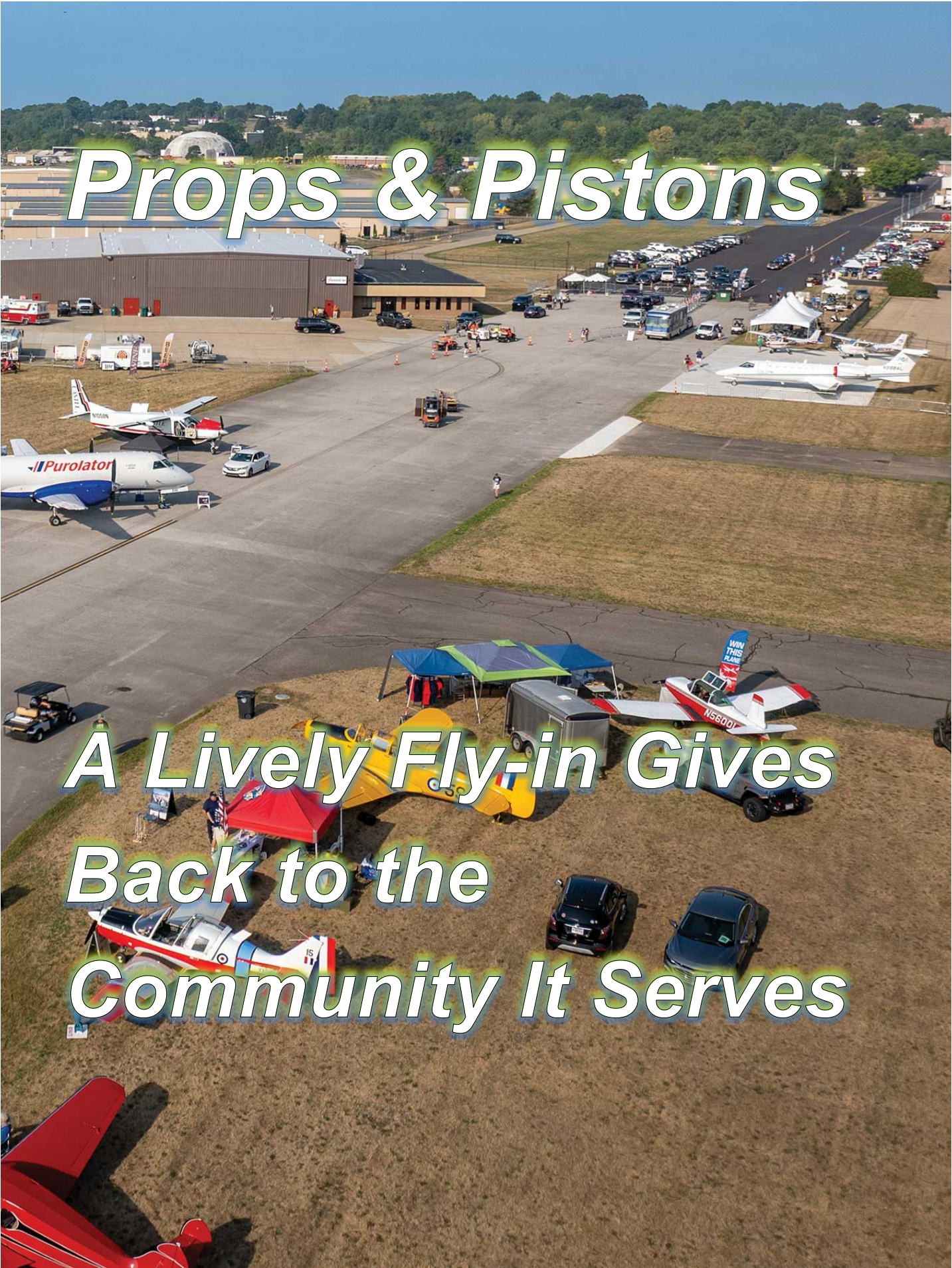


An aerial photograph of an airfield during a fly-in event. In the foreground, a yellow biplane is parked on a grassy area next to a red tent. A small red and white biplane is also visible. In the middle ground, a large white and blue Purolator airplane is parked on the tarmac. To the right, a white and red biplane with the registration N5601 is parked. In the background, a large hangar and a parking lot filled with cars are visible. The sky is clear and blue.

Props & Pistons

*A Lively Fly-in Gives
Back to the
Community It Serves*

“Props and Pistons” — A Lively Fly-in Gives Back to the Community It Serves

By Mike Jones

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Approaching my ten-year anniversary of writing for this journal, you may have noticed a pattern in my scribbles. You might have concluded that I enjoy flying and airplanes and diving deep into the technology that keeps us aloft. But more than anything, I am fascinated by the people that aviation introduces into our lives. We get into airplanes for the adventure, but we stay in aviation for the people. As proof of this assertion, your Honor, I submit exhibit number 1: The recent “Props and Pistons” fly-in in Akron, Ohio. I wanted to see if a small community could possibly host a world-class airshow. I never should have doubted it!

