and their assigned flights. The starting group was Alpha flight, featuring C2O webmaster Gil Velez in his Cessna 172 paired with two



Once all the pilots had registered, Julie and Steve Wolff sorted the planes by speed into flights of three airplanes. Here, one pilot checks the roster for his assignment.

Cessna 150s. The list rolled on through the entire alphabet and restarted, all the way to Poppa-Poppa. Alex and I were Mike-Mike Three. Mike-Mike lead was

Jim Gandee with his wife Rene, who flew their handsome C210 from Los Angeles for the event.



took thirty pizzas and several huge coolers of sodas to “fuel the tanks” of the 200 flyers scheduled to participate in the Cessna mass arrival.

Because carbs and caffeine really keep airplanes in the air, right around noon a huge SUV pulled up and disgorged an almost infinite stack of pizzas. The throng lined up and everybody got a slice or three. It was a feast.

The official briefing started while we were munching our thick-crusts, led by C2O founder Rodney Swanson. He reviewed the rules of the road. We took a roll-call using a simulated “comm check” to make sure everybody was in the room. We briefed taxi procedures, which were intricate because planes were sprawled over all the ramps. Swanson briefed altitudes, speeds and routes, go-arounds, emergency procedures and “what if” mistakes. We learned there even was a Civil Air Patrol plane overhead, call sign “Lighthouse”, in case someone landed off-airport. This was intense stuff, and despite the occasional frivolity everyone took it seriously.

The Flight

Eventually it was time to mount up. Sitting in ‘91N, Alex monitored the action with a hand-held radio to avoid wasting fuel or draining the battery; it took forty minutes to get all the slower planes into the air. Eventually our time

came and we flowed politely behind Mike-Mike Lead until there were six airplanes on the end of the runway. Lima-Lima flight departed smoothly before us. After a pause Mike-Mike Lead started rolling. We counted “one-two-three” and then I hit the gas. In a moment all 115 planes were in the air, flowing northward to Oshkosh.



Rodney Swanson has planned and briefed complicated helicopter missions for the Army, and he ran the briefing like the pro he is. Every speed, altitude, heading, and possible procedure was covered completely.

The flight took about twenty minutes at 90 knots. I kept my eyes on Mike-Mike Lead and stayed at his 45° echelon, about 75 feet behind and to his right. To avoid losing sight of Lead over my wing, heading adjustments were “flat turns” using rudder only. The throttle was my constant friend; every few seconds I made a tweak. Alex monitored the now-familiar gauges but mostly kept his eyes outside the cockpit. He spotted Lima-Lima and Kilo-Kilo flight in front of us, but kept scanning in all directions. True story: in 2019 an unwary Piper drifted through the C2O formation enroute to RIPON; that puckered everybody up.



Here's something you don't see very often: six planes on one runway simultaneously. In this case, there were the three planes in Kilo-Kilo flight up front, starting their departure roll. The two planes of Lima-Lima flight are closest to the camera. The photo was taken from airplane #6, Mike-Mike Three, and Mike-Mike Lead is out of the camera's line, to the right. It's about this moment you realize how crowded it's going to be up there in a few minutes.

As planned, about three miles out Mike-Mike Lead called, “Gear down, flaps 10.” It was the only radio call of the flight. We drifted lower until the runway appeared; Lead took Runway 36 Left and I landed on 36 Right, which is a taxiway in normal times. We raced to the end and into the arms of the awaiting volunteer marshals who scooted us to the North Forty for camping.

Operationally, everything went very smoothly, according to C2O's Swanson. “Juneau isn't big enough to arrange all the aircraft as we wanted, so we had some entangled planes who couldn't get out when they should have. Twice I had to pause the departures,” he explained. “That made the whole thing work, because those two breaks in the line of departures created shock-absorbers in the flight stream.”



Mike-Mike Lead is about 100 feet ahead of Mike-Mike Three. If you look closely, you can see Lima-Lima flight right on the horizon, and Kilo-Kilo flight ahead of them. Good rule: at 75-feet separation, a Cessna single is about as tall as a man's thumb. If it's bigger than your thumb, you're too close!

