

Flight of Two, no, make that One

By Rick Caldwell

When I finished building my RV-6 and moved from my garage to the Melbourne airport, I found space in a hangar with an RV-4 and a C182. BP owned the RV-4 and just down the way another RV-4. Owned by BW. After noticing both of them taxiing out together whenever they would fly, I asked BP about this. He said they go up for some formation flying and general all around rat racing. BP asked if I wanted to go. OK, sure. I thought he meant ride in his back seat. No, he said, get in my RV-6 and follow him. I did. What a blast that was following him through the sky. I was using 110% of my concentration to match my wing angle to his, out in front while trying to keep him in the same spot in my windscreen. At one point I saw the ground through the top of my canopy but I was so focused on locking onto his movements that it was later back on the ground that BP told me that was a barrel roll I noticed. My first one.

In no time, I was a regular on their flights. Every Saturday and Sunday, we went up as a flight of three. This went on for some years. There are many stories to be had but one in particular I'll relate here.

One Saturday BP couldn't make it out, so BW and I decided we would make it a flight of two and go down to the new restaurant at OBE. BW had just got his plane back from Heck who had replaced two cylinders. While his plane sat in the shop, the battery went almost dead. It barely turned over and made one blade but that is all it took and the Lycoming fired up.



BW was lead and I flew off his right wing. We had just past Blue Cypress Lake when I saw his wood prop for a second. Then I saw it again and I pulled out ahead. I throttled back to stay on point but then his prop totally stopped. BW started turning east. I knew there was only swamp and orange groves out east and knew of a grass strip behind a house out to the west. I told BW to follow me. In a couple miles, he saw the green strip and landed, coming to a stop midfield. He told me over the radio the weeds were tall and I told him I am not landing. While I circled, I asked him what happened. I asked if he switched fuel tanks. He did not. He looked in the selected tank and it was dry. The other side was full. BW said he thought for sure that Heck's engine repair caused the problem; he didn't swap tanks in the air to get the engine back to life. So now on the ground, he tries starting the engine. Dead battery. This time really dead. BW says he needs a hand prop.

I am still circling overhead and I see a pickup truck heading up his way. He walks down to the road and I see he is successful as the pickup is picking him up and driving out to the plane. I figure he has the situation under control so I head on back to MLB.



Some while later, BW comes taxiing in. He tells me the rest of the story. The pickup was full of Mexicans and none spoke English. He had no luck trying to convince them to prop his plane. Then the homeowner comes driving back there. He sees a plane parked in his backyard with a pickup truck next to it and a bunch of Mexicans milling about. He gets out of his car with a gun pointed right at BW's head. He thought for sure he caught a load of drugs being delivered. BW managed to calm him down without a shot fired. But couldn't talk him into propping his plane. So BW puts him in the seat and BW props the plane. It starts right up on that full tank of gas and BW flies on back to MLB.

I think back to those times and can honestly say those were the good ole days. How BP had the wherewithal to take a beginner pilot like me and somehow train me by osmosis or whatever he did to fly four feet off his wingtip just blows me away. I'll never forget those days. Bill Plunk, rest in peace. →