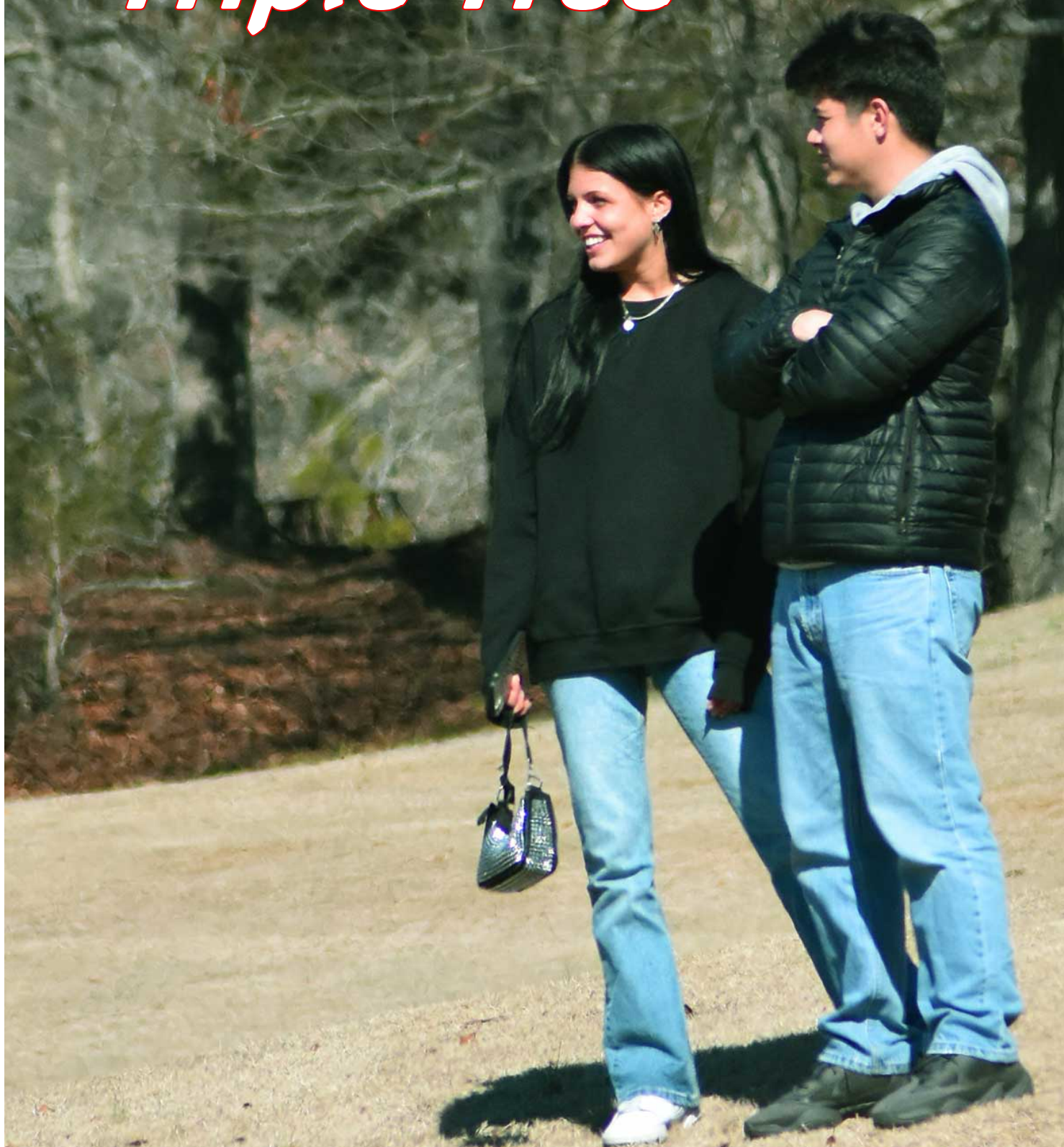


Chilly Chili at Triple Tree



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By Mike Jones

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The Triple Tree Aerodrome in Woodruff, South Carolina is Nirvana, Brigadoon, and the Promised Land of general aviation, all rolled into one. It's only open a few weeks of the year. Snuggled onto a hillside and protected by miles of oak and pine forests, there are few neighbors to complain about engine noise. There is a lake large enough for light floatplanes, a small museum with fascinating airplanes, campgrounds with electricity and running water, a river in which to wade, and a turf runway 7,000 feet long.

But the best part (as if it needs to get any better) is the professional kitchen attached to the main hangar. That kitchen can churn out top-quality edibles in the blink of an eye. I've had juicy steaks with home-made potato salad, hot dogs the size of the Goodyear blimp, and pancakes bigger than a parachute. It's good eatin' Carolina-style. But in February of every year the Triple Tree family starts the flying season off right. February is the "Chilly Chili" fly-in at Triple Tree, and while the chili may peg your CHTs it's worth the avgas to be there.

