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Black Dot
*(and Other Adventures
at Triple Tree)*

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Deep in the dead of winter, with snow piled high and a train of ice storms threatening, time weighs heavily on our hands. Our planes slumber quietly in their hangars. Even Punxsutawney Phil snuggles into his nest under a tree stump. Our memories turn to the warm and sunny flying of last summer, like flying to Oshkosh. It's thrilling to be cleared to land on those green, red, or orange dots. We all do our best to nail the proper target, hoping the flightline photographers got a snapshot of our Top Gun performance.

But this past weekend, I landed on the black dot. Big mistake. Here is my story.

Chilly Chili

In earlier editions of this newspaper I have mentioned a few adventures at the Triple Tree Aerodrome (SC00) in Woodruff, SC. This is a beautiful aeronautical playground. At the south end of the runway there are hundreds of campsites served by the most luxurious campground bathrooms you'll find on this planet. The Enoree River wraps around the runway; it's a popular spot for swimming, fishing, and kayaking. The north end of the runway is home to an impressive hangar filled with vintage aircraft plus an impressive industrial-

grade kitchen. Volunteers crank out tasty and affordable meals for hundreds of visitors. To merely call it bucolic would be lazy. Most aviators call it heaven.



The turf runway at Triple Tree is 7,000 feet long and runs northeast to southwest. The runway has a steep grade, climbing towards the big hangars at the top of the field. The campgrounds were damaged by Hurricane Helene, so the Triple Tree staff has been busy restoring the riverbanks and clearing out trees, stumps and other debris.

Then there's the runway. Triple Tree features the most pristine, tightly manicured 7,000 foot Bermuda grass runway your tires (or your golf shoes) have ever touched. They claim it is four hundred feet wide. While the runway is relatively flat towards the south, about mid-field the runway rises up a fairly steep hill only to plateau again for another thousand feet at the top of the rise.

The aerodrome is busy throughout the flying season. Early each spring it hosts the Joe Nall radio-controlled model

airplane event. In late spring Uncle John's Fly-in takes over the field, offering a long weekend of aviation and self-cooked meals. There's a helicopter

extravaganza and a massive sail plane competition. The flying season ends with the Triple Tree Fly-in in September, where over 500 planes and crews camp, eat, drink, and tell flying lies for an entire week.

But the flying year at Triple Tree starts with a wintry challenge: the Triple Tree Chilly Chili festival, always on the first weekend in February. This one-day fly-in (it's just too cold to camp) feeds about 150 people with gallons and gallons of home-made chili.

A Muddy Surprise

This year's event was as good as ever. Most of my flying buddies were attending, and the preregistration was over a hundred aircraft. Text messages raced amongst our group — who was coming, which airplane are you using, what time were you departing, do you want to meet up, do you want to fly in formation? After months being trapped in cold hangars, every pilot and every plane was eager to get into the sky.

But Mother Nature threw us a curveball. The night before the event, a cold front squeegeed half an inch of rain out of the sky. Now, this runway is brilliantly designed and drains perfectly, but a half an inch is a lot of water to move from turf in just a few hours.

Of course, taildraggers don't care. Taildraggers are the honey badgers of the sky. They fly anywhere, land lightly on any terrain, roll over rocks and puddles, and laughingly return to the sky with weeds and groundhogs trapped in their brakes.

Tricycle-gear planes are more aloof. The nose wheel design is twice-plagued: a heavy engine usually sits atop a small-diameter nosewheel tire. Do the math:

Small tires + heavy loads + soft turf = a prop in the muck

Caution is advised.



After a heavy rain the night before, the turf runway at Triple Tree Aerodrome took a beating from the arrivals of hundreds of G.A. aircraft.

I departed around ten in the morning on the chosen Saturday, with clear skies, unlimited visibility, and gentle winds. The Centurion's autopilot maneuvered the airplane precisely and accurately. Fayetteville Approach cordially helped with flight-following. Before you could say "GUMPS check" I was number three in the pattern, downwind to Runway 3, Triple Tree.

Following a very nervous, dark-red, nose-wheel Piper.

The procedure at Triple Tree calls for pilots to maintain 90 knots at 1,700 MSL. This Piper must have missed that memo. He was all over the place; up and down, faster and slower. His flaps cautiously edged out as he turned base. He flew an ultra-long final (much to the despair of us behind him). He timidly crossed to the displaced threshold. Nose high and a little fast, he floated.

And floated and floated and floated.

He passed the runway threshold. He passed the two muddy black spots on the runway, passed the aircraft parking area, passed the control tower, and even passed the “Follow Me!” golf cart. Maybe he was going to float all the way to Charlotte.

Finally, I gave up and added TOGO power. If the red Piper was going to hog the runway, I'd just do another loop through the pattern. Pilot Rule #1: You can always go around.

