

A man and a woman are standing on a grassy field in front of a small, white and blue single-engine airplane. The woman, on the left, has long blonde hair and is wearing a patterned halter top and light-colored shorts. She is holding a wine glass filled with a light green liquid. The man, on the right, is wearing a dark blue t-shirt with the word "FLYING" and a graphic of a green airplane, dark shorts, and sunglasses. He is also holding a wine glass with a similar liquid. They are both smiling and looking towards the camera. The background shows a line of trees under a clear blue sky.

*Family Fun at  
the Triple Tree  
Fly-in*

# *Family Fun at the Triple Tree Fly-in*

*By Mike Jones*

*Cessna Pilots Magazine, originally published: November 2019*

Wilsonville, SC is a mysterious place. Google can't find it and WAZE won't show you the way. It only materializes out of the mists once a year at the beginning of September. It's Brigadoon with a southern accent. But Wilsonville is real: it's a cluster of the best camp sites at the Triple Tree Fly-in in Woodruff, SC.

My success discovering Wilsonville was more luck than plan. After an award-winning touchdown on the 7,000 foot grass runway, the marshals directed me and old '91N to flight line parking despite my window banner which screamed in big black letters, "CAMPING."

I jumped out of the plane and explained my needs, perhaps somewhat aggressively, to the bewildered marshal at my door. He looked around and saw a beautiful red Stinson under some hickory trees which had just started its engine. "Why don't you camp over there?" he suggested, eager to get this lunatic out of his face. I dove into that parking space like Jacques Cousteau.

For the second time in five minutes I slipped out of the cockpit. This time, a neighbor ambled up to help wrangle the plane into its parking spot. "Welcome to Wilsonville," he said warmly, without introduction. "It's the best part of Triple Tree."

I expressed my appreciation for his help at pushing old '91N back between the trees.

"It's no problem. This land used to be part of my family farm, and my grandparents are buried by that tree over there." He pointed vaguely in the direction of a large RV, no tree in sight.

"Really?" I asked, a little incredulous but knowing anything is possible on a 300-year old farm.



*"Wilsonville" is centrally located so everybody stops to chat, especially when a shiny Cessna 210 lurks beneath the hickory trees. L-R: Lou Furlong from Cumming, GA, Kevin and Robyn Buchand of Leesburg, VA, Rob Mathis from Sandersville, GA and Bryan Wyatt from Conyers, GA.*

"No," he confessed with a sparkle. "I just say that for fun. If you can't have a good time at Triple Tree, you need a lobotomy."

## Camping

Geographically, Triple Tree Aerodrome has two major sections. The lower, southwest end of the runway stretches along the Enoree River and is dedicated to catering, camping and day parking. Up the hill to the northeast are permanent buildings which overlook a man-made lake and the long grass runway. There you will find the big hangar, an educational center and some



*The southwest end of the Triple Tree facility hosts most of the aircraft parking and camping. The property is bounded by the Enoree River, which winds along the bottom of the camp grounds. RVs and airplanes park side-by-side at Triple Tree.*

administration facilities. Copses of trees dot the property, creating shady spots for camping and conversation. Wilsonville is there, someplace, but I'm not telling anybody where.

Standing alongside old '91N, I looked around my new home. Piston planes were gushing out of the sky onto the Triple Tree grass. Next to my plane perched a pristine straight-tailed Cessna 172 in baby-blue livery. It was followed by a perky silver-and-red Swift, then an inviting line of canopies and

folding chairs, and finally a strong-chinned Waco some eighty years old. To my right snuggled a gaggle of Cessna Cardinals, tails into the trees. Cardinals always seem to fly in flocks.

It took me an hour or so to set up camp and then I strolled to registration. The buildings at Triple Tree are convenient, rustic and attractive. They feature a classic design graced with modern functionality. The volunteers were very helpful, the lines were short and the air conditioning strong. Compared to the crowds, waiting lines, endless rules and organizational formality of Oshkosh, this was a delightful reminder of the way things used to be.

