Wing Strut Fairings.

N413C’s (November Four One Three Charlie’s) wing strut fairings were looking pretty shabby. People almost naturally put their feet on the fairings getting in and out of the plane leaving them scraped and dented. Betty and I took them off carried them to the house and cleaned, repaired, and painted them until they looked almost new. This morning we went to the hangar and reinstalled the newly painted fairings. Wow! They look great.

Inspired by the improvement our handiwork did to our little Stinson, we decided to fly to Pine Bluff for lunch. The weather was picture book perfect – bright blue skies, light swaying winds, and comfortable temperatures you expect from the Spring season. The airplane was ready. After a thorough walk around inspection of the wings and things and making sure we had plenty of fuel we fired up the 150 horsepower Franklin six-cylinder engine. She’s a very old engine but it only takes barely a turn of the prop for it to come to life. The Franklin is a low compression engine, much like my old Harleys, and as it idles it just gently rocks, so slowly you almost think it will quit. Like the Harley, it’s a pleasure to just sit and listen to. It’s the deep throbbing pulse of machine that seems to have its own heartbeat.

We slowly began taxiing down the freshly mowed grass taxiway between the private homes. A couple local residence waved as we passed. Even the taxi was special today. Betty always
watches me taxi and makes sure I’m not too close to the edges. At our little airport, some of
the taxiways passes right next to the swamp so she had good reason to keep an eye open for
us.

At the beginning of runway 36, the longer of the two grass strips at our airport, we ran the
powerful little Franklin engine up to 1600 rpm, checked all the controls for freedom of
movement, set the flaps for takeoff and lined up ready to go. “Takeoff checklist complete”. I
pressed the throttle in smoothly and the Franklin instantly responded with a gentle tug of the
airplane forward. One Three Charlie’s wheels slowly began to roll. In seconds our rapid
acceleration down the grass runway became apparent. The controls came alive in my hands as
our speed increased. Smoothly, I lifted her tail from the ground allowing the little Stinson 108
to accelerate more freely. Soon, with no more than a gentle urging of the control yoke her 33
feet of cloth wings lifted us into the air. The ground seemed to fall away below us as we
climbed higher and higher into the crystal clear blue sky.

I looked at my beautiful bride and saw her smiling as she took in the constantly expanding view
below us. Then Betty raised her camera and started taking pictures. Happily, I thought to
myself, she’s enjoying the flight; just as I hoped she would. We flew over familiar roads as we
climbed toward the south headed away from the big city of Little Rock. The Stinson reached
2,500 feet and we settled on the half mile high view for the remainder of the flight. The freshly
plowed farm fields spread out below us from horizon to horizon. The magnificent Arkansas
River twisted and turned like a giant serpent crawling over the land.

Off in the distance Betty saw the huge cooling towers of ‘Nuke 2’ (the affectionate name pilots
have for the 2nd largest nuclear power plant in Arkansas) and asked, “Are we high enough?”. I
explained to her how the current aviation charts show us how high we have to be to safely clear all the obstacles. I said, “At a half mile high we are well above everything in our path.” She smiled and with the microphones of the headsets awkwardly in our way, we kissed. Betty said, “Hey, we’re in the half mile high club.”

It wasn’t long before we could see our destination coming into view. We gently banked the airplane slightly to the east toward the Pine Bluff airport and lined up for a landing on runway 18. Country Air, our home base, has narrow turf runways that are relatively short and surrounded by trees and swamp. Pine Bluff is in the wide-open spaces with only one very wide runway that seemingly goes on forever. The contrast of the two aerodromes couldn’t be more apparent. Since we were landing on this enormous runway I told Betty I was going to do a 3-point landing; short runway technique just for the fun of it. It was a nearly flawless landing but a little uncomfortable for Betty. You see, to land on the main wheels and the tailwheel at the very same time (3 point) the airplane is in a very nose high attitude during the landing and you can’t see over the dash. Passengers don’t care for losing the view just at the moment the ground is coming at you. When I saw Betty’s response I decided to do wheel landings the rest of our flying today. On the wheel landing the plane is almost level until it’s rolling down the runway nearly stopped; providing passengers with a complete view of the entire landing.

