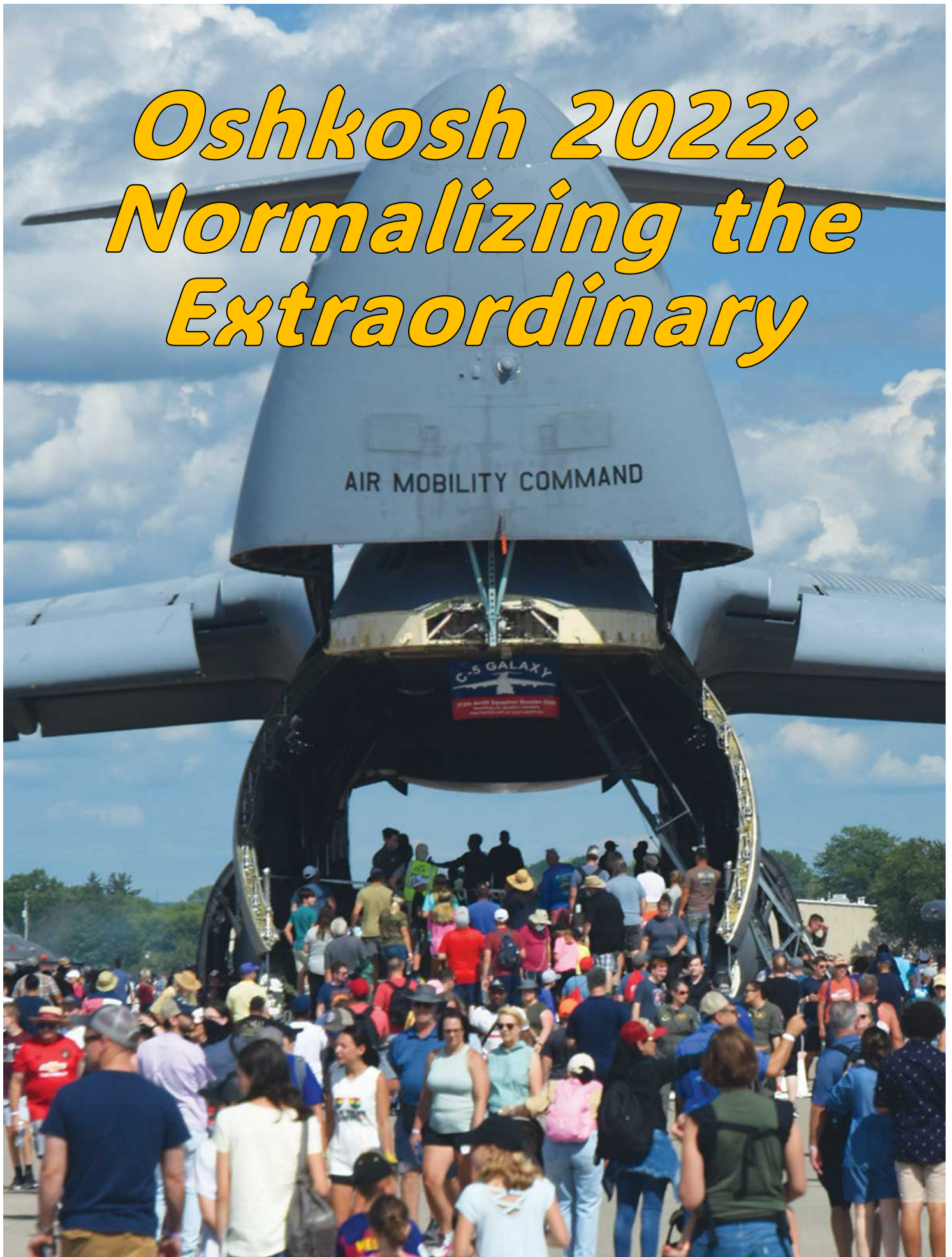


Oshkosh 2022: Normalizing the Extraordinary



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By Mike Jones

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Lurking in my brain (and maybe in yours) is a funky psychological process known as the “normalization of deviance.” This phenomenon was observed by sociologist Diane Vaughan in her ground-breaking analysis of the Challenger space shuttle accident in 1986.