During the departure, Swanson was on the radio with the planes and on the phone with ATC at Oshkosh. Their radar detected the first pause and spurred an inquiry from them. Swanson explained parking issues had caused the hiccup. There was another break in departures around the Sierra flights, and ATC was queried that, as well, but everybody was on the ground at KOSH before the C2O time slot expired. As with any complex project, it's a work in progress.

Camping

Alex and I spent six days at Oshkosh and they were a delight. The pre-planning that the Cessnas2Oshkosh team had put in really showed. There was a huge tent, tables, grills and banners. Coolers with free water and sodas were available all week. Every morning a different volunteer crew prepared breakfast;



Photo, above: Sunday evening is the big dinner event for the C2O team, and they did not disappoint. It was catered by LaSure's Banquet Hall & Catering, which has been an icon in Oshkosh for more than fifty years. It was superb and abundant; a wonderful extravaganza. Photo, below: The distinctive chartreuse shirts of the 2021 C2O event are colorful in the evening sunlight at the Sunday group dinner. The only problem was a lack of chairs; lots of folks ran back to their campsites to bring additional seating.



my Carolinas contingent offered fresh fruit, bacon, eggs, and southern grits. Sunday evening featured an awards dinner with expensive gifts from the C2O sponsors. Every evening we gathered in chairs around the planes and told stories, compared planes and enjoyed an adult beverage or ten. During the days, we wandered the flight line, explored unfamiliar airplanes and chatted with eager vendors in the exhibition halls.

Of course, the weather is a factor when you're camping. Saturday night a huge full moon surprised us all, rising romantically over the bathhouse. On both Sunday night and Wednesday night storms rolled in; that tale is told in

another article in this magazine. But to the best of my knowledge, no airplane was harmed in the making of this adventure.



My Carolinas contingent made breakfast on Monday morning on the watchful eyes of Denise and Jarvier Camba, cooking 36 dozen eggs (!) and hundreds of slices of bacon. The grits were boiled in a huge pot of water outside the tent, and needed constant stirring. Adding the grits to the pot is Jim Taylor, while Lee Meyers supervises.

Eventually, Alex and I knew we had to return to reality. On Thursday morning we bundled up our tents, caught a tailwind and made it home VFR direct in just over four hours.

The “Why?”

At this point, the savvy reader has a question: Why in the world would you get into the sky with 100+ pilots and attempt something so fundamentally dangerous? Isn't this unnecessarily risky?

To which I would offer two answers. First, there is risk in every flight. The key is to manage the risk, and the C2O team manages it very well. Pilots are trained in basic formation processes and some are eliminated if their skills are deemed insufficient. The planes are clustered by performance. The weather is good enough or we don't fly. The briefing is complete and intense. To my mind, and the minds of 114 other flyers, the risk was mitigated to a reasonable level.

The second answer is more pointed. It is essential, as healthy people, to keep growing and learning. I've collected my private, commercial and instrument tickets. I've graduated from Cessna 172s to C-182s to the T-210 and then into taildraggers. My logbook includes hours in floatplanes, gentleman aerobatics in a Citabria with Bob Wall, 17-heart stopping spins with Adm. Bill Finagin in his amazing Pitts, and 30 magical minutes in a DC-3. Each experience challenged me, expanded my skills, made me a better pilot and in turn a better person. Helen Keller wrote, "Life is either a daring adventure or nothing at all." This flight is but a tool: a mechanism we use to learn to better understand ourselves and our world. That's why we fly.

Adventure on, dude!

About the Author

Mike Jones is an aviation writer based in Pinehurst, NC. Commercial-rated, he's logged over 3,000 hours in more than two dozen types of planes. Due to COVID, most of the fun places he likes to fly are closed. Once there's a vaccine and the 2021 airshow season opens again, he can't wait to get back into the air. He's always accessible at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.