Across a wide banner of perfectly-mowed grass were tie-downs, bathhouses, a large open-air cabana, a fire pit, and caterers sizzling up lunch. I watched families pushing with their toddlers in carriages and others walking their dogs on long leashes, their tongues lolling in the summer warmth. Dogs at an airshow? Wonderful!



*Like the author, this 1968 Huey UH-1 is a Vietnam veteran and was rescued from the scrap heap by Terry Robertson from Boyton Beach, FL (in yellow shirt). Seeing it fly and hearing Huey stories made a bit of history come vividly alive for younger visitors, many of whom only know about Vietnam from history books. Here (L-R) David Bishop, Isaac Bishop, grandpa Charles "Rick" Bishop and Austen Philips inspect the restoration. Rick flew a J-3 Cub for years until ill-health grounded him.*

A gaggle of flyers who were camping down by the river were the first group to walk up and check out old '91N and her snappy new paint job. Apparently plane-spotting is the communal obsession at Triple Tree; during my days

under the hickory trees probably fifty people walked by and asked about the Centurion. Everyone was properly appreciative so I did the right thing: opened the cooler and handed out beer.

Leading the first group were Kevin and Robyn Buchand of Leesburg, VA. They own a short-wing Piper Tripacer and are pondering an upgrade. Parked



*What can be better than a Cessna, a margarita, and a campsite by a pristine river? This is Kevin and Robyn Buchand of Leesburg, VA, and they were just coming back from wading in the Enoree River which flows behind the camp ground. Notice the Cessna 170 parked in the sunshine behind them.]*

next to them was Lou Furlong from Cumming, GA who arrived in his burly Cessna 180 with tundra tires so huge they looked pregnant. Bryan Wyatt was from Conyers, GA and flew a gorgeous PA-18-95 to the fly-in. The last member of the group was Rob Mathis from Sandersville, GA who brought his white and silver Citabria. Here we were, six people meeting in six minutes and we almost were family. That's the magic of Triple Tree.

I grabbed a ride on a big school bus around the perimeter of the runway up the hill to the big hangar where seminars had been scheduled. The

first seminar was a unexpectedly interesting discussion of the history of “upstate” South Carolina, Woodruff and Triple Tree (see sidebar). Wandering through a small sponsor display, I chatted with Shawn Benson of Aircraft Specialties, a smiling chap of formidable expertise with a passion for engine maintenance and lubricants. Riveting techniques, safety wiring, and borescopes were next on the list; Triple Tree features a number of “hands-on” demonstrations which are not nearly as crowded as Sun-n-Fun and Oshkosh.

As the day wound on, I found an excellent lunch — nothing beats real southern fried chicken — and I headed back to Wilsonville. The principle activities there were, in order of popularity: critiquing landings, talking about planes loved and lost, and finding more beer.



*Triple Tree is all about families, flying and fun, and nothing says it better than a happy cluster of generations in front of one the most beautiful airplanes ever built, a Beech Staggerwing. Standing in front of this beautiful yellow bird is the Cannon family from Thomasville, GA: cousin Gage Odom, Emily Cannon with 3-year old Madalynn, husband Jonathan, plus in-laws Roddy and Michelle Jones. Jonathan flies a PA-27 Aztec from a 3,500 foot grass strip while Gage flies a Cessna 172.*

The guy who helped me park my plane was the lanky and grey Jim Wilson, the “mayor” of Wilsonville. He and his lovely wife Eileen brought their Waco biplane from their private field near Summerville, SC. In fact, they’ve flown the Waco to every Triple Tree fly-in since the event began. He and his pals always park together, under the same trees. “Triple Tree is the only hard point on my calendar,” Jim said, and all his neighbors agreed.

Jim and Eileen had a two-seater for years and flew it everywhere. Managing the weight and balance was easy because “if she [his wife, Eileen] could get it into a helmet sack, she could bring it,” Jim laughed.