Outward Bound

This year's Chilly Chili fly-in was on February 3rd. The air was brisk, almost cold, but the skies were blue and cloud-free. I had preflighted the Centurion the night before so the oil was topped and the tires round. I had activated an electric heater overnight so when I arrived at the hangar even though winds were icy my baby was warm and ready to rock. Nick Phan, who flew with me to

Oshkosh last year, arrived with his newly minted Private Pilot's ticket in his pocket and a young lady on his arm. We mounted up and within minutes were purring through the skies, headed 25 minutes to the southwest to Monroe, NC (KEQY).



The runway at Triple Tree normally is as verdant as an Irish putting green, but in winter the Bermuda grass goes dormant and brown. On this Saturday, we were all landing up-hill which made landing rolls short but take-offs challenging.

In Monroe, we picked up another vagabond, retired Capt. Alex Mello, bon vivant of the skies. Since Alex has retired from his left-seat job at a major legacy airline, he's actually flying more frequently than when he was zinging around the county in an Airbus. He's found a niche flying airplanes for people who don't have the time to fly those planes themselves. Everything from a Cessna jet down to a two-seat taildragger, Capt. Alex will come to your hangar, preflight your slightly dusty steed, buy some avgas using your credit card, and go bang it around in the skies for a couple hours, ensuring the valves, cylinders,

and magnetos don't get too rusty. He's like a professional dog-walker, without the pooper-scooper.

Alex clambered into the left seat while I grabbed the radios on the right side, and Nick plus one snuggled in the back. We blasted out of Monroe and continued to the southwest, "SC00" dialed into the Garmin. Triple Tree is busy enough during these fly-ins to have a special arrival procedure which whimsically starts at "Wally-World" (an enormous Walmart warehouse) and ends with a mid-field crosswind at 90 knots right over the antique World War II control tower. Sure enough, there were people who had not read the procedure and came in from all angles, but we were there early enough to not jump into a last-minute fur-ball.



The main hangar and flying museum at Triple Tree is perched on the top of the hill. The hangar is equipped with offices, bathrooms and an industrial-sized kitchen, which on this day was serving fiery-hot chili by the truckload.

The turf runway was soft from recent rains, so the Triple Tree radio advisor asked everybody to “land long” in order to avoid some mud on the first thousand feet or so of the runway. That meant touching down on the upslope of a hill, just like missionary flights on YouTube where they drop into a village on a mountain top. As skillful as ever, Alex had the nose pointing sky-high as he gently flopped the Cessna on the incline, adding a skoshe of power to gently match our descent to the angle of the hill. We touched down gently and taxied off to the right, where volunteer marshals expertly directed us to parking. Climbing out of the Cessna, it was clear the party was already beginning.



One of the joys of Triple Tree is seeing unusual planes with eye-popping pedigrees. Walking up and down the flight line, you see everything from single-seat ultralights to burly DC-3s. Here, an antique twin unloads passengers.



(Top) Triple Tree uses the hilltop ramp for cookouts and dining, and even more seating is available inside the hangar. The crowds they can accommodate are enormous; on this particular day they served about 400 people. The checkerboard tablecloths add a country-fair atmosphere



(Left) Wandering around the hangar, I met (right to left) Bob Martin, Abby Paige, Brent Table, and toddler Martin Paige; followed Jody Martin and Miss Emily David Kate. The Martins flew in from Alabama in their Bonanza, in just two hours, to visit the Paiges for a fun weekend.

Party Hearty

The Triple Tree runway, normally a brilliant green arrow of Bermuda grass, was brown and dormant, slightly forlorn surrounded by leafless forest. Some of the arriving planes, landing heavily, chewed up the turf as they flailed on to the grass. Naturally, there were Cessnas and Pipers galore, both singles and twins. A handful of aerobatic arrivals were fun to watch, flying tight patterns and spewing smoke. There also were home-built aircraft, like Zeniths, and taildraggers by the dozen with their unending love for turf runways. A few frozen ultralights made the trip, along with a smattering of historic restorations. The unofficial tally counted two hundred planes arrived for the event.

Ponder that for a moment: 200 airplanes, arriving within a two-hour time block, from all different directions and flying at different speeds, at an uncontrolled turf field, safely. Next time somebody tells you today's pilots aren't as good as they used to be, you can quote me. We're doing fine.



Stacy Bolster (left) and Heron Weidner came in second place for the longest flight of the day, flying two hours and 52 minutes, "destination direct" from Williamsburg, VA to Triple Tree in their 1969 Cessna 172K. Amazingly, that routed them right through the Charlotte Class B airspace, an honor rarely offered by those grumpy controllers. When I asked how they managed that, Weidner simply said, "We asked very nicely." She must have a magic touch; her day job is flying F-15s for the Air Force.