Getting to Akron from my home in North Carolina was easy: a sun-filled early morning jaunt of about two and a half hours. As always, I filed IFR but the skies were CAVU. I flipped on the autopilot, popped a Bud, and tossed the empties out the window as I wafted over Virginia and on to Ohio. There was a complex NOTAM for arrivals but the temporary control tower, eager to improve flight safety by getting me out of the sky as soon as possible, authorized a time-saving straight-in approach. I made another regrettable landing but most of the big parts of my plane remained glued together. Thank heavens Cessna makes our babies strong.

I followed the marshals and tied down the Cessna in the grass. Soon I was walking the flight line, enjoying the hardware on display, the patter of the airshow announcer, and admiring the long-line of cholesterol-filled food trucks setting up for another busy day. “Props and Pistons” may only be a community event, but it is highly entertaining. And caloric.

Walking the Flight Line

For a small show, the flightline was surprisingly well-equipped. There was a gaping C-17, with the inevitable line of sub-burned tourists queuing like colorectal tourists at the back end of the giant bird. A slightly smaller C-130 was perched on the side, along with a handsome collection of warbirds. The large AOPA tent featured a flurry of useful and informative presentations (see sidebar). A whole section of the ramp was cordoned off for the flight-show piston planes while dozens of flight schools and aviation companies positioned handsomely-bug-free airplanes around their displays. Traffic was heavy, both on foot and in the air.



A C-17 on the ramp at Akron.

Unless you’ve seen an Egyptian pyramid bearing with the Goodyear logo, one would be hard-pressed to find a more discordant structure at any airport than the surprising “Akron Airdock.” At 1,175 feet long, 325 feet wide, and

towering 200 feet in the air, the hangar was designed to shelter the Hindenburg-like dirigibles the Navy was deploying. The building covers eight acres; a Nimitz aircraft carrier would fit beneath the Airdock’s gently curving

roof. When it was finished in 1929 the Airdock was the world's largest structure without interior supports. 600-ton doors cap each end of the giant structure. Sadly, the only two dirigibles to call the Airdock home were the Akron (ARS-4) in 1931 and the Macon (ARS-5) in 1934. Both were destroyed in storms which — followed by the crash of the Hindenburg in 1937 — put an end to the dream of passenger-carrying rigid airships.

STEM Scholarships

While “lighter than air” isn’t working in Akron, you can be sure general aviation is alive and well there today. One of the first people I met was a weary but energetic Hans Krah, piloting himself around the fly-in in a worn-out golf cart. Krah is the chairman of the fly-in and a senior TRACON supervisor up at Cleveland. He reported the fly-in is the principal fund-raiser for a local charity called “Inspire Aviation.” Inspire funds year-round community outreach across the Akron area, mostly focused on STEM-based activities and aviation. Among their many activities, Inspire operates a successful scholarship program.

“One [scholarship] is a private pilot starter scholarship.

We also have a general scholarship which can be used towards any STEM-related activity,” Krah stated proudly. These programs are making a difference: “One of the kids a few years ago is now a crew member on a KC-135 out of Rickenbacker. One year our winner just wanted the check sent to her college to partially pay her tuition bill.



Air Force Trainer with Powered Parachute Behind. Stratus-Props-58.jpg. Photo, courtesy Stratus Visuals.

We have five recipients who continue to volunteer. Anything related to STEM it is okay with us.”

During show week, Krah is at the airport every evening until 11pm. “I don’t get much sleep that week,” he acknowledged with a laugh. Between setting up, tearing down, working with sponsors, emergency planning, working with the airboss, coordinating with the temporary control tower, and supervising thirty volunteer sub-chairs, it’s ferociously busy. This year, AOPA has joined the Props and Pistons events which has given it an extra jolt of energy. Krah agreed that teaming with AOPA has kicked the fly-in onto a much bigger stage.



Airshows are for kids, too. Here, a Jurassic Park dinosaur sprays water on two excited kids.

“We have been courting AOPA for years. But recently they decided to back away from running shows themselves,” he said. “Of all of the sites they were looking at, Akron had the most AOPA members within a 500-mile radius. That helped drive their decision.”

Like fertilizing a garden, teaming with AOPA has enabled the event to grow much faster, with an estimated attendance of 7,500 for 2025. The organization has a budget of \$250,000 (according to Guidestar) which Inspire leverages for the betterment of the community. The economic impact of the 2025 fly-in is estimated to be in the \$7-9 million range, which “blows any previous number that we had out of the water.” That’s good for Akron and for aviation in general.

