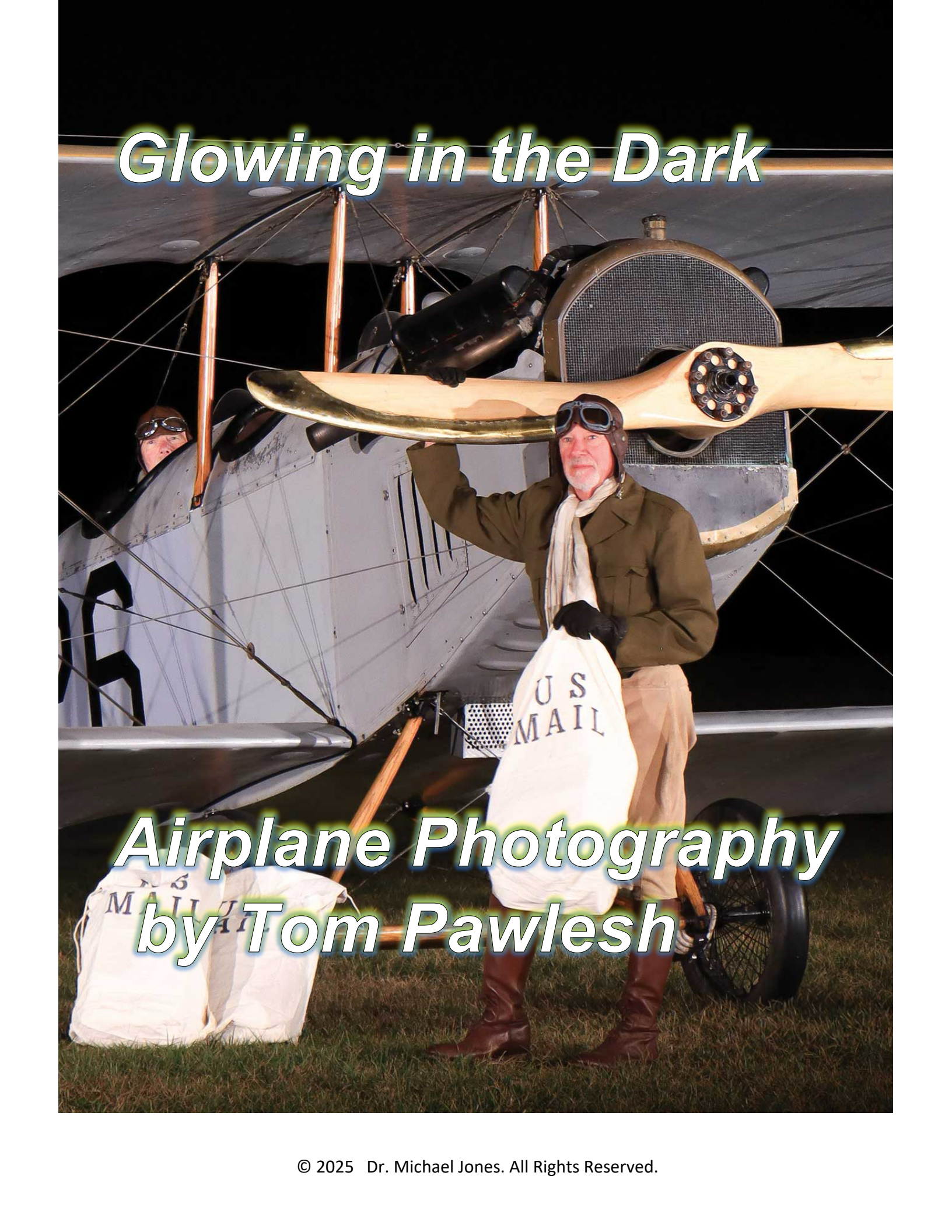




Glowing in the Dark

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by Tom Pawlesh*

Glowing in the Dark: Airplane Photography with Tom Pawlesh

By Mike Jones

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A fly-in or airshow isn't a single, monolithic event. It's actually a gaggle of micro-events, all flying in tight formation. Grey-haired pilots might choose to fly the poker-run competition, while teens might stand in line for a Young Eagles flight, and toddlers might flop through the bounce houses. There's live music most nights, arts-and-crafts for pre-teens, a comfortable banquet dinner in the Piper Museum, educational forums, and a dozen other activities every single day. There's lots going on.

But the event I wasn't expecting was to get a splendid picture of my plane from the celebrated aviation photographer, Tom Pawlesh.

Pawlesh — who hails from near Pittsburgh, PA — has been fascinated by photography since he was fourteen years old, when his father bought him a 35mm camera and a darkroom. The limitations of simple tools can push a creative person to stretch the borders of the expected. Pawlesh has stretched that simple gift into a delightful passion, photographing historic scenes — including antique airplanes — under the most dramatic conditions.

That worked because his other passion was aviation. Pawlesh learned to fly in his college years. That skill turned into a career in corporate aviation and

eventually a major airline, from which he finally retired in 2021 after 47 years. He's type-rated in seven different jets. But despite burning all that Jet-A, photography always lingered as a passion, like an unscratched itch.



