



The crew and pilots on the eve of the start of the 2003 National Air Tour.

H.G. FRAUTSCHY



The 2003 National Air Tour

The chance of a lifetime

JOHN COUSSENS

Throughout life I have learned that we never recognize the most significant moments in our lives until they've passed. When a man named Greg Herrick introduced himself to me at AirVenture 2002 and invited me to fly my 1928 Travel Air 4000 biplane in the 2003 National Air Tour, I felt flattered. It sounded like a fun event. Looking back now, I realize how those few minutes with Greg changed my life forever.

Thirteen months later, loaded with camping gear, cameras, and more than a little trepidation, I headed east from my home airport in Arlington, Washington. Ahead of me lay an 8,600-mile odyssey, with over half that distance needed just for the round trip to the tour's starting point at Willow Run airport in Ypsilanti, Michigan. After two days flying, I reached western Nebraska, leaving the Cascades, Rockies, and high plains of Wyoming far behind me. After two more days, I joined up with fellow tour pilots Hank Galpin and Clay Adams at Brodhead, Wisconsin, for the final flight into Willow Run.

The sight of the ramp at Willow Run, filled with antiques from across North America, gave just a brief glimpse of the incredible journey to

come. When starting day dawned, electricity filled the air as I ate breakfast and headed to the airport. Low fog heightened the drama as I walked among ancient aircraft on the eerily silent ramp. During starting ceremonies, we all listened intently as Edsel Ford II and Erik Lindbergh spoke of the history and value of our coming event.

The first minutes of the tour are etched in my mind through the sights and sounds of history relived. Over 30 radial engines including Wrights, Pratts, Lycomings, and Continentals loafed their idle songs as I sat in my Travel Air, at the back of the ramp, watching dozens of propeller blades spin lazily in the brilliant sunshine. One by one, 26 planes with legendary names, like Stinson, Fokker, Waco, Travel Air, Stearman and Sikorsky, staged on the taxiway. Edsel Ford II, whose grandfather started the original tours, waved the starting flag for every plane. Lifting from the pavement at Willow Run left me speechless, as I finally began the tour after over a year of personal planning, coordination, and sacrifice. In that moment every sacrifice paled, every hurdle dropped from memory, every fear of failure to start the tour fell away. Now I just had to finish . . .

We left the lakeshore fog of Detroit behind us and headed west toward Kalamazoo, my Travel Air assigned to the slowest group of planes. That group included the two Sikorsky Amphibions, and the awe I felt joining those two majestic birds in formation simply defies description.

Across the first four days, we landed in Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa, and at each stop we were treated like visiting heroes. Young and old alike asked for our autographs on programs and Air Tour posters, and hosts at each airport threw open both their hangars and their hospitality.

Those first few legs held surprises and challenges, too, with winds causing a few pilots to delay departures, and a fuel tank support breaking on one of the Ford Tri-Motors as it left Anoka, Minnesota. Time for repairs delayed that Ford for several hours and resulted in the plane getting more than a little muddy when it reached Des Moines . . . Thunderstorms stood like sentinels just west of Interstate 35 for our entire trip south from Anoka, and forced us to stay in Des Moines that night rather than continue to Kansas City per our schedule. A radar snapshot, showing storms in a solid band stretching from Canada

clear to the Gulf of Mexico, confirmed the wisdom of stopping short. Craig Schiller, Greg Herrick's righthand man, saved our bacon in Des Moines, arranging hotels for over 80 people and hangars for most of the planes at that first of several unplanned overnights.

Throughout the Tour, weather continued to alter our plans. During a scheduled free day in Wichita, the Stearman owners had arranged to fly to McConnell Air Force base to visit the very hangar in which their planes were built. Concurrently, I had planned to get all the Travel Airs to their birthplace at Beech Field, and possibly visit the original Travel Air factory buildings that still stand within the Beech complex. Steady rains that eased occasionally but soaked us throughout the day scuttled both trips.