*One of the rugged DC-3s demonstrates a high-speed, low-altitude fly-by as Bryan Wyatt from Conyers, GA watches. We could hear on the scanner the tower instructing both planes that the minimum altitude was the height of the control tower, but to my eyes they looked lower — much lower! Great fun, great flying.*

But Eileen eventually decided she wanted something a bit more spacious and — for reasons unknown — it had to be a biplane. Jim showed her a photo of the beige Waco and it was love-at-first-sight. Jim explained it has taken him a decade to get it into the shape he wants. “I’m almost there,” he announced confidently as Eileen rolled her eyes.

The unmistakable throbbing of a cold radial engine interrupted our chat. Two Douglas DC3s parked beneath the tower were ready to perform a brief airshow for the campers. They departed uphill in loose formation and made two trips through the pattern, each time lower, faster and noisier. One of those planes was the bright yellow Gooney Bird owned by Dan Grider, retired Delta Airlines captain. I wrote about Dan in the March edition of this magazine, memorializing his flight with Major Dick Walters who flew nearly 100 missions over “The Hump” in World War II in a similar plane. It was great to see both Dan and his bird were both still going strong.

## Up in the Air

It's 86 heart-stopping steps up to the ATC control cabin which looms over the runway. It's best not to look down because the stairs are a frail-looking lattice and the receding ground clearly is visible below your toes. The long, scary climb is made only slightly less frightful by the solid floor and coffee pot which awaits you on high.

During my visit, Brent Guffey from Bessemer, NC was the senior person in the tower. He's been volunteering for thirteen years and has only missed one Triple Tree event, due to a hurricane. Jerry Preiser is from Seneca, SC and just retired from the



*The ATC experts at Triple Tree are the real deal; they're all FAA pros and have been volunteering at Triple Tree for a minimum of four years. Only one controller works the radio at any given time; two other controllers support the active controller with binoculars and the ADSB display. Their eye-popping shirts allow them access to the control tower.*

tower at Pompano Beach, FL. Marianne Becker spent her career in the Detroit

area. Boyd King is from Greer, SC while Kyle Reed drove 13 hours from Ritter, LA to volunteer. Everybody has been working the tower at Triple Tree for four or five years at a minimum, and the entire ATC team are all active or retired air traffic controllers.

Brent described working at Triple Tree as “ATC without the net.” The controllers wear eye-popping orange shirts to distinguish them from other volunteers. One supervisor is always on duty, inside the cabin near the donuts. There’s an active controller outside on the balcony working the radio. The controller is supported by two swivel-headed spotters with binoculars. Lastly, another controller works ground operations as planes flow to the runway.

The work is fun but exhausting, especially in the summer heat. Usually controllers work one-hour shifts before passing the microphone to the next volunteer. The biggest requirement: “You really gotta know your aircraft,” Brent advised.

Technology is coming to Triple Tree. For the first time, a large computer display now shows all the ADSB-equipped traffic in the area. This makes it easier for controllers to see who is joining the conga line at Wally World as well as who is “busting” the procedure. This system will be much more helpful next year when all aircraft should be ADSB-equipped.

The most worrisome ATC issue is aircrew inattention to the Triple Tree arrival procedure. It’s not a



*Triple Tree is the brain-child of Pat Hartness, who has dedicated his life and a small fortune to bring it to reality. Here, Pat welcomes all the visitors on a busy Saturday seminar. (L-R) Uncle John Hartness, Pat Hartness, Mary Lou Hartness, Dr. Courtney Hartness, grandson Gladden, and son Sean Hartness.*

complex procedure but every year more than a few pilots mangle it. A handful simply barge into the pattern “GPS-direct.” Add in NORDO traffic, ultralights and the occasional fast-moving war bird and the Triple Tree tower needs to be at the top of their game to keep everybody safe.

Improper radio processes are another source of stress. In my hour in the tower I heard several planes “check in” with rambling introductions. This wastes valuable bandwidth the controllers need to push the planes around the pattern. The written procedure clearly says “eyes open and lips shut” but too few pilots adhere that recommendation.

