

Tweet



Memories

Reliving the past with the T-37 Tweet

BY JOE CONNELL



Who among us would not feel a rush of youth to again view the ship we served, the tank we drove, or the aircraft we flew? What if we could experience it again after 40-plus years? My experience came true at EAA AirVenture Oshkosh 2009, and it all began with this simple e-mail:

Joe,

Are you coming to Oshkosh? If so, how about a sortie with me in my buddy's T-37?

Paul

Paul Keppeler is a first officer for Delta Airlines and owns a Canadian-built CT-133, a Canadian version of the Lockheed T-33. Paul's initial e-mail casually mentioned a friend had acquired an A-37 (combat version of the T-37), and Paul was planning to get checked out in it.

A second note arrived several weeks before AirVenture 2009. Paul wondered if I would be available for a sortie in the T-37 at Oshkosh. I had flown the T-37 49 years ago at Bainbridge Air Base, Georgia, in the hot summer of 1960. And suddenly, in my thoughts, I was 20 years old again!



Paul Keppeler and Joe Connell



A few weeks later I was on the flightline at Oshkosh when my cell phone unexpectedly rang about mid-morning. “Got time to take a hop in the Tweet?” Paul asked. Twenty minutes later we commenced the pre-flight and briefing.

In many respects my mind kept flip-flopping between the present and a time some 49 years ago at Bainbridge.

Paul picked me up in his SUV. With him was Jim Allen, one of the owners of the T-37. Forty-nine years ago I would have grabbed a chute, helmet, and kneepad and headed out to the flightline. From there I would hope to snag a ride in the “trolley” that constantly patrolled the line waiting to pick up and drop off instructors and students at their line of aircraft or the briefing room. If I didn’t, I would trudge a long distance in the Georgia heat and humidity to my assigned plane. I can still visualize the heat waves rising off the tarmac...

Our instructors were civilians, on contract with Southern Airways System. My instructor, “Pat” Patterson, would occasionally share stories of his military service. Usually this was when we were waiting for weather to improve before a flight. He had accumulated around 8,000 hours. He spoke of flying C-54s in the Berlin Airlift. On one occasion he had to take off in fog. After lining up on the runway and setting his directional gyro, Pat advanced the throttles and made the perfect takeoff under instrument conditions. All went well until he rolled into a turn—and the directional gyro never moved. It had been caged during the entire takeoff. Our flight commander was Jim Van Landingham, an easygoing fellow with a southern drawl. A common opening for the morning briefing would be, “Now men, about this weather, you’ll stand by.”

Back at Oshkosh...Paul and I went through the preflight. No tiedowns this time—but I remembered a student trying to taxi with the tail securely chained to the ramp. We checked the tire tread; I unconsciously checked around



In many respects my mind kept flip-flopping between the present and a time some 49 years ago at Bainbridge.

the chocks for snakes. (It was not unusual to find a rattlesnake between the tire and the chock in the Georgia-morning walk-arounds.) The skin of the plane was cool from morning showers—not blistering from the heat of a sweltering Georgia summer afternoon.

We unlatched, checked the oxygen bottles, then secured the forward radio compartment area. *A classmate of mine, Terrey Ruehl, had an owl tear a hole in the front end of his Tweet when he was in the pattern shooting night landings; sure enough, the remnants of the owl were in the same compartment.* The chines on the nose brought back a discussion on how they changed spin characteristics.

Much was the same, and yet much was missing. *Gone were the smells of sweat, old leather, and a hint of past airsickness (mine and others' before me). Gone was the weariness as we aviation cadets marched back to our barracks—nearly everyone had salty outlined sweat stains on their flight suits.*

It was a time of letter writing to the folks at home about my flying. My pen pal, Kathy, wrote nearly every day asking about flying. She was a college friend of my sister, Jeanne. (After writing almost daily for two years, we met and were married seven months later. Thirty-one years later cancer would take her from our five children and me.)