The Challenger was destroyed when frozen O-ring gaskets in the solid rocket boosters failed. Amazingly, O-ring damage had been observed on 24 previous shuttle flights but with no ill-effects. That experience “taught” NASA decision-makers that O-ring damage was acceptable and safe, despite NASA’s own rules and the manufacturer’s conflicting specifications. It turns out that if you see something amazing often enough you can teach yourself it’s normal, even when it’s life-threatening. Clever lady, that Dr. Vaughan.¹

¹ The “normalization of deviance” is a narrow form of a more generalized behavior called “adaptive learning.” Adaptive learning is a behavior every person uses, almost every day. By itself, is not a bad tool; it simplifies the world and enables predictions about events and outcomes. Advertisers, for example, rely on adaptive learning in the hope that people will receive their marketing messages develop positive connotations for certain logos or brands, thereby buying more stuff and earning the advertising whiz-kid a promotion to the C-suite. It is only when adaptive learning accentuates risks or overlooks problems that the technique becomes dangerous.

Now we turn our Cessna spinner towards another amazing event: AirVenture 2022. It was a record-breaking week with 650,000 attendees, according to the Experimental Aircraft Association (EAA). Wittman Regional Airport handled 18,684 operations in ten days, about 20% more than the traffic handled by Atlanta Hartsfield, the busiest airport in the world. EAA estimates 10,000 different aircraft were on the ground at various times during the week.



Another exceptional development was the inspiring efforts delivered by the U.S. Air Force, which celebrated its 75th birthday at AirVenture. There were twenty hours of eye-popping airshows spread across the week, plus the two twilight airshows which, quite frankly, scare me to death. Our Cessnas-to-Oshkosh (C2O) brethren did us proud when they flew — as a unified flight of 100+ airplanes! — to a splendid, show-stopping mass arrival on Saturday afternoon before camping in the North 40.

More records tumbled as the week plowed on. There were 3,226 planes on-site asking to be judged as show-planes. Vintage aircraft featured a record 1,375 aircraft while CPA's Doug Tilghman and his pals parked a record 1,156 homebuilt aircraft on their patch. There were an eye-popping 369 warbirds. It's amazingly amazing.

The commercial side of the show was equally exceptional; 803 exhibitors jammed into booths and tents sprawled across the site. More than 5,000 volunteers contributed over 250,000 hours of free labor for the event. To accommodate campers and visitors, about 1,000 portable toilets were trucked in and cleaned daily (take THAT, Sun-n-Fun!).

Even Mother Nature played nicely this week. Other than one squall on Saturday the weather was exceptionally comfortable: bright sun, sporty winds and cool temperatures. It was a far cry from the sweltering days of 2021.



Excited to join the post-COVID world, visitors from 92 countries attended the expo. These people are the most energized and enthusiastic aviators you will ever meet. I met one group of aviators who flew a Baron from Argentina to attend the

show. But the winner of the “I never want to do that” contest was a young lady who soloed a Mooney across the Atlantic from Germany. Apparently she had trouble navigating; I heard she transited Iceland and Greenland correctly but ended up in Las Vegas. That’s my kind of flyer. You go, fraulein.

Exceptional, amazing, record-breaking. One eye-popping accomplishment right after the other. By the end of the week, it’s just normal. I became numb to shiny aluminum and exotic airfoils, the engine noise, the simulated explosions, astounding avionics, even the bad food. At an airport full of the amazing, I wandered aimlessly, looking for the interesting. I had normalized AirVenture.

Ragged Arrival

The week started more stressfully. My Cessna T210 was just out of annual, fully loaded and eager to take to the air. Taking the left seat was Capt. Alex Mello, who has a day job with a major legacy airline. With more than 20,000 hours in the air I figured the odds were good he'd keep the shiny side up and the dirty side down.

But the weather conspired against us. A straightforward four hours to Michigan turned into a brawl with the weather. Air traffic control was flexible as we dodged the worst of the storms and calm as we plowed through the ones we couldn't get around. Deviations left and right of course sprinkled the radio waves like Halloween candy; nobody was denied anything they needed as we and several hundred of our compatriots headed north-by-northwest to the land of Osh.

Eventually, we shot the ILS into Southwest Michigan Regional (BEH) just across Lake Michigan from Chicago. While the staff were accommodating, this is a tired and threadbare facility trying to survive on avgas revenues after the commercial airlines had pulled up stakes. The whole place was forlorn and sad.

Loaded up with fuel and coffee, we requested an IFR clearance across the lake. But the route assigned by Chicago Approach required us to turn south, loop around the bottom of Chicago and then go west almost to Iowa before approaching Oshkosh from the southwest. Life-jackets on and brimming with confidence we cancelled IFR and motored across the lake in a brisk 20 minutes, saving hours of time and gallons of avgas. We worked our way past Milwaukee, plunged through a couple veils of rain, and prepared for the Fisk transition.

