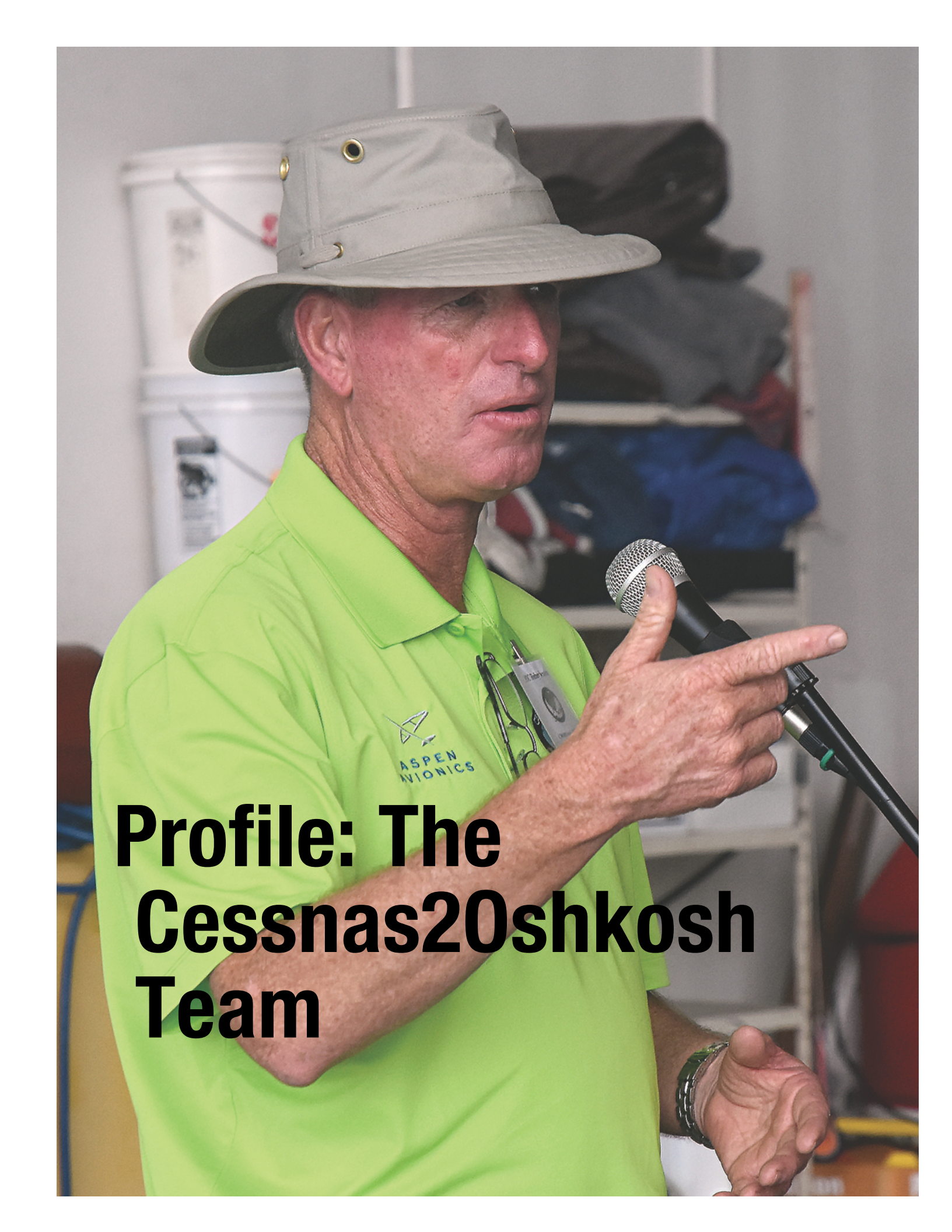




Profile: The Cessnas20shkosh Team

The Cessnas2Oshkosh Team

By Mike Jones

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At the pointy-end of the Cessnas2Oshkosh arrow are three incredibly hard-working volunteers. Rodney Swanson is the Director of Training and Operations



Rodney Swanson, at the Juneau Mission Briefing.

and is based out of Headland Municipal Airport (0J6) in Alabama. Craig Chipley is based at Falcon Field Airport (KFFZ) in Arizona and handles sponsors and deals with the FBO, Wisconsin Air. Lastly, Gil Velez is the über-webmeister and handles the formal communications. He's based at Essex County Airport (KCDW) in New Jersey.

While the Cessnas2Oshkosh program officially began in 2005, the origins go back two years earlier. Swanson and his brother both are flyers and wanted to bring their planes to Oshkosh. But with one brother in Alabama and the other in Arizona the logistics didn't work. They decided to

meet in Kenosha, form up in echelon, and execute the normal RIPON-FISK arrival for 2003.

“Everything was hunky-dory until we landed,” Swanson recalls. “Then the marshals split us up because our planes were different types. We were parked like a mile apart. But neither one of us could camp separately because we had different supplies in each plane.” While they had a great week at Oshkosh, the initial strain of organizing their gear between two distant campsites made life harder than it needed to be.

Swanson tried again in 2004. Using the popular CPA forums, he wrote about the great time they had at Oshkosh and suggested interested pilots ought to meet up before flying into Oshkosh, and a small group did. But again, when they landed, they were scattered over all the campgrounds. Now Swanson had a real bee in his proverbial bonnet.