Although the rains of Wichita gave way to beautiful skies from Kansas to Georgia, Hurricane Isabel lurked ominously in the Atlantic. Even as early as our first night in Kansas, Isabel's track looked likely to hit Kitty Hawk only a day before we planned to arrive. We watched TV weather each night and hoped for a reprieve. It never came.

When we reached Peachtree, Georgia, the fearsome power of Isabel stood in our path. No pilot in the group felt willing to push its boundaries, so by unanimous vote we delayed in Peachtree to let the storm pass. But before the sun had set, our first day in Georgia took on an ominous hue. Miss Veedol slewed sideways in fickle winds through a wrenching ground loop that collapsed the left main gear up through her floorboards. Only a miracle saved its two pilots from injury. Our delay was the Miss Veedol crew's blessing, however, as several pilots pitched in and spent the entire extra day disassembling their once proud bird for her ignoble truck ride home.

Two days after the hurricane passed, we arrived at Wilson, North Carolina. Scarcely 130 miles from Kitty Hawk, Wilson was not only a scheduled stop on the tour, but also



Erik Lindbergh recalls the fact that his grandfather had planned on flying in one of the original air tours, but bad weather kept him from the start.



PHOTOS H. G. FRAUTSCHY

Edsel Ford waves the starter's flag for each aircraft and NAT organizer Greg Herrick and author Tim O'Callaghan give a "thumbs up" as they taxi out for departure.



Typical of the vast majority of the tour stops, the local community of Wausau, Wisconsin, did their best to make the tour pilots and crew welcome. A terrific lunch was put on in one of the hangars, and mayor Linda Lawrence and local Chamber of Commerce members gave a short welcoming speech.



A great sounding rag-tag ramp band was entertaining at various stops along the route. The band was composed of members of the NAT crew and pilots. Roger Gomoll, tuba, and Craig Schiller, drums, with Chris Grotewohl on banjo and Pat Courtemanche and Ryan Mohr on guitars.



PHOTOS H.G. FRAUTSCHY

Greg Herrick is pleasantly surprised by Edsel B. Ford II, as Ford presents him with the family's "Spirit of Ford" award for his work in recreating the National Air Tour. Greg's vision of the three-week long event as one that would educate the public was borne out at each stop as hundreds of people (and in a couple places, even thousands!) came out to look at the vintage air-planes on the tour.



The NAT planes line up for the first takeoff of the tour from Ypsilanti, Michigan.



Clark Seaborn and his Fokker Universal crew.



PHOTOS H.G. FRAUTSCHY

Ted Davis Flies NAT 27, a Travel Air E-4000.



GILLES AULIARD

Travel Air NAT 2, flown by John Coussens.



Clark Seaborn got a workout at each stop, hand cranking the inertia starter on the Pratt & Whitney mounted on the nose of the Fokker Super Universal.



PHOTOS H.G. FRAUTSCHY

At each stop, the crowds had to wait for just a while so that each aircraft could be serviced with fuel and oil. Then the crowds were allowed to mingle with the airplanes and aviators until it was time to leave.



H.G. FRAUTSCHY

Is this guy having fun or what? Dick Jackson cruises along in the Sikorsky S-39 that took him and his wife, Patsy, as well as an army of friends and volunteers, over 40 years to restore.

the furthest east we could travel where hotels were available and electricity was still on. Even though a TFR over Kitty Hawk had been canceled, the airstrips at both Kill Devil Hills and nearby Manteo were closed to non-emergency traffic. Although landing was out of the question, local authorities blessed our proposal

to fly out and circle the Wright Brothers Memorial. Roughly half of our planes made that journey.

I was the only pilot to travel clear from the West Coast, and circling Kill Devil Hills felt like reaching the top of Everest. Viewing damage to the Outer Banks that ranged from mild to unspeakable, however, made that flight bittersweet.