We listened in amazement as a Cirrus driver tied up the frequency as he tried to get ATC to route him directly to Oshkosh:

"Cirrus 123, do you have the NOTAM on board?" ATC asked.

“No, I don’t,” the pilot replied. “Can you read it to me?”

Folks, I’m not making this up. I’ve got the audio on tape. Flying a million-dollar airplane with passengers on board, this guy had done no pre-flight



planning and was absolutely clueless. Alex bruised his forehead from incredulous slaps.

The best part of flying to Oshkosh is the Ripon-Fisk ballet, where hundreds of planes line up like circus elephants going 90 knots. But the change this year was the extension of the transition from a new waypoint farther to the southwest, named “Greenlake.” This extended the original 15 n.m. transition to 26 n.m. That’s a long time at 90 knots. But if traffic keeps becoming denser, maybe next year they’ll extend it to



Capt. Mello and I agree that Boeing Plaza is the most exciting few acres of aviation anywhere in the world. This year’s effort was energetically supported by the U.S. Air Force which brought just about one of everything to the party. I don’t think there’s anyplace you can go and get as intimate with heavy metal as you can at Boeing Plaza.

Puckaway Lake making it a 34-mile slog. After that, the next waypoint might be Dubuque, or even Denver.

This is intense flying in saturated airspace. While on-board traffic displays are helpful, the best defense is keeping your eyes out of the cockpit. Invariably at least one sky-cowboy will cut the line, fly too fast, or navigate to the wrong waypoint. It keeps your pulse up. Alex and I were surprised by a Bonanza blasting by us, perhaps 200 feet over our altitude and at least fifty knots too fast. There's always one, isn't there?

Eventually Alex plopped us down both professionally and precisely on our assigned dot on Runway 36 Right, which in more normal times is a mere taxiway. We trundled to the North 40 where the Cessna Base Camp was already in full-swing. Neighbors helped push the plane into position and we set up our camp.

This year as before, Alex was happy in his too-small tent. We both blessed his quick-starting portable generator. We plugged in our cell phones and decorated the plane with chili-pepper lights, but couldn't shake the feeling that Karen Ewart and her son Chris had out-illuminated us for the second year in a row.



Jonesy is always on the alert for a Cessna 210 in any livery or condition, but to see one taking off with the baggage door open nearly had him calling the emergency vehicles. Turns out this is an EAA-owned Cessna which is used for many of the photo shoots at AirVenture and in the various magazines the EAA publishes. The photographer hangs out the baggage door to get an unobstructed view of the photographic target.

Cessna Base Camp

You don't have to fly the Cessna Mass Arrival to join your fellow Cessna owners at the Cessna base camp. Everybody is welcome, all week long and especially after Wednesday. There's always room for another plane or ten. The Oshkosh NOTAM (now called a "Notice") instructs us to carry a sign signifying the "North 40" camping area. We used that sign to get us near our goal and then switched to another sign reading, "Row 540" which is the center of Cessna Base Camp. It worked a treat.

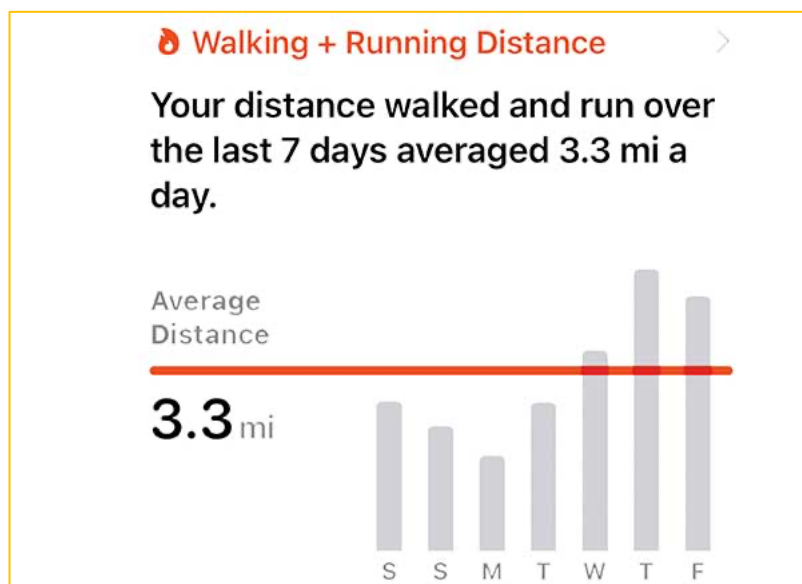


A quiet moment back at the campsite, after a long day of walking and listening. Notice the chili-pepper lights decorating Jonesy's Cessna. Our two intrepid adventures were discouraged to see that once again Karen and Chris Ewart had out-decorated them on Karen's unique Cessna 182. Well, there's always next year.