We cleared the big runway and did the after-landing checklist. We taxied over to the restaurant and parked our beautiful Stinson right up front. “Let’s eat.”
Sitting in the airport restaurant we could see our Stinson on the ramp. She really looked good, especially those nice freshly painted wing strut fairings. Now, I must remember to be careful getting in and out of the plane.

The Restaurant

Grider Field Restaurant is the definition of home cooked Southern soul food. They proudly display an award they received for ‘the best soul food in Arkansas’. The dining room is located right on the ramp at the Pine Bluff airport. It has a huge glass front offering an excellent view of the airport area. It’s not the fanciest décor but no one comes here for the finery. It’s all about the food. They have the most delicious fried chicken, green beans, and cornbread muffins. They say their “cornbread is to die for”. The staff is very friendly and everyone from Pine Bluff seems to congregate there for lunch. The restaurant truly has a relaxed and friendly atmosphere and the food is great. We showed up early, right after opening, and still had a line to wait in. This is a testament to their great food.

Betty and I got in the cafeteria style line. When our turn came the lady waiting on us smiled and said, “You’re in the airplane! Do you want your dinners to go?” We explained that we flew here to have lunch and enjoy the ambiance. Our food trays were loaded with more and more food at each station. I’m sure my tray was beyond gross weight. I think I ate a whole chicken
by myself. But, nothing can touch the mouthwatering, tenderly cooked, and ever so wonderfully seasoned green beans. I just might have the green beans for dessert on our next flight to lunch here.

We shared some light conversation and savored our plate lunch. I kept eyeing the sweet table of homemade desserts wondering which one to have. It was only a short time into our meal that it was obvious there would be no room for dessert. With our bellies full and walking a little slower we said our goodbyes and made our way back to our Stinson, One Three Charlie.

Our plan for the next leg was to fly over to Carlisle, Arkansas and fuel up the airplane before heading back to Country Air, which doesn’t have any fuel facility. Carlisle, being the closet airport with fuel, is a logical stop on the way home. Besides, it gives me another chance to practice a landing. We always like to put One Three Charlie in the hangar with her fuel tanks full so she’s ready to go play the next time.

Gas stop

It felt like we taxied forever to the end of Pine Bluff’s mile long runway for takeoff. Our lightly loaded Stinson barely needs 1,000-feet to takeoff. Overkill! But rather than take the shorter intersection takeoff and save a minute or two there’s the thought that runway behind you is absolutely useless. We elected to takeoff from the beginning. Once again, I lined up One Three Charlie on the runway and began the takeoff roll. On this takeoff, instead of lifting her tail with the controls, I let the plane make the takeoff.
A tail wheel airplane is already in the takeoff attitude as it sits on the ground. As the speed increases the lift also increase on the wings and as soon as there’s enough lift – up, up, and away you go. We were well in the air as we passed over the restaurant at mid-runway. Betty had her camera out and caught a few photos as we climbed out after takeoff leaving Pine Bluff behind the tail.

We turned slightly Northeast on a heading that would take us directly to the gas station at the Carlisle airport. Betty looked down as the plane banked toward her side and saw a highway intersection she immediately recognized. In our years of motorcycle travels through this area there’s a dilapidated convenience store we’ve stopped at several times. It was never by choice but rather a necessity to make this store a stop. Betty snapped a picture of the old building and the intersection bringing back a flood of fond memories.

The afternoon brought warmer temperatures and few scattered fair-weather clouds. That’s the kind of clouds a pilot loves to see. You know that if you fly just above them the air is smooth like riding on a magic carpet. Thus, the name; fair weather.