Important safety tip: the tower actually wants to hear from pilots a landing clearance has been issued. Triple Tree doesn’t use the “wing wag” semaphore system of Oshkosh, so when pilots join the pattern pilots should acknowledge their instructions. But this is not clear in the procedure — I silently screwed it up myself — and Brent agrees the policy is confusing. Look for an update in 2020.



*While visitors are responsible for their own breakfast and lunch, almost everyone who is camping buys tickets for the communal evening meal on top of the hill at the Big Hangar. The menu changes every night and is prepared and served by a huge team of volunteers.*

Overall, air traffic was light for 2019. The number of visitors to Triple Tree was reduced this year because Hurricane Dorian soundly spanked the southeast. The ATC team estimated they

handled only 500 planes during the entire week, about half their normal load. But the runway was firm and the camping was great because we were 200 miles inland from the surf-pounded beaches. Pat Hartness, the founder of Triple Tree, told me it was the first Triple Tree event ever without a drop of rain.

## Southern Hospitality

While walking is the preferred mode of locomotion at Triple Tree, it's a big hill and a long walk to dinner. With another bus ride I'm back at the Big Hangar where dozens of volunteers have prepared another splendid dinner for the crowds.

Every night the ritual is the same but the menu is different. Volunteers in the kitchen behind the Big Hangar prepare voluminous quantities of salads, beans, potatoes or other side dishes while other experts grilled or bake a meat dish. Tuesday is pork loin, for example; Wednesday is fish fry and Thursday everybody cooks their own steaks.



*There's a bonfire every evening back in the campgrounds, and weather permitting there usually is some entertainment: a movie, a concert or just making s'mores and singing karaoke. It's all about families and fun.*

While the lines can be long, the crowds are friendly, the bar is busy and the views are bucolic. Fisherman drop their lines around the edge of the lake.

Usually there is an amateur airshow as powered parachutes enjoy the quiet evening air to loop through the pattern. Fly-byes at 30 knots — how thrilling!

The Big Hangar also is home to a small but elegant collection of historic airplanes. Triple Tree now proudly displays their P-51, the incredibly polished aluminum of a Spartan Executive, an original Piper Cub in bright yellow, plus other planes, vintage gear and a large collection of radio-controlled flyers. There's no shortage of eye-candy while you wait for the dinner bell.

As the evening wound down, I wandered back down the hill to the visitor center. An excellent DJ was spinning karaoke tunes and hundreds of folks sat around a bonfire making s'mores and enjoying the show. Kids were dancing in the grass, babies dozed on mommas' lap, and stars twinkled overhead in the crystal-clear skies. There are worse ways to spend a week.

## Oshkosh Antidote

To my mind, Triple Tree is the antithesis to the frenzy of Oshkosh. There are 5,000 visitors instead of 600,000; 500 planes instead of 15,000. There are no hour-long waits to depart, no jumbo jets, no airshows, no Blue Angels, no security guards and no outrageously priced fast-food. There isn't even any avgas.

Instead there just are planes and kids, barking dogs and chilly beer, good food and lively conversation. Plus, grass. Lots and lots of beautiful grass. It's a happy family of strangers; people who love all things aeronautical and want to share them with others. It's a simple joy.

Triple Tree reminds me of the time when airports welcomed visitors. There was a time when very few airports even had fences. When commercial planes flew with their cockpit doors open. Kids would ride their bikes to their local 'drome and swap washing planes for a flight. When you didn't check the TFRs before every flight.

Those days are gone forever. But you can get a tickle of what we have lost with a visit to Triple Tree. See you there in 2020!

---

## *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. But he was surprised when he brought the Centurion into the shop after Oshkosh. In next month's edition, he'll explain the scary discovery the maintenance guys made when they looked under the cowl.



He's always accessible at [PilotMike2012@gmail.com](mailto:PilotMike2012@gmail.com).