

The Bamboo Bomber: An Enthusiast's Appreciation

While in graduate school at Oklahoma State University back in the 1990s, inspired partly by the old "Sky King" television show and the chance finding of copies of the biannually issued *United States Civil Aircraft Register* in the University library, I began a search for identities and owners of all the aircraft used in that show, but especially the identities and fates of the Cessna T-50 Bobcats. That led to a research project in which I compiled the manufacturer's serial number, military serial number, and civil registrations of all T-50s built. Some five years ago, I started work on a comprehensive history of the T-50, and since then I've researched the CAA/FAA records of every T-50 registered in the US, obtained copies of the USAAF Individual Aircraft Record Cards for the aircraft and histories of the Cranes used by the Royal Canadian Air Force, and found photos and stories from a variety of sources, with the intent of compiling all this data into a book on the aircraft for future publication. But I've only seen two of these aircraft in person, both in museums. Only recently was I given the opportunity to actually fly in one.

Although a total of 5,400 T-50s of all variants — AT-8s, AT-17s, UC-78s, JRC-1s, and Cranes — were built, probably only two dozen or so of these airplanes are routinely flown today. One of those is serial number 6487, N66671, a UC-78B (USAAF serial number 43-32549) built in October 1943 and owned and flown by Terry Sullivan of Bossier City, Louisiana. Terry acquired the airplane in 1994, restored it with the help of parts from other Bobcats, and began flying it on the local airshow circuit in 2009. Terry owns the Bamboo Bomber Club website (<http://www.cessnat50.org>), and I've been corresponding with Terry for a couple of years, helping answer historical inquiries about the T-50. So when Terry invited me to be his guest for a weekend and join him for a fly-in to Mansfield, Louisiana, I eagerly accepted his offer!

I drove from Dallas to Shreveport on a Friday afternoon, met Terry at Shreveport Downtown Airport (DTN), where he keeps the airplane, and followed him to his hangar. My first impression, upon opening the doors, was one of SIZE. The FAA refers to a "light twin" as any small multiengine airplane with a maximum certificated takeoff weight of 6,000 pounds or less, and while the T-50's maximum gross operating weight of 5,700 pounds puts it in the light twin category, it's not a small airplane, with a wingspan of 42 feet and a length of 33 feet. But it always looked smaller to me on television when Sky and Penny were flying the "Songbird."

It's also a TALL airplane! It's three feet from the ground to the wingwalk on the trailing edge of the left wing, too big a step even for me, a 6-footer, and a stepladder is required operating equipment. It's also a steep walk to the cabin door, but a handrail on the fuselage side helps.



N66671 rests on the ramp prior to our flight to Grand Cane, Louisiana. The color and markings commemorate the WW II 15th Air Force B-17 in which Terry's dad flew as bombardier.

Once inside, the cabin is spacious, with a lot of legroom for the rear occupants. The rear seat holds three people, but it could get cramped on a long flight. Access to the pilot and co-pilot seats is awkward; you have to step over the main spar and avoid stepping on the fuel tank selector and crossfeed valves, but once you figure out which foot should go first, it's not so bad. The pilot/co-pilot seats are adjustable fore and aft, and there was adequate legroom even for me with the co-pilot seat full aft. But it's cozy all around; side-to-side seating is close. The average person was probably smaller when the T-50 first flew.

The next morning, after breakfast at the airport restaurant, we towed the airplane out of the hangar into the sun and pre-flighted it for a short trip to C. E. "Rusty" Williams Airport (3F3), Grand Cane, Louisiana, and its 5th Annual Fly-in. My next impression: The cockpit gets HOT in a hurry, thanks to those big overhead skylights in what Cessna called the "turret top." They were no doubt intended to give USAAF student pilots extra visibility when making formation turns, but they let in a lot of light and heat, and many civilian post-war owners of surplus Bobcats had them replaced with factory aluminum panels or even wood and fabric to make the cockpit more comfortable. Air conditioning is not an option.

Engine start-up seemed straightforward to me, a non-pilot, but I noticed the primer control seemed stiff. Each engine requires two or three strokes of primer to start, and Terry seemed to be working hard at it, but he assured me that's normal. Start-up was accompanied by a blast of smoke from each engine, as seems normal with radial engines. My next impression was, while the engines were warming up, was: This airplane is LOUD! Terry's airplane is equipped with noise-reducing headsets/microphones, which made communication easy, but there's a 245 horsepower, seven-cylinder radial engine turning over about 6 feet from your head, with nothing between you and it but a plexiglass window, and that engine makes a LOT of racket. I felt myself wondering how World War II instructors managed to communicate with their students, given the relatively primitive-by-today's-standards communications gear of the period, and I'm sure that passengers were issued cotton to stuff in their ears. The noise is deafening, and Terry assures me his airplane is thoroughly soundproofed.