Back at Oshkosh...the instrument panel was better than factory new. *Gone was the chipped paint, a misplaced checklist, paint worn from boot heels, and pins that safetied the ejection seats.* The throttle paint was not worn. *Gone were the occasional grease pencil marks on the instruments made by some cadet to remember an airspeed or altitude.* I saw the piccolo tube used to defrost the windshield. *It brought back memories of frost coming out of the air conditioner after advancing the throttles when shooting touch-and-goes in the humid Georgia afternoons.*

Gone were the ARC-34 radios that sometimes challenged reliability. For some reason they would always pick an



COMMEMORATIVE
AIR FORCE

Honor our Heroes... Be a Colonel



CAF Col Brad Lang (right) stands with American Hero & Tuskegee Airman, retired USAF Col. Charles Maden (left) in front of the CAF's P-51C Mustang, restored & flown in honor of the Tuskegee Airman of World War II. Lang, the son of a Tuskegee Airman, flies this P-51C as part of the CAF's Red Tail Project.

Join us in honoring the men and women of freedom.

**www.beacolonel.org
(877) 787 - 7178**

Visit the
CAF
at AirVenture
July 26-Aug 11

Commissioning Colonels and Honoring American Military Aviation for over 60 years
www.commemorativeairforce.org | www.airha.org | www.beacolonel.org | www.redtail.org



Night flying at Bainbridge.



T-37 at Bainbridge.



The Student Center.

inconvenient time to channelize when changing a frequency. Occasionally a cadet would push the tone button for a “practice” DF steer back to Bainbridge. Several years later I would hand wire the bundle of wires between the control head and the receiver for our alert shack at Bien Hoa, Vietnam. In doing so, our alert shack could monitor H-43 search and rescue operations.

I got cinched into the parachute. Seat belt, shoulder harness, with the “one and zero” lanyard tab fitted into

the release latch. Nearly 50 years ago our upper classmen were always testing us to see if we knew the date our chute’s repack was due. My instructor, Pat Patterson, and one of my table-mates, Lt. Broome, departed their T-37 one afternoon after it would not recover from a spin. If I remember correctly, they punched out around 6,000 feet over the Georgia landscape.

With the oxygen mask in place, its smell reminded me of Paul Nipple. Paul was a classmate of mine who au-



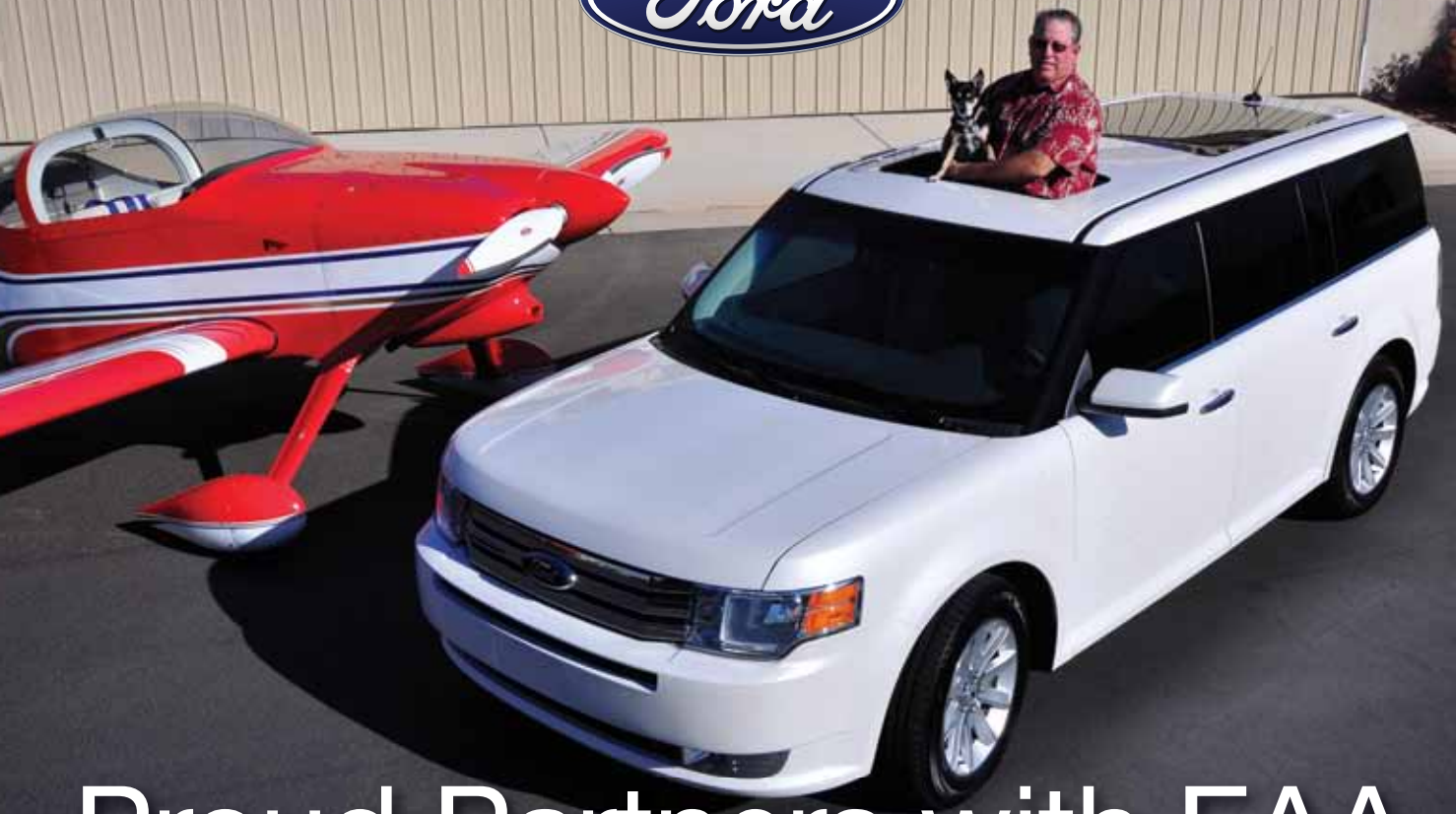
The tower at Bainbridge.