Through the last four days back to Ypsilanti, the spirit of the tour changed for me. I had reached my

furthest goal, if only overhead, and now I was heading home. Even so, on landing back at Willow Run, the rush of accomplishment overwhelmed me as nearly a dozen of my fellow pilots shook my hand before I could even climb from my cockpit.

In the 18 days we spent together, our group of 80 pilots, mechanics, and volunteers grew from "you" and "me" and "them" to "WE." We came from Washington and Maine, Georgia, and Minnesota and everywhere



JOHN COUSSENS

The Lock family's pair of New Standards rest for a moment before starting the day's labors. Both big biplanes hopped rides at the tour stops, often arriving ahead of the tour and stimulating interest in the event.



GILLES AULIARD

The reproduction of the "Spirit of Wenatchee," the 1929 Bellanca Skyrocket built by EAA Chapter 424, was on the tour. Unfortunately, the left main gear folded during some gusty crosswinds, so the Bellanca had to be trucked home to Washington state for repairs. We wish them well, and if you'd like to know more about this adventurous project, log on to www.spiritofwenatchee.org.



Ted Beckwith and his wife Bev flew what would be known as the smallest airplane on the tour, their newly restored Great Lakes 2T-1A.

GILLES AULIARD PHOTOS



A pair of Tri-Motors, a Stinson 6000-B, and the Skyways Ford pass in review paying their respects to the Wright brothers as they pass by the granite monument at Kill Devil Hills, North Carolina, only days after Hurricane Isabel slashed through the Outer Banks.



The grand Champion Antique of EAA AirVenture Oshkosh 2003 was on the tour. Here's Ben Scott and his spectacular Stearman 4E Speedmail.



Waldo Anderson shepherds Thomas Schrade's Sikorsky S-38 around the midwestern skies of southern Michigan.

PHOTOS H.G. FRAUTSCHY



The sight of another Sikorsky Amphibion off the wingtip was enough to put goose bumps on anyone. Dick and Patsy Jackson's Sikorsky S-39 is framed by the tail of the S-38 "Spirit of Osa."



A pair of 1928 monoplanes. Hank Galpin in his Travel Air 6000 flies off the right wing of the Aviation History Foundation's Fairchild FC-2W2.

H.G. FRAUTSCHY



Before being permanently retired, the FAA's DC-3, N34, participated in the tour. Used to check airway beacons and instrument approach systems, N34 was once a common sight.

GILLES AULIARD



Kim Sailor was one of the pilots and during the overnight stop at Lansing, Illinois, she was privileged to wear a dress designed by Amelia Earhart, normally displayed at the Amelia Earhart Birthplace Museum in Atchison, Kansas. Joining Kim at the tour stop was her fiancé, Tom Williamson.



The largest formation of trimotors in many years pays their respects to Meigs Field, even as the bulldozers tear it up below.

GILLES AULIARD



Clay Adams, Travel Air pilot.

NAT Diary

by H.G. Frautschy

Echoing John's comments, joining the National Air Tour, if only for a few days, was the chance of a lifetime. I jumped at the opportunity to hop in the second Sikorsky S-38 built by the late Buzz Kaplan's company, Born Again Restorations. Owned by Buzz's partner in the project, Thomas Schrade of Las Vegas, the plane was being flown on the first portion of the tour by the amiable Waldo Anderson. We waddled down the taxiway past a beaming pair of starters, Greg Herrick and the flag-waving Edsel Ford. Ford clearly enjoyed his immersion in vintage aviation, if only for the morning.

Over 20 years ago, I spent the very start of my professional career at Sikorsky Aircraft and had a black and white photograph of the Sikorsky S-40 Pan American Amphibion hanging by my desk. Never in my wildest imaginings would I have believed we'd be seeing its two predecessors in the air together, let alone me flying one, and then later the other. *Flying* magazine columnist Lane Wallace and I traded the right seat of the S-38, and we both marveled at the airplane's capabilities. With its hull suspended below the wing, and the twin outrigger booms stretching back to the twin fins, it seemed that the parts were flying in formation with the hull! Even more amazing was looking out the window and seeing Dick Jackson's incredible Sikorsky S-39 restoration flying in formation. The two Sikorskys were paired from the start until the S-38 had to leave the tour because of a commitment to fly the airplane for a movie (it served as a stand-in for Howard Hughes' S-43).