But just as I began my go-around, the red Piper finally touched down. He indecisively lingered on the runway edge before finally veering onto the grass taxiway. The runway was mine, if I could get to it.

But I had already leveled out, fifty feet in the air, accelerating.

On the other hand, I had 6,000 feet of runway in front of me, all uphill. If I could get on the ground, stopping wouldn't be a problem. I decided to go for it.



Rare and antique airplanes abound at Tripple Tree. Here a Howard DGA taildragger approaches the runway with perfect style.

Slips are a wonderful skill. I pulled the power to idle, yanked the nose to the right and dropped the left side. Lift abandoned my wings like a jilted lover. The Centurion gracefully plummeted towards the turf.

Which is when I noticed the black dot. It was the third damp spot on the runway. The mud and chewed-up grass made it as black as coal. It was the biggest dot. The deepest one. Laced with muddy tire-tracks. Right on my nose.

I added a spot of power and raised the nose, grabbing the last few ergs of lift from my diminished airspeed. I almost made it. The Centurion hung with me but finally the wings gave out and I plopped down heavily. Right in the middle of the damn black spot. Mud splattered everywhere. The main tires grabbed, twisted, dug in, released, and twisted again. The plane wanted to slide sideways. I hit the rudder, kept the yoke in my lap, and added a touch of power. Momentum was my friend. Together, we plowed through the muck. I cleared the runway and headed for parking. For the thousandth time, I blessed the good folks in Wichita who made such strong airplanes.

Flightline Camaraderie

I parked behind the control tower and was greeted by my friends. They laughed at my landing — a more common reaction than my pride cares to admit — and we began strolling the flight line. Immediately, I saw a familiar plane: a Cessna 310 light twin my business partner had owned many years before. Whimsically, our company logo was still on the tail.

It's now owned by James Frank and his dad, both of whom live in the Atlanta area. During the depths of COVID, when Frank was 16, his father sold the family's Cessna 185 to replace it with a light twin.

"This plane came up for sale, a low time 310. It looked like the perfect airplane," young Mr. Frank recalled. "My dad talked to the mechanic and then to



(Above) The author was surprised to find an old friend at Triple Tree, a Cessna 310 owned by his business partner for many years. Now based near Atlanta, the airplane has accumulated another 500 hours in just three years at the hands of its new owners who are flying it up and down the East Coast and as far west as Texas. (L-R) Ethan Green, Shae Thaxton, Jim Frank (the new owner) and Jack Reynolds. (Below) While the weather was chilly the sun was bright as the Triple Tree kitchen produced a marvelous lunch for their hundreds of visitors. Inside the hangar is a first-rate aviation museum. The food is always first-rate at Triple Tree.



George Gilbert [my partner]. He bought it sight-unseen.” The Franks have had a lot of fun with the plane. They’ve been all over the deep south, the far west, and several intermediate trips to Texas and Oklahoma. Frank estimates they’ve put 500 hours on the plane in just three years.

I chatted with Casey and Nicole Matthews about their experiences at Triple Tree. “As far as I’m concerned, this is the grass strip Mecca. I love this place, I love the hospitality,” he burbled. “I’ve been coming here for, gosh, I don’t know, six, seven, eight years, something like that. Just kind of, you know, to pay homage to all the history, the teaching, the taildraggers, and the grass, plus all the stuff that they’ve done here.”

Eating my chili outside the big hangar on the top of the hill, I met Charlotte resident Josh Plummer, his son Carter, and his daughter Camila. He said his kids really enjoy Triple Tree. Their usual plan is to just come and hang out for the day, looking at the airplanes and having adventures. Plummer bravely brought a low-slung Mooney to the event. His landing was much like my own.



Casey and Nicole Matthews. Nicole is not a pilot, but she enjoys “Quality time with my man.”

“Normally the Mooney does pretty good, even on wet grass runways,” he reported. “But today it was a little slick. We were slipping and sliding. But I kind of coasted right through it.”

Triple Tree has a small museum of flight-worthy aerial antiques and one, a blindingly shiny Spartan Executive, was taking the runway. I chatted with David Lucarelli as we watched it taxi.



Everybody stopped to watch the Spartan Executive taxi by. (L-R) Lucas Powers, David Lucarelli, and Tommy Gardner, all from the Charleston, SC area. Lucarelli has been flying for 52 years while Powers is working on his private license.

“I have five airplanes, including two Cessnas, and I’ve been flying for 52 years,” he told me. “I fly as much as I can, whatever I can get my hands on, but I always come back here. There’s nothing like the flying at Triple Tree.”

Triple Tree is puppy-friendly and Dave Ellis brought his hound, Daisy. Ellis captains a 1966 Cherokee 180 upon which he’s spent a small fortune

refurbishing. Normally Ellis volunteers at Triple Tree, but his wife is out of town on a family emergency so he planned just a short visit.