gured while on a cross-country out of Bainbridge. Near as anyone can tell he was downed by hypoxia. It cast a pall on our class for a long while. He would be the only classmate I would lose in training. An upperclassman was lost from vertigo during solo night flying.

Paul and I stowed our pins prior to taxiing. I can still remember the crew chief looking for our five pins: three for the gear and the other two for the ejection seat and canopy. No pins, no pulling the chocks.

In time we taxied out to depart on Runway 27. As I transitioned from T-34s [press the rudder to turn] to the T-37 [press the nose-wheel steering button, then the rudder], I wish I had a dime for the times I deflected the rudder, then remembered to punch the button; the T-37 would dart toward the grass off the side of the taxiway. “Constructive” comments from my instructor would follow! Being in a side-by-side trainer had its advantages. My instructor once grabbed the hose on my mask to point out another aircraft I had failed to see. Simple, yet effective!

A Cessna 172 was in front of us. The departure line was creeping



Proud Partners with EAA

Why would anyone buy anything else?

"Ford has always been part of our family. When I was in the market for a new car, I wanted mini-van interior space & seating, great handling and sporty styling. The best choice was the Ford Flex. The Flex complements my all-Ford fleet with a F-250 Super Duty and Crown Victoria already in the garage. No matter whether I'm flying or driving, comfort and style are critical. With the second and third row seats down, the Flex provides me with plenty of space to transport my large radio controlled models and other large items. The second row seating has more room than any other vehicle in its class, hands down.

And, because of the Partnership program offered by Ford and the EAA, I was able to make the deal even sweeter by upgrading the package to include the Vista Roof. My sales representative from Pioneer Ford in Goodyear, Arizona, Don Stich, went out of his way to make the deal quick and easy. If you are in the market for a new vehicle, take advantage of this great program. Thanks EAA and Ford!"

Darwin B. EAA #689466
Chandler, AZ

Enjoy the privilege of partnership

EAA Members who are considering the purchase or lease of a new Ford Motor Company vehicle should be sure to take advantage of the opportunity to save with the Ford Partner Recognition Program.

Get your personal identification number (PIN) and learn about the great value of Partner Recognition/X-Plan at www.fordpartner.com

Certain restrictions apply. Available at participating dealers. Please refer to www.eaa.org.



LINCOLN



MERCURY



partner
recognition
VEHICLE PURCHASE PLAN

along slowly. The Jet-A was going up in fumes at a gallon and a half per minute.

“Dragonfly, position and hold,” came the call from Mobile. *Call signs came flooding back: Exbound and Winning Willy were our active runways. I was Navaho 38. At Vance Air Force Base we had the Tipper series of call signs. Bob Norman and Ed Lankenau were my T-33 instructors. Later the call signs would begin with Pedro, used for all HH-43Fs in Vietnam.*

“Dragonfly, cleared for takeoff.” I remembered how quickly the T-37 had accelerated—a big change from the previous T-34. A gentle rotation and tire runway whine ceased, only to be replaced by thumps as the gear settled into the wells. Cloud cover was broken, and Paul held it low for several miles. We popped up through an open hole and headed toward some open sky.