It wasn’t long we could see the Carlisle airport up ahead. As we began our arrival and announced our intentions over the radio we heard a familiar voice. My friend, and fellow flight instructor, Ryan, was giving someone training. After a short friendly chat, I turned our Stinson to line up with runway 27 at Carlisle.
Remembering that Betty preferred the wheel landings where she can see over the nose instead of the 3 pointers I set up for a nice gentle touchdown on the main landing gear. One Three Charlie is an unbelievably responsive airplane – a pilot’s delight. Especially when you consider she’s 71 years old. It takes only the lightest touch to guide her down to the runway.

Smoothly we closed in on the ground as the airplane’s tires gracefully reached down and ever so slightly touched the earth. In flight the Stinson 108 landing gear really is extended downward about 6 inches below the normal weight on wheels’ position. As the plane touches down there’s the feeling the landing gear really is reaching down to the find the ground.

We cleared the runway and taxied over to the fuel pumps. Carlisle airport, like so many airports today, is a self-service fuel facility. The process of gassing up your airplane is much like gassing up the car at the self-service pump. Put your credit card in the machine, plug in your zip code, select your fuel grade, and pump. Well, it’s a little harder than the car. The fuel tanks are up on top of the wings so there’s some serious climbing with a fuel hose in your hand. Also, since One Three Charlie’s Franklin is a low compression engine designed to run on leaded gas we have to add an additive to each gas tank. Today was going to be very easy though because Betty was helping. She mixed and measured the additive so all I had to do was pour it in the tanks and then she handed me the fuel hose. In a matter of just a few minutes the plane was topped off and ready to go again.
Betty keeps track of our credit cards so I handed her the receipt from the machine.

She looked at the somewhat larger total than you’d expect from a gas stop with the car and said, “Add it all together and it looks like we enjoyed a wonderful $300 plate lunch”.

Country Air

From Carlisle airport to Country Air Estates is maybe a 10-minute flight. Ah, but another chance to practice a takeoff and landing. We took off headed West. Interstate 40 was directly along our path so we climbed to 1,000 feet and followed the highway. We looked down at the cars and trucks persevering along the asphalt ribbon below us. How pleasant it is to be up here in the clean cool air.

Country Air is a relatively easy aerodrome to find. Just south of runway 36 is the huge red tower of the Remington Ammunition factory. It’s like a gigantic beacon pointing at the air field. I learned from someone who retired from Remington that the purpose of the tower is to make shot gun pellets. From the top of the tower molten lead is dropped. As gravity does the work the lead falls through different sizing screens until it cools to just the right size at the bottom.

I lined the Stinson up with runway 29 at Country Air. Runway 29 is the shorter of the two runways but more than long enough for our little airplane. I made one of those landings you wish everyone at the air field could’ve witnessed. The two main wheels ever so gently touched down on the smooth grass as we began the transition from efficient air vehicle to a lumbering land machine. The Stinson 108 is well known for its fantastic handling in the air; it’s one of the finest flying machines ever built. But, I’ve
never heard of any pilot brag about how well this airplane handles on the ground. I think it hates the ground. You can’t see where you’re going, the little tail wheel in the back has somewhat of a delayed steering action, and once the tail goes down you’re sitting facing uphill; looking at the sky.

Slowly, we taxied back to the hangar passing once again between the homes that line the taxi way. In front of our hangar I unlocked the tail wheel and spun the 108 around within her wing span. Now that’s something a nose wheel airplane can’t do; turn around within its own wing span. Randy, one of the friendly neighbors, saw us getting ready to put the airplane in the hangar and offered his assistance. Betty, Randy and I slowly and carefully rolled her back into the darkened hangar.

As the big folding hangar door slowly creaked to a close I took one last admiring look at One Three Charlie and thought to myself, maybe we’ll fly down to Vicksburg, Mississippi for lunch one day. I hear they have a restaurant called the Tomato Place; famous for their hamburger – a $400-dollar hamburger.