He visited with the Bonanza guys who had a small but successful mass arrival. Their expert, who shall remain unnamed, said it simply couldn't be done with Cessnas. The Bonanza claimed high wing planes can't fly formation, the different kinds of Cessnas all fly at different speeds, and there wasn't an approved training program, among other discouragements.

What the Bonanza guy did not know was the Swanson is one of the top pilots in the U.S. Army, a paragon at planning complex aerial assaults. His motto is “Anywhere in the world, plus or minus thirty seconds.” And that's with people shooting at you.

“This sounds cool,” Swanson recalls thinking. “I knew their expert was wrong, because we had done a 27-ship arrival into Warner Robbins AFB to tour their museum and it worked fine. So I went home, I reviewed all the formation flying materials I could find, and combined the best parts of them into a Cessnas-to-Oshkosh plan. Then I created the training materials to implement that plan. It was easy because that's what I do for the Army.” All in all, it only took Swanson about a week to create the program. He gave it to EAA and both they and the FAA approved it.

CPA's founder, the late John Frank, also worked with the C2O team and the FAA to develop a "letter of agreement" defining the Cessna fly-in procedures. They started putting the training clinics together, and they did their first small mass arrival in 2006. But 2007 was the worst year.



Rodney Swanson has planned and briefed complicated helicopter missions for the Army, and he ran the briefing like the pro he is. Every speed, altitude, heading, and possible procedure was covered completely.

"It was awful," Swanson recalls. "I can't tell you how many thousands of dollars I spent flying around the country doing training clinics by myself. But then I found Craig and Gill and we've been working together ever since." In fact, Swanson gives Chipley and Velez credit for doing the lion's share of the work thorough the year. "We each have our strengths and dovetail nicely together," he said. "It works out perfectly."

"The part that really satisfies me is the planning, I really groove on the precision of planning," Swanson acknowledged. "It takes a lot of work, and thinking, and knowledge, and skill to make this happen." As for the flying?

“That’s like the cherry on top of an ice cream sundae. For me, the planning is the ice cream, the banana and the chocolate sauce. It’s immensely satisfying.”

Once the aeronautical aspect of the mass arrival was perfected, Swanson’s team began thinking about the camping experience. The breakfast ritual began in 2007.

“We were all sitting around, enjoying the post-arrival glow, and I said, hey if anybody wants breakfast stop by my tent in the morning,” Swanson laughed. “Thirty people showed up! All I had a one-burner stove and a dozen eggs. I grabbed my credit card and told my brother to run to the store and grab whatever he could find.”

These days, the budget for the fly-in is about \$15,000. Most years they finish with a small profit which is donated to the EAA Air Academy. The expenses are substantial. The cooking tent is \$500; the vans are \$1500 a week each, and breakfast is about \$600 per day. Neither Craig, Gil nor Rodney take any compensation “except for a lunch at Red Robin once a year.”

“We have good sponsors,” Swanson said appreciatively. “Aspen gave us a \$10,000 avionics package as a raffle prize, which is huge; Honda loans us a generator and Kennon gives sunshields as prizes. We really appreciate everything.”

They also appreciate the “can-do” attitudes of their volunteers. Swanson estimates about 75% of the people who fly-in to do something volunteer-ish during the week. Swanson also offered a shout-out to two couples who really out-performed: Steve and Julie Wolff, and Denise and Jarvier Camba.

Steve and Julie Wolff manage pilot registration. They arrive two days early, get the check-in office set up, post signs, and fill the gift bags every pilot receives. They also are the final arbiters of the 11am deadline and they’re ready

to stand tall in the saddle and take the heat from tardy pilots in the name of safety.

Denise Camba and her husband Jarvior took charge of the kitchen this year and supervised the volunteers at the breakfasts. Dozens of people are involved in each meal so supervision is essential. Each breakfast is cooked by a volunteer group and delivered with a local theme; the “southern grits” cooked by the Carolinas contingent is particularly popular. “Denise and Jarvior did an amazing job,” Swanson said.

Other key players are the trusted pilots who conduct the formation flying clinics around the country. These trusted, experienced aviators have participated in



previous mass arrivals, have formation flying experience, and have the “chops” to explain the procedures and stick to them once in the sky. Sixteen of the proposed nineteen clinics went off on schedule in preparation for this fly-in, which is something of a miracle considering the far-flung geographies, spring weather and the unpredictabilities of COVID.

“I mean, we have a whole list of people who are always there throughout the year, Steve Holmes from Houston, Lee Meyers, Jerry Olson, I talk to them all the time. But those four were the stars,” Swanson said.

What's next? The event can't get much bigger because of parking limitations at the Juneau airport. But even more importantly, the event now is an ecosystem all its own. While it used to be about the flying, "It's now all about the people," Swanson said. "We've watched our children grow up together. I've seen health issues, marriages, divorces, deaths, and pilots lose medicals. It's the whole panoply of life, on a very personal level."

Learn more about the Cessnas2Oshkosh team at their web site, Cessnas2Oshkosh.com.

About the Author

Mike Jones is a 3,000 hour commercial-rated pilot, professional writer, and graduate student who enjoys camping next to his 1979 Cessna Centurion at airshows. While his tent was damaged at Oshkosh in 2019, this year his new-and-improved Taj Mahal made it through two strong storms. Look for Jonesy at airshows and fly-ins across the country in 2021. He's always accessible at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.