Strolling the Show

An airshow is only as good as the flying, and the “glue” that holds a show together is the airshow announcer. At Akron, veteran broadcaster Terry Scott delivered a lively patter which kept the audience both informed and engaged.

Scott’s background is in journalism. He was the news director at CKLW-TV in Windsor, Ontario, and ultimately the director of broadcasting at the Canadian Press News Agency in Toronto.



Terry Scott is an affable Canadian newscaster who volunteers as the airshow announcer at the Props and Pistons event. It's a win-win for everybody: the airshow gets a professional announcer, and Scott can satisfy his itch for aviation.

As you might expect, he’s got silver pipes. His soft baritone carries easily across the noisy ramp.

“I’ve always loved aircraft,” he reminisced. Scott has worked with the Canadian Harvard Aircraft Association in

Tillsonburg, Ontario, for thirty years. (The Harvard

is the British version of the military trainer known in the States as AT-6 Texan or SNJ.) Scott became involved with the Props and Pistons Festival in 2022.

“I love it. It’s been fantastic,” he said exuberantly. “They’re a great bunch to work with. There’s the smells, the sounds, and the lore that’s involved. It fits my love of aviation, my love of history, of storytelling. It’s just been a pleasure.”

Standing on the back of a flatbed truck in the hot August sun is hard work, and Scott spends a great deal of time prepping for the show. “I want to educate and entertain. I rehearse some quips, some little stories. Personal stories that I’ve heard from pilots. It’s doesn’t have to be all glitz and glamour, but the kids need to love it. I’m trying to educate them a little bit as opposed to, you know, just facts and figures.”

One trick Scott uses on-stage are recorded interviews with the pilots that he plays while they are performing in the sky. He feels it adds a human dynamic to the airshow, rather than just rattling off useless information the audience can already see.

“Aviation is a network of folks who not only enjoy flying, but also work to serve others and lift people up.”

— Holly Hayden

“Some of these pilots, your top guns, they’ve never met a microphone they didn’t love. But lots of them go on like a boring press release,” he said. “It’s a trick to really get them talking, to be real, not rehearsed. There’s one chap, Robert Schmidle, a three-star

general, and he could go on and on and on. But one time I asked him, how did you get the callsign ‘Rooster’? That was a great story that would never be in a press release.”

Veteran Planes and People

Airshows are famous for their World War II airplanes, which can be repaired and reflown for decades. But World War II veterans are tougher to find; the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs estimates only 66,000 of them are still with us, of the 16 million who served. Wandering under the wing of an old Navy Avenger bomber, I met one of the greatest generation: 99-year old Alvin Gould.



A spry Alvin Gould of Butler, PA, shrugs off his 99-years as he inspects a Dauntless Avenger from WWII. Gould flew on a similar machine for 26 months at the end of the war, including the battle at Iwo Jima. With him is his son-in-law, Bill Sonntag.

Today Gould lives in Butler, PA, but he served 29 months in the Pacific right to the end of World War II. His diminutive frame served him well, because he was a ball turret gunner on an Avenger, mostly flying off the carrier Saratoga.

“It wasn’t very roomy, but It wasn’t bad; there’s more room inside than there looks to be,” he said, his voice scratchy and faint. He proudly rested his hand on a restored turret gun on display at the airshow. “I did a lot of shooting, but only at towed targets. I riddled them with bullets.”

Primitive airplanes flying under challenging conditions often led to adventurous outcomes. “[On one flight] our arresting hook missed the cable and we almost went off the side of the carrier. The cable cut right through the [landing gear] struts of the plane,” he said thoughtfully. “Hydraulic fluid was leaking everywhere. The prop was chewing up the wooden deck. But we got out of that okay.”

Son-in-law Bill Sonntag related another story Gould had shared. “Probably the worst thing was on February 21, 1945, while the Saratoga was supporting the Battle of Iwo Jima. Seven different kamikazes hit the Saratoga. It was bad, and 123 people were killed. A cruiser pulled alongside to help keep her afloat.” Gould nodded at the memory. “We returned to Hawaii and we waited for another carrier,” he said, “but the war ended before the carrier arrived.”

An Oddity on Wheels

As the day wound to a close, I hitched a shuttle ride with the joyful Jill Smith. Smith is not your ordinary shuttle-driver. She lives in Cuyahoga Falls, OH and started her career with an education degree from Kent State. “But I knew very quickly that I was not being called to be a teacher,” she said. Changing gears, she has been a minister for 25 years while serving double-duty as a hospice chaplain.

Smith chauffeurs guests using a pedal-powered surrey. A traditional surrey is an open-sided, horse-drawn carriage designed to carry people in comfort. Smith’s version is a more modern, handsome, people-powered machine. When everybody pushes on their bicycle-style pedals, the surrey conveniently and quietly shuttles visitors around the relatively flat ramps at the airport.