Warm-up accomplished, cabin ventilation improved markedly thanks to the blast of air from the props through the opened side window, as well as the open cabin door, temporarily held open by a stop, and we taxied to the runway. The height of the airplane means a pilot's eyes are almost 10 feet off the ground, and visibility over the short round nose of the Bamboo Bomber seemed sufficient to me that S-taxiing is



Departing Shreveport Downtown Airport. Shreveport Downtown is the city's original airport and is just north of the downtown area. That's the Red River below the airplane.

not required. We were quickly cleared for take-off on Runway 14 and off we went. The control wheel is initially held all the way back to lock the tail wheel, but after the airplane travels only a few lengths and the speed builds, the wheel goes forward, the tail comes up, and the airplane leaves the runway soon after. Landing gear retraction went unnoticed by me, and flaps are not used at takeoff, but Terry was turning the overhead trim crank as we took off. A right turn after took us to the northwest in order to skirt the airspace of Shreveport Regional Airport, and we then made a wide left turn to the south toward our destination. In flight, ventilation through the fixed overhead vents is adequate, and the Jacobs radials ran smoothly, belying their "Shaky Jake" reputation. The ride was a gentle one, and about a half-hour later we were lined up for landing on Runway 18 at Grand Cane.



Turning final to Runway 18, at Grand Cane. Those overhead windows provide excellent visibility, but let in a lot of heat when the airplane is on the ground.

After landing and following the airport's "Follow Me" golf cart to our assigned spot, we shut down the engines and unloaded our cargo: lawn chairs for us and Terry's friends without the room to carry them in their own smaller airplanes. Terry then tossed me a rag and informed me it was my job to wipe any oil off the engines! I'd always heard that radials were notorious oil-slingers, but there was little oil after our short flight, mainly on the bottom and lower sides of the cowlings. This chore was accompanied by an occasional creak or pop as the engines continued to cool, and the smell of the oil reminded me of the 3-in-One oil my mother used on her Singer sewing machine! And I didn't get a single drop of oil on me.

Terry had told me in advance that my job was also to answer questions about the airplane, so for the next three hours or so that's what I did, while also keeping people from putting their hands where they shouldn't. The fly-in was open to the general public, and there were lots of questions, from adults and kids alike. Most had never seen or heard of the Bamboo Bomber before, but all seemed fascinated by it, kids especially, who thought it was a real combat warplane and were disappointed to learn it didn't have guns or carry bombs. And there was not one question about Sky King!

After about three hours (and a free hamburger and T-shirt), the show wound down, so we loaded the lawn chairs, pulled each prop through seven blades, started up (more smoke), and taxied to the fuel pumps prior to heading back to Shreveport. The Rusty Williams Airport manager allows participating fly-in aircraft owners to top off their tanks for free before departing, and we put 104 gallons in the

Bamboo Bomber (we had taken off with partly empty tanks). At \$4.50 a gallon, that was a mighty generous gesture by the airport.

The trip back to Shreveport was also uneventful, marked only by some gusts. The wind had picked up since our flight down, but the Bobcat handled the gusts well, with more "bounce" than "chop." Terry says the airplane can be a handful, and no doubt the relatively light wing loading and the tall fuselage sides make it more responsive to gusts than a modern aircraft, but the ride reminded me more of a boat rocking in gentle swells and was not at all uncomfortable.

Landing at Shreveport was another smooth one, and after I wiped down the cowlings (again), we connected the tow bar and pushed the Bamboo Bomber back in her hangar and unloaded the lawn chairs. Terry and I had a beer each to celebrate a "successful mission," and my Bamboo Bomber adventure was over.



That's a very LOUD radial engine just 6 feet from the co-pilot's ear!

Cessna's T-50 may be better known to the general public as Sky King's original "Songbird," but its real significance lies in its role as a trainer of World War II multi-engine pilots, and I've had a week or so to think about the experience of flying in this genuine World War II veteran. Aside from the sounds and the smells, what I came away with most was the sense of what it must have been like to fly as a USAAF instructor or cadet and the role the T-50 played in helping win World War II. I've read much of the literature of World War II air combat, but the aircraft used to train the aircrews seldom get mentioned, so I'm glad to see that T-50s, which trained many a multi-engine World War II pilot, are preserved and flown and lovingly cared for. My father was a WW II USAAF veteran, an air traffic controller in Puerto Rico. There were T-50s based there, and I know he must have seen them, even though he never mentioned them in the stories he told me about his experiences. While riding with Terry in his Bamboo Bomber, I thought of my dad, and Terry's dad, a 15th Air Force B-17 bombardier, as well as all the instructors and students who flew the T-50 and then went off to combat. I thought of what it must have been like on a long training flight in frigid Canadian winters or baking southwestern U.S. summers. And I thought, too, of the pilots who went overseas into combat and never came back.

This was an experience I'll never forget, and it came just two days after my 68th birthday. So thanks, Terry, for the BEST BIRTHDAY PRESENT EVER!



On final approach to Shreveport Downtown's Runway 14. Landing visibility is excellent thanks to the Bamboo Bomber's short nose.



Putting the Bamboo Bomber to bed. She looks great for a 71-year-old airplane, and Terry, who is also a licensed A & P mechanic, keeps her in excellent condition.