One of Pawlesh's favorite scenes, this is a replica of the Ryan NYP monoplane Spirit of St. Louis on the ground at Old Rhinebeck Aerodrome aviation museum in the Hudson River valley of New York. The original airplane was made by the Ryan Airplane Company of San Diego, but funded by St. Louis businessmen and aviation enthusiasts.

"Today, I'm using my camera skills to photograph interesting people and the planes they love," he told me. "It keeps me close to aviation."

During daylight hours, Pawlesh offers owners the opportunity for in-flight photographs of their birds. Obviously, this takes two planes. He rides with one pilot and photographs a second airplane. Then they land, swap seats, and photograph the other plane on the return. It's a win-win for everybody.

"I prefer to shoot through an open window," he told me, but some airplanes just don't offer that option. "You do what you gotta do."



This Davis D1K is an example of Pawlesh's skill with air-to-air photography. This historic airplane is beautifully contrasted against the green hills and fluffy clouds of central Pennsylvania.

Pawlesh's real specialty, however, is night photography. At Sentimental Journey, Pawlesh set up his gear at the western end of the runway, just as the sun was setting. He used small but powerful LED lights to illuminate the scene. An ultra slow shutter-speed guaranteed the spinning prop will blend into a shimmering disk. In the "golden hour" of sunset, these handsome planes glistened and glowed under his careful craftsmanship.

The actual photography process is fairly quick. Planes have their engines running and are marshalled into position. The shutter is snapped, using shutter speeds lasting multiple seconds. Then that airplane is marshalled "off the stage" and the next plane taxis into position. Some lucky pilots get a colorful sunset behind their planes. At Lock Haven, Pawlesh didn't finish until just before midnight. It makes for a long day.

Pawlesh generally uses a Canon D90 digital single-lens reflex camera. His favorite lenses are either his 100-400mm zoom for airshows and the 18-135mm semi-wide-angle optics for both the air-to-air and night shots.

“I shoot in either aperture- or shutter-priority mode, depending on the subject,” he said. The aperture-priority mode is more often used for the night shots, and the air-to-air work usually uses shutter-priority mode to minimize vibration while capturing the graceful, slivery “prop disk” on the nose of the plane in flight.



This Merle MA-18 is a homebuilt aircraft with a smoke system, which adds an unexpected burst of drama to the photo.

Sometimes Pawlesh doesn't just attend events, he creates them. In 2024, he contacted the management of the Old Rhinebeck Aerodrome (New York) last year and proposed using his services as a unique fund-raising event to attract amateur photographers to that museum. “I told them I'll do the photography if they'll pay for my hotel,” he laughed.

In the end, the museum charged a three-digit entrance fee for each photographer and even at that price more than two dozen photographers showed up. Pawlesh offered a brief introduction on the techniques of a night shoot as the museum rolled six historic airplanes onto the long grass runway.

“My favorite photo was of a Curtiss Jenny with some airmail pilots stranding next to it,” he recalled. His runner-up was the museum’s replica of the Spirit of St Louis in front of the museum’s Ryan Hangar, including a Ford Model A carrying the logo of Ryan Airlines on its sides. “We did the whole Lindburgh thing, from San Diego to Paris, in one evening,” he said with a smile, “and we’ll do it again on October 4th this year.”

All of this travel and technology isn’t easy, but paying for it is. It turns out, Pawlesh doesn’t charge airplane owners for the artwork he creates. That makes him one of the favorite guests at any fly-in.



This bit of history is an original Curtiss-JN-4D “Jenny” owned by the Old Rhinebeck Aerodrome. Designed as a trainer for the US Army, the “Jenny” was known for being challenging to fly. It lacked dynamic stability, was heavy on the controls, and the rudder wanted to move on its own. The plane lacked both elevator trim and an altimeter. Yet somehow it was a successful civilian aircraft with 6,000 built. It became a key player in the barnstorming era of the 1920s.



Capt. Tom Pawlesh, for once in front of the camera and not behind it.

“At the WACO fly-in, I flew in two open-cockpit planes and a cabin-class biplane, and they’re handing me \$100 bills for taking pictures?” he said in amazement. “I said, guys, you’re the ones buying the gas and giving me rides! I do this for fun!”

Pawlesh and his wife travel to events across the eastern half of the country, but their schedule varies from year to year. “Normally I go to Dayton, which is a big airshow, and they treat us well and my wife really likes it. We make a nice weekend out of it,” he explained. “But

this year, I decided to do the Latrobe Airshow, then to Sentimental Journey, and then the WACO fly-in, all in just a couple of weeks. Coming up, I’ll do the warbird airshow Geneseo, New York, on a grass runway right on the Finger Lakes. It’s a nice airshow, and I’ll be doing a night shoot, and I will be doing the lighting for the event.”

While the travel may be exhausting, Pawlesh (along with his very tolerant and understanding wife) enjoys working the cameras and chatting with the

pilots. “I get to spend a lot of time with amazing airplanes and fabulous people,” he chuckled.

But that’s not all he does. On his website he features a marvelous montage of photos of trains, antique automobiles, and streetcars. His camera lingers on abandoned buildings, vintage gas stations, railroad stations, and covered bridges. Quite the eclectic collector, Pawlesh is.

Learn more about Pawlesh’s career and browse through his scrapbook at <https://tompawlesh-aviation.smugmug.com/>

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.