"I fly with Daisy all the time, but we're usually alone. So today I figured I just would acclimate her to crowds of people," he explained. Things did not go well: "It was a one-on-one wrestling match, all day," he said with a smile.

Like most airshows, Triple Tree relies on an army of volunteers. Carol DePrima and her husband, Joe, are perfect exemplars. They've been volunteering almost twenty years, ever since they moved to Woodruff. Carol has been in charge of the kitchen for thirteen years. It's even become a family affair: their daughter is Ann Marie Purkhiser, and she and her husband have been volunteering the better part of two decades.



Tim Ellis and Daisy came to the Chilly Chili festival from about twelve miles away. He flies a 1966 Piper Cherokee that he's been refurbishing. "If Clemson ever finds out how much money I put into it," he said with a laugh, "they're gonna bust down my door and take my business degree away."

"When we're not volunteering, we still come here and enjoy the events," Purkhiser told me. "My son, he's twelve, he wants to be a pilot. We'll just come over and play on the simulators and get involved in the classes. It's an amazing place."

I found Terry and Suzanne Robertson sitting by the edge of the runway, judging landings. Robertson flies Learjets for a living and has thousands of hours in taildraggers. They winter in Fort Lauderdale, where they operate two aircraft repair stations, but on this day they flew from Simpsonville, all of about nine miles. Their bird is a spotless Cessna 180 which they have owned for twenty years. For Terry, Triple Tree is his spiritual home.

“We wouldn’t miss Triple Tree. My gosh, there’s nothing else like this in the world,” Robertson said. “It’s grassroots flying. There aren’t all the vendors. It’s not commercialized. There’s nice camaraderie, and it’s the best flying in the world.”



Terry and Suzanne Robertson flew nine miles to Triple Tree in their picture-perfect Cessna 180. “It’s a 1978 model. I bought it used, out of Minnesota, and even now it only has 1,900 hours on it,” Robertson explained. “They don’t make them like this anymore. I fly Lear jets for a living, but this is my baby, and it’s not going anywhere.”

More Mud

Lunch came and went, the conversations dwindled, and the sun was heading towards the horizon. My gaggle of friends reluctantly decided it was

time to head home. As I fired up the Centurion I watched a dozen or more planes struggle uphill, some splashing through the mud. Almost everybody was ignoring the smooth and level runway beyond the displaced threshold at the south end of the runway. Instead they were departing mid-field and climbing the hilly runway while trying to build airspeed. Some take-offs were mesmerizing, but everybody eventually made it off safely.

I was unconvinced. My plane is heavier than most. My gear is retractable, so the tires are small. Trying to accelerate while climbing a soggy, turf-covered hill didn't sound prudent. I looked at the 1,500 feet of unused runway to my left and told the lineman I needed a full-length departure. He looked at my tires and nodded in agreement.

Carefully, I threaded my way down the grass taxiway, avoiding low spots, damp areas, and soft grass. My run-up went smoothly. I positioned the plane on the firm, dry ground at the end of the runway. The yoke was back in my lap. My plan was to scoot down the right edge of the runway to avoid the muddy center where the grass had been trampled by a hundred arrivals. I added full power and the adventure began.

The Centurion cranks out 310 horsepower at 36.5 inches of manifold pressure and 2,700 RPM, and I used every one of them. The first 500 feet worked perfectly. I accelerated to perhaps 40 knots right on schedule. Then I hit the tiniest edge of the first muddy spot, and the left tire dug in while the right tire kept rolling. The plane shimmied. A kick of the rudder brought her back in line. Yee-hah!

At 60 knots I arrived at the right edge of the second wet spot. Again the plane waivered but this time the heavy nose dug into the soft soil. Mud flew in all directions and the plane slowed precipitously. It felt like a bucking bronco. I momentarily eased off the power to take the strain off the nosewheel but kept rolling. The mid-field hill was approaching.

I nicely dodged the third and largest wet spot and arrived at the base of Mount Suribachi at 70 knots. Rotation speed. But the hill was climbing as steeply as the plane. For a moment — 200 feet? 400 feet? Not sure — we climbed upwards together in a grassy hug. Finally the Continental won the contest and we lifted off the grass. Free of the muck, the Centurion accelerated smartly and we crested the top of the hill, muddy but flying.

I have often said, I never start my airplane's engine without learning something new. This trip to Triple Tree was just another tick in my thirty years of aeronautical education. Soft-field technique is not just for bush pilots. Practice it often. They say the grass is always greener on the other side. Be prepared: it may be soggy, too.



After the muddy landing at Triple Tree and the even soggy departure, Jones' beautiful Cessna was a little worse for the wear. Nothing a little soap and water can't fix.

About the Author

Dr. Mike Jones is an aviation enthusiast and amateur historian who uses his business expertise and academic training to improve the management of G.A. airports. 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.