Rev. Jill Smith attends fly-ins and other public events, offering rides in her pedal-powered surrey. The only “fee” for her service is engaging conversation.

Smith laughs as she recalls her introductory phone calls to the Props and Pistons people. “It was really hard to explain my surrey to them,” she laughed.

“But they finally just went, sure, you can come. So I just show up and transport people. It gives them a chance to cool off on a hot day.”

Smith asks for conversation in exchange for her taxi rides. “I have met so many interesting people, it’s crazy. I have met people that I met a few weeks ago at Oshkosh. I’ve met people from Northeast Ohio who had never been to this Props and Pistons before. You can’t frown when you’re peddling a surrey. No way!”

“I like to be as diverse as humanly possible,” she said as she trundled away. “The surrey is fun and makes people laugh.”

Fellow Flyers

Parked near me on the grass were Joe Marshall, his wife Holly Hayden, and their handsome Cessna 182. They had flown to the show from Akron International, only twelve miles to the south. They spent more time pre-flighting than actually in the air.



Joe Marshall and Holly Hayden are the proud owners of Cessna 182, N5601E. They flew all the way from Akron International to the Akron Fulton Airport to enjoy the fly-in; a trip of about twelve miles. At the end of the day, they flew Dr. Jones back to his hotel at the International airport.

Marshall and Hayden are tickled with the local success of Props and Pistons.

“This is a well-run organization, and we really like their mission, providing scholarships for students for aviation-related curricula, STEM fields, and such. It’s

just fantastic,” Hayden replied. “The sponsors are great. Avit Flight Academy, for example, sponsors the fly-in. They also do a tremendous job at local outreach for youth aviation. [The airshow] invites people to experience aviation,

to connect, and network with others. We're also very appreciative that AOPA does so much."

Marshall only has been flying for a handful of years, but he had been talking about piloting forever. "One night, Holly said, you keep talking about this, but you never do it," Marshall remembered. "She said, there's never going to be a good time. It's never gonna get cheaper. You're never going to get any younger. Do it now!" With such a supportive spouse, Marshall "knocked out his private" in less than a year.

They began looking for an airplane and quickly focused on the Cessna 182. "I knew the Skylane would be a great plane for us," he related. "It is forgiving enough for a low time pilot like myself, but still has decent airspeed and a useful load. I was lucky to find N5601E. I picked up the airplane and was doing instrument lessons on the way home." Marshall spent a week with IFR6, a company that specializes in accelerated instrument training and completed his instrument rating in six days.



Comely Lisa Mark from Cameron, OH inspected a Scottish Aviation Bulldog, owned by Steve Koenig from Marysville, OH. Mark said she was intrigued because her brother wants to be a pilot. She found the cockpit spacious but the panel confusing. "It's pretty cool. The controls made a lot of sense when he explained them," she said, gamely climbing out of the antique. The Bulldog was the basic trainer in the Royal Air Force up to the turn of the millennium. "This was the airplane where you learned basic aviation skills, formation flying, aerobatics, your cross-country work," Koenig explained proudly. "It's a nice little airplane. It'll do 6Gs positive, 3Gs negative, and 115 knots straight and level."

Now Hayden is getting her license as well. She started with a minimal "spouse's course" but quickly became hooked herself. She started as an official student in December of 2023.

"Joe has been amazingly supportive," she explained. "I'm not as quick a learner as

Joe is, so it's taking me longer. But it's a wonderful hobby and I feel like I'm truly partnered with my husband. We're enjoying aviation at a whole different level."

Marshall and Hayden enjoy social flying, but even more appreciate the ability to use their airplane to give back to the community. "Sure, we will fly for the \$100 hamburger, but I need a reason to be in the airplane," Marhsall said. He and a friend participated in Operation AirDrop after Hurricane Helene devastated western North Carolina.

For Hayden and Marshall, aviation is all about the people. "The friendships in aviation are difficult to describe. Aviation is a network of folks who are not only enjoying flying, but also work to serve others and lift people up," Hayden remarked. "It's a very positive environment. We feel very, very fortunate to be included in that."

No Ordinary Days

I could not agree more. As pilots, there's no ordinary day in aviation. There is a complexity to aviation that no single person can totally master. Every day offers a different challenge: the weather, something mechanical, or even your mental state at the moment. There are so many variables the only common thread is the condition of constantly having to be learning. Which is why small, friendly airshows, like "Props and Pistons", are so important. They renew the sense of community, keep our learning sharp, and remind us we're all in this together.

About the Author

Dr. Mike Jones is an entrepreneur who uses his business expertise to help G.A. airports across the country improve their governance and operations, speeding them on their way to more revenues, grants, and community support. He also helps protect them from avaricious developers and reverse the damage caused by ineffectual politicians. He's been writing for this magazine for nearly a decade, flown 800 Young Eagle missions, and put 4,000 hours in his logbook. He's always accessible at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.