It seemed every direction you looked, there was one of the tour's airplanes within sight, and at each stop, there were times when it was hard to get away from the airplane for a few necessary moments, as the groups of enthusiastic visitors would crowd around and pepper you with questions. What fun!

If it was possible, the next day was just as incredible. I flew with Dick and Patsy Jackson in their S-39 from Lansing, Illinois, to Milwaukee, via the Lake Michigan shoreline. Certainly the saddest segment of that leg was flying by the site of Meigs Field, which they were actually bulldozing as we

flew by at 500 feet. The group of Friends of Meigs Field supporters and their banner held high were clearly visible, and I'm sure all of us felt the same frustration at the ability of one man to destroy such a valuable asset to the city of Chicago. We had all looked forward to landing at that great field, but Mayor Daley's destruction of Meigs made that impossible.

It was an extraordinarily hazy day as we flew north, and as I flew loose formation with the S-38 along the lakeshore, there was no discernable horizon unless you looked inland. Both Dick and I were mesmerized by the same vision, as we could see only the S-38 framed in the windshield frame and struts. No lake, no shore, just the haze tapering up to a bit of blue the further up you looked. The engine noise seemed to be far in the background, and the two Amphibions were just suspended in midair. It felt eerie. It truly was an amazing sight, one that none of us will forget.

The next day's leg to Wausau, Wisconsin, was with Ted Davis in John Coussens' Travel Air, which gave me a great opportunity to look at a number of the other ships in the NAT flight. The lunch in Wausau, hosted by the Chamber of Commerce (including VAA member Madonna McMahon) was wonderful. Wausau was an original stop in 1928, and the home field of the winner of that year's tour, John P. Wood. Again, the people who turned out were fascinated with the visit, and wanted to know as many details as we could relate about each aircraft. Greg Herrick's vision for the tour was vindicated each time we educated the public about these grand airplanes.

Far too soon I, joined by my two children, Alden and Jenny, headed home in EAA's Ford Tri-Motor. They had been able to take a day off of school and fly to Wausau in the S-38, including time spent standing up in the open hatch in the aft part of the cabin, enjoying the windblast and the spectacular view. Before we departed, we watched the tour fly away, raising great clouds of dust as the aircraft roared off (well, some just purr instead of roar) towards Minneapolis. At the risk of making Greg and the NAT staff apoplectic, I have to ask:

"Can we do it again?"



Even the spectators got in on the fun! Ruth Coulson dressed up in period garb for the tour's stop in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Ruth and her husband, Phil, later joined the tour with the Waldo's Flying Service New Standards, which flew the tour and hopped rides at each stop.

in between. We were doctors, lawyers, engineers, airline pilots, and contractors. Our camaraderie grew not from our occupations or hometowns, but rather from the common love of antique aircraft that made us willing to give nearly a month of our lives in order to fly the tour. Nearly all of us made it back to where we'd started, successfully traveling over 4,000 miles across 21 states, and we did it all together. Yet suddenly it was over.

Leaving Willow Run after the tour, the sky was strangely void of friends surrounding me. For the first time in my life, flying felt odd and empty and sad; the lump in my throat stayed with me clear into Iowa as I mourned the end of such a grand adventure.

The next day, though, off by myself in the middle of Iowa, I smiled. I thought back to gaggles of biplanes around me, to flying formation with the New Standards, to framing two Sikorskys between my struts as we crossed the Chicago skyline.... Greg Herrick, along with thousands of people across the country, I want to thank you for dreaming so big. You were right: flying the National Air Tour truly was the chance of a lifetime.

P.S. If you missed the tour, check www.nationalairtour.org and read the e-mail updates! You'll get to share the tour as it happened!