Up at the main hangar atop the hill, Pat Harkness — the visionary founder of Triple Tree — had rolled his antique aircraft out into the bright sunshine to accommodate dozens and dozens of tables for the luncheon crowd. The aeronautical herd grew larger as the lunch-hour approached. Like cows coming back to the barn to be milked, long lines of pilots began coalescing around the serving tables.

Most of us lounged on the hilltop, watching the late arrivals spiral on to the downwind leg over our heads. Giant coolers provided sodas and water, and just after the mid-day hour buckets and buckets of chili appeared from the industrial kitchen behind the hangar. Smiling and chatty volunteers ladled out the chili in generous portions, followed by a table of condiments and desserts. There even was vegetarian chili option, for those so inclined. Hungry from a long morning of flying and walking, most of us sat in the sun, made new friends, and wolfed down our lunches. I cleaned my plate, that's for sure.



Triple Tree thrives on amazing volunteers. Here, Flora Nodine, Boris Nodine, and Jane Foster serve huge helpings at the Chili Counter while Chef Mark Davidson supervises. Davidson is from Greenville (SC) and told me he's "been volunteering with this group for 30 years. I always help out with the food. I'm not a professional chef; I only cook at Triple Tree, but I've been involved in every event we have."

Rob Williams, the executive director of the Triple Tree Foundation, greeted everybody on the public address system. They gave away two awards: one for



Admiring the historic Spartan airplane owned by the Museum, I met Scott Bodem and his family from Spartanburg, SC. Several years ago, Scott and his son Cooper and I had met, standing in another line for another lunch at Triple Tree. It was very nice to catch up on all the changes their lives have seen in the past three or four years. From right to left: Scott Bodem, the dad, who just got his private ticket; Walker Bodem (black hat) also is working on his private license, Marina Bodem has just married Cooper Bodem, and also is working on her PPL, and her husband Cooper. Cooper now flies a King Air B200 for a charter operator and hopes to go to the airlines soon.

the crew who had flown the longest distance to be there that day, and another for the youngest pilot to arrive. Those were nice gestures and appreciated by all.

Bio Breaks

Only then did the sole problem of the day materialize: during the winter months, there's only one heated bathroom at Triple Tree, and they only spend

that money so the water pipes won't freeze. The line was long and progress was slow. Whoopsie.

By mid-afternoon, things were starting to wind down. Planes were dragging themselves into the sky as the shadows grew long. Taking off in these conditions was a challenge. Lacking the first thousand feet or so of flat runway, where normal acceleration would happen easily, the take-off roll started at the bottom of the knoll and pointed uphill. Even my Centurion, with 300+ horsepower, struggled to gain airspeed while climbing a hill on a draggy, rough turf runway. When Alex finally coaxed the plane into the air — we crested the end of the runway perhaps ten feet in the air — you could almost hear the



This happy couple are Jack and Diane, from Clover, SC , which is about an hour and a half by car from Triple Tree. With them is Maggie, their chihuahua. Jack's a flight instructor for Delta but for fun he flies his Stearman or a Piper Cub. Diane was hugely impressed with Triple Tree: "It's so beautiful, even with no leaves on the trees, it's a dream."

Continental breathe a sigh of relief. "That was hard work!" it muttered, "What are you guys doing back there?"

The trip home was a rewind of the arrival. Twenty minutes later we were back at Monroe, and Alex bade us farewell. Nick climbed into the front seat and captained the flight back to Pinehurst. I was pleased to see the improvement in Nick's plane-handling skills since our adventure to Oshkosh this summer; he was smooth on the yoke and confident on the radio. He's got a great career ahead of him, whatever form it may take.

Any event at Triple Tree should be one of the bucket-list items for all of us G.A. pilots. It's an intimate, non-commercial affair among friends. The flying is challenging but not nearly as intimidating as at Oshkosh or Sun-n-Fun. The ambience of the forests, the grass runway, the river and lakes, great camaraderie, lively banter, good food, and reasonable prices make it a must-fly item. Check the web for the next scheduled event; you won't be disappointed.



Luke Hedin won the award as the youngest pilot at the event. He's from Charlotte, NC and is 19 years old. He flew to Triple Tree in a Grumman Cheeta. He just got his private ticket last year, and now is working towards instrument and commercial, hoping for a career in the majors." I want to do what my dad does," he told me, "be a captain for American Airlines."

About the Author

Mike Jones is a 4,000 hour commercial-rated pilot who has more than 50 aircraft types in his logbook. His pride and joy is a Cessna T210, which has carried him to every corner of the U.S. and Canada for more than twenty years. He's always accessible at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.