We skirted a towering CB and watched it build and boil. *I spent one of my solo sessions years ago watching a thunderhead build on a hot, humid afternoon in the Georgia skies. As I watched, it kept percolating higher and higher. As a farm boy I would watch these clouds form in Iowa. Only then I wondered if it would interrupt getting the baled hay in the barn or spoil some plans I had that evening with my favorite girl (at the time.)*

We found some open sky between the cloud layers, and Paul did a few aileron and barrel rolls. *I am remembering the time my roommate, Clarke Lee, and I were flying together on paired students flights. It was a way to build cockpit time yet learn from each other. Clarke was one of these eager fire-in-the-belly kind of pilots. Prior to the flight there had been a side discussion on an agreed to “Tiger channel” for air-to-air communication. I dialed in the frequency, and Clarke checked at the appointed time. Minutes later we were performing tentative formation flights with another pair of cadets. No one had been assigned lead, and the formation deteriorated to two aircraft flying in the same vicinity. That all changed when Clarke thought it would be cool to do a*

barrel roll around the other aircraft. All was well until he reached 90 degrees, at which time the plan fell through and the plane fell through. I can recall seeing the empennage of the other plane appearing in the left windscreen, then sliding rapidly across mine. I can still remember seeing the two light bulbs of the rudder passing by. We dropped formation flying from our Tiger flight after that attempt! My friend Clarke would be lost in an F-100 crash in Europe in 1963.

Shortly into the flight Paul noted the wing tanks were not being fed proportionately. *I had the same thing occur on a long cross-country flight so many years ago. Placing the fuel flow in manual corrected the problem by the time we landed. The same worked for me years ago.*

“Your aircraft” echoed in my helmet from Paul. “My aircraft” was my response. The plane was mine. I was playing a bit of catch-up to stay ahead of it. The crispness of the controls echoed from past decades. I wandered aimlessly through the sky, not even needing to lead with rudder as I must on my homebuilt.

My reverie was jolted back to the present when I flew below a rain shaft. Paul and I were suddenly out of our seats, and our helmets rapped against the canopy. I was scrambling to retard the throttles. “My plane,” said Paul as he rolled the plane on edge to unload the wings. “*Never fly below virga*” echoed in my ears from the past.

We eased our way into the Oshkosh traffic. Initial at 200 knots, right break, throttle 60 percent, speed brakes out, downwind at 150, gear coming down, three in the green, flaps coming down at 135, begin the base turn, short final, over the numbers, touchdown. Today and yesterday—all in one.

We taxied the Tweet to old Runway 22 and shut down. *I’m left with the old memory of the last jet engine shutting down on the ramp after night flying ends for the night. There was a silence that permeated the flightline. The blue taxi lights rippled in the distance.*

The pleasant smell of jet exhaust slowly took its leave, and I was left to ponder the wonder of flying a jet.

In memories I was back home over the 1960 Christmas holidays on a break in flight training. Old friends saw me in uniform and offered me greetings. After a few pleasantries came the inevitable question, “So what do you do in the Air Force?” With a big grin I responded, “I fly jets!” And now the same kind of question, “So what did you see and do at Oshkosh?” “I flew a jet—one I had flown 49 years ago!” With those memories I walk a little straighter, smile a bit bigger, and old aches are forgotten. Thanks, Paul.



About the Author:

Joe Connell was a pilot in the U.S. Air Force from 1960 through 1966. After completing pilot training in the last class of aviation cadets, 61-G2, he was commissioned and selected helicopters for his flying career. He flew the HH-43B and HH-43F helicopters for the Air Rescue Service. During his yearlong tour in Southeast Asia in 1964-65 he flew aircrew rescue and recovery missions in South Vietnam. After leaving the Air Force in 1966, he began a 34-year career with IBM. He and his wife, Jan, retired in 2000. Together they have seven children and 15 grandchildren. They are presently flying a Kitfox homebuilt airplane and currently building an RV-9A experimental airplane in their basement. They live in a wooded acreage near Stewartville in southeast Minnesota.