

## REFLECTIONS ON THE 2023 CULLMAN AIRPORT FLY-IN

By: Alan Armstrong\*

### GENESIS OF THE SHOW APPEARANCE

In or during the summer of 2023, I received an email from Jim Buckley about participating in the Cullman Regional Airport Fly-In on November 3 and 4, 2023. While Airbase Georgia of the Commemorative Air Force has a history of having aircraft participate in the Cullman Regional Airport Fly-In, I had never experienced that event previously. I learned later that the Fly-In is heavily supported by the City of Cullman, Alabama. As is common practice, I got my paperwork in order, naming the Cullman Regional Airport as an additional insured on my aircraft insurance policy, and made preliminary contacts with Ben Harrison, the Airport Director, about appearing in the show.

### THE FLIGHT TO CULLMAN

Friday, November third, was a magnificent day. It was one of those perfect days for flying we all dream about. The visibility was spectacular. There was no turbulence. Departing the Coweta County Airport (KCCO) at about 3:00 p.m., I got flight following on the way up with the Atlanta Approach, Atlanta Center, Birmingham Approach, and Huntsville Approach. Due to the mountainous terrain, I had a temporary interruption in radio communications with the Birmingham Approach that resolved as I got closer to Birmingham. I had been asked to fly over the city and make some noise, so I made a slight westward deviation to fly directly over the City of Cullman before commencing a left downwind approach to Runway 20.

The Cullman Airport is nicely laid out. It is a quiet country airport. However, on the date of the Fly-In, it was anything but quiet. Skydiving operations were

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underway, as were helicopter flights. I was in communication with a helicopter making right base traffic for Runway 20, while I was setting up for left downwind traffic for Runway 20. Everyone was accommodating on the radio. In due course, after landing, I was directed by Ben Harrison, the Airport Director, on the radio with respect to my taxi instructions. There was a C-47 parked on the apron, and I was directed to taxi near the C-47. Ben Harrison gave helpful instructions during this process. Eventually, I was turned over to other personnel who motioned me to taxi near and park adjacent to the Douglas C-47 transport aircraft. Seats were arrayed by the C-47 and in the vicinity of my Kate replica. I learned later that videos would be playing on the day of the show to provide the audience history on both aircraft and their participation in the Second World War.

After engine shutdown, I met Colonel Ken Brown, a retired Air Force pilot who was heavily involved in the organization of the Fly-In. I secured the Kate, and received some assistance from Mike Shendel, M.D. Dr. Shendel was an interesting person who had recently retired from the practice of medicine. Although a general practitioner, he practiced obstetrics and delivered a number of newborns during the course of his tenure as a physician. He was from Louisiana and was a colorful and interesting person.

Also, at the airport were William “Rob” Haley and his wife Yvonne who is a pharmacist. Interestingly, Yvonne was working as Rob’s fireguard while Rob was giving flights in the North American AT-6 Aircraft, operated by AirBase Georgia of the Commemorative Air Force.

After taking pictures of aircraft at the show, Rob, Yvonne, and a number of other participants in the show had dinner at the All Steak Restaurant in Cullman. Cullman is an interesting city. The architecture of the buildings indicates the area is relatively affluent. During my brief stay there, I did not determine why Cullman was economically successful. In any case, the city was well laid out and had nice restaurants and hotels.

## THE DAY OF THE SHOW

Saturday morning dawned clear and bright with light winds. I drove the courtesy car provided by the airport authority to the show, turned over the car keys, and loaded

my gear in the Kate Bomber. As is common, people were standing around the Kate asking questions about it. People are frequently interested in an aircraft that appears to be a Japanese warplane.

Captain Hendricks Eggerton (a retired Delta Airlines pilot) appeared, and we walked about the airport taking photographs, including photos of medivac helicopters and the hangar in which they are serviced. An Army Heritage Museum out of Arkansas was offering rides in a Bell UH-1 Iroquois, commonly known as a "Huey." I had never flown in a UH-1 before, so I thought I would give it a shot. After paying my fare and being briefed on emergency procedures, I got a flight in the Huey, which was a very interesting ride. The helicopter was more maneuverable than I imagined. The pilot performed climbs, descents, and turns with enthusiasm that revealed the performance of the helicopter. It was a real treat to get that ride in the Huey.

Lunch was available on the second floor of the terminal building where a nice restaurant was located with a view of the airport. The restaurant featured Alabama home cooking. I ordered chicken and dressing, mac and cheese, and mashed potatoes.

A flight of four RV-4 aircraft flew over the airport in formation. The Huey helicopter was busy giving rides. The Fly-In was very well attended. Overall, it was a very pleasant day.

## THE FLIGHT HOME

Rob Haley and I decided to fly home as a two-ship formation flight. Because the runway was only 100 feet wide, we made take offs in trail. Rob took off first, turned left, and I cut inside of him and joined on his left wing. I then crossed over to this right wing as we made a left echelon turn and flew over the airport making a pass upwind over Runway 20. We then departed to the south and climbed to 5,500 feet and established radio contact with Huntsville Approach. Air traffic control was cooperative in giving us flight following on our way home. North of Carrollton, Georgia, Rob was having difficulty with radio communications with ATC, so I assumed command of the flight. We overflew the Carrollton Airport where we split up as Rob turned east and I turned southeast, Rob heading to Falcon Field Airport while I flew to Coweta County Airport. I landed just about sunset. A good friend,

Cooper Perkins heard me on the radio and he taxied his aircraft to the hangar where the Kate is stored and helped me put the Kate away. Moving the Kate with a golf cart and towbar in approaching darkness was a process in which I appreciated the assistance of Cooper. Most people do not appreciate how much work is involved in repositioning a large aircraft into a hangar containing other airplanes. It requires care and skill, especially in low light conditions. As the light faded away, Cooper departed, and I did my best to clean the Kate up and secure her in the hangar in preparation for her next adventure.

After flying for nearly five decades, I still very much enjoy the freedom of flight and the meaning it gives to my life. It is my obligation to act as an ambassador for aviation and encourage the development of the next generation of aviators.

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