Camping under the wing of an airplane is not for the faint of heart; it's a great deal of work for a few hours of damp and uncomfortable sleep. There are two compensations which make it worthwhile. First is the unique breakfast prepared daily by C2O volunteers who sizzle and slice massive meals of eggs, sausages, grits and other delectables. The second is even better: watching the Oshkosh airshows from the comfort of your own chair, at your own tent, with your neighbors and your beer cooler at your side. I don't need no stinking crowds, and pass the guacamole, please.

The airshows roar from 2pm until 5pm or so, usually ending with the noisier military jets. The F-35 and Air Force F-16s made daily appearances this year, which are so noisy they make your chest pound. There also was a forlorn F-18 from the Navy who tried to keep the Tom Cruise mojo alive. The Navy did manage one surprise: as a special showing of the new “Top Gun” movie began at the Theater in the Woods, an F-18 staged a noisy fly-by which had everybody cheering. Good work, Ghost rider.

Interesting observation: the F-35 appears unexpectedly fat and stubby, especially in comparison to the sleek but older jets. I have discovered the reason for this is the engine. One huge, monster, noisy, powerful, JP4-swilling turbine that flings the F-35 through the air like a rock through a window, squeezed into the smallest possible fuselage. It’s a thrill to see and even better to hear. I hope the audience was chock-a-block with Russian spies: their reports will be very discouraging news for some guys in Moscow.



Jonesy kept track of his travels at Oshkosh. 3.3 miles of walking is a long way with a 30-pound backpack, and that doesn't include the time he spent in the golf carts, school buses, trams and jitneys which haul people around the vast facility.

How does one pass the time at Oshkosh? There is always something to see or do. “Urban Air Mobility” is a new term to describe the new autonomous, multi-engine electric airplanes coming in the next few years; at AirVenture they popped up like mushrooms after a rain. There are Forums for every topic and

interest. Merely wandering the flight line is a joy, seeing new-to-me airplanes like the 300 mph Swearington SX-300. Take the bus to the gradually-improving seaplane facility. There is an aviation museum, helicopter rides, STOL

competitions, a 5K run, dozens of restaurants, and Boeing Plaza where the heavy metal is primly parked. You may “normalize” the excitement of Airventure, but you will never be bored.

Weary But Home

Our plan was to stay until Sunday because we wanted to see the Saturday twilight airshow. But when Saturday morning rose dry and clear, and a healthy tailwind was forecasted, Alex and I figured it was time to get home. We cleaned up our campsite, loaded the plane, bought some fuel, and were airborne by mid-morning.

Looking at the radar track on FlightAware for N7591N, you can see the wide corkscrew flightpath this trip required. We departed to the west, into the prevailing winds. Then we turned north, to clear the busy OSH airspace. Then we turned east, to find the shortest route over Lake Michigan. Once over solid land on the east side of the lake we allowed ourselves the luxury of “Direct Destination.” The Garmin G5 autopilot woke up, sang us a happy tune, and turned on a beeline for home, stretching slightly over four hours.

Good golly Miss Molly, Indiana is boring from the sky. Ohio is scarcely better. I’m sure the people are charming, but the featureless terrain displays nothing but green farms, roads following cardinal directions, and tiny towns coalescing for no obvious purpose. The most excitement was a railroad line



which zigged to the southwest diagonally on its way out of there. It was exciting to finally get to West Virginia where we could simultaneously admire the mountains and deplore the environmental devastation of the coal mining.

We spiraled into home plate after just short of five hours in the air. Thanks to the Flint tip tanks (a CPA advertiser, by the way) on my T210, we landed with well over an hour of avgas but not much in the way of human gogo-juice. We unloaded the plane and Alex jumped into his convertible, both of us eager for our own homes, our pets, our families, and our own beds.

My almost sainted wife met us at the airport, happy to see us both. While we lugged and tugged all our gear, she asked about the airshow.

“Pretty ho-hum,” was our normalized reply. “Just another amazing week at Oshkosh.”

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.

