



**JEFF SKILES**

COMMENTARY / CONTRAILS



# Flight of the Fairchild

The 2014 EAA Sweepstakes airplane has a new home

BY JEFF SKILES

**WITH A PUSH OF** the starter button the propeller spins briskly as if the starter motor wishes to register on the tachometer with its efforts alone. Eight blades go by in a blur, and I throw the oversized magneto switch to both. The Ranger comes to life with a thunderous roar before settling to a muttering rumble as the throaty exhaust of the smooth-running inline-six engine announces the presence of something entirely unique on the ramp. Nothing sounds like a Ranger!

The mission today is a simple one: to deliver this airplane to its new home in Indiana. The EAA Sweepstakes Fairchild 24 will leave Oshkosh after 15 years of repose in the hangars bordering Pioneer Airport. This is a good development for such a noble aircraft; it deserves to return to the air.

Lou Frejlach and Marge Poeschl lovingly restored the Sweepstakes Fairchild in the 1990s and with only 12 hours showing on the tachometer since its makeover, they then donated it to the EAA AirVenture Museum. Here it has been displayed to the delight of visitors at Pioneer Airport, but now the Fairchild will fly once

again. As beautiful as this ship is, it was designed for flight, and it's time the Fairchild returned to its calling.

## ALOFT ONCE AGAIN

As I taxi to the runway the massive gear yields a very smooth ride. The pilot sits a bit like one would ride in a golf cart—rear end flat on the floor with your legs out in front of you. The position is only problematic on taxi. With a steerable tail wheel one might be inclined to use full rudder to make a taxi turn, but that pushes the opposite side rudder so close to you that it's almost impossible to stay off the brake. This often causes a confusing moment wondering why it won't turn left until you realize that you have the right

brake locked. I view it as a problem that will eventually work itself out as the new owner adjusts to this old aircraft.

These aerial conveyances from the 1930s are like that. No two of them fly exactly the same, even when they are of identical make and model. They have individual and varied personalities that demand the pilot conform to their way of thinking. Not a problem really as long as the owner realizes that this is a partnership of plane and pilot that sometimes requires cajoling and at other times a firm hand.

#### TAKING WING

The Ranger's rumble turns to a roar as I feed in the power, and then becomes a snarl as the propeller winds up pulling the Fairchild eagerly forward. Tracking the runway centerline is easy. The long, narrow snout gives a commanding view ahead even with the tail wheel on the ground. The elevator is

immediately effective, and the tail comes up in response to the massive chrome control sticks. Already it feels light on its wheels, and earlier than you can imagine the Fairchild is in the air, Carbon Cub-like performance from the 1930s.

As the Ranger claws for the sky I bring the throttle back to 25 inches of manifold pressure and concentrate as I try to decipher the confusing tachometer gauge. The readings wrap more than 360 degrees around the instrument. The Ranger is either at 500 rpm or 2500 rpm depending on your viewpoint. I'll guess the latter and bring it back to 2400. This at least has the needle pointed straight down on the gauge.

The Fairchild has a wood blade variable-pitch propeller, not a constant-speed prop like most of us are used to. Without a prop governor the pilot must continue to adjust the rpm manually as the prop winds up with increased speed.

#### ON COURSE

Lake Winnebago looms close under the left wing as I say goodbye to Oshkosh. The Fairchild settles on course for the western suburbs of Chicago as I follow a dogleg route around the Class B airspace. I might have wished for Florida or Maine, California would have been a grand adventure, but, alas a short two and a half-hour flight to Indiana will be my last experience with this aerial thoroughbred.

The feel of the Fairchild's controls are at once both sensitive and stable, a delight to fly. I don't commonly like to fly aircraft with control sticks. It just doesn't seem as natural to me as a yoke. The Fairchild is the exception however. The chromed control sticks topped by a walnut ball command light control pressures, and the highly sensitive—little movement, lots of effect—trim crank on the ceiling is more repositioned than turned. Why aren't more stabilizer trims like this?

**FIFTH ANNUAL**  
**Marvel of**  
**FLY-IN & EXPO**  
APRIL 10-11, 2015

*flight*

**Be our guest**

At the DeFuniak Springs Municipal Airport (54J)

**Exhibits**

**Pilot Seminars**

**Fun for the Entire Family**

**Aircraft Rides**

**Demonstrations**

**Aircraft Judging**

**SOUTH WALTON**  
FLORIDA

**Featuring the CAF Rise Above Traveling Exhibit**

Guest Speaker and Parade of Airplanes Announcer: The Legendary Sonny Everett

**www.MarvelofFlight.com**

The door handles and window cranks found in aircraft of this era came from the finest automobiles Detroit had to offer. Those used on the Fairchild were from the new 1937 Chryslers. There is no need to crank open the windows on this cold day, but summertime flying with your elbow hanging in the breeze can be pure joy.

Many of the instruments on the panel have the Fairchild winged horse logo etched on the glass, and in the metal castings for the rudders. The plethora of entry steps also bear the mark. There is no question that you are flying a Fairchild.

#### ASSEMBLY MANUAL?

Airplanes I have flown from this era often have, shall we say, limited documentation. If you are lucky, they come with a few thin pages euphemistically referred to as an operating and assembly manual with heavy emphasis on assembly. I don't know if airplanes were dropped on your front doorstep in a box back then, but I have never thought of "assembly" as part of my preflight responsibilities.

With these old airplanes you work with what you have, and it's best to carry a healthy suspicion for anything you might read or hear about the type in general. Each individual aircraft often evolves in mysterious fashion.

The manual only contains the most general information about flight anyway. In 1937, performance charts were still a long, long way in the future. My manual states that the Fairchild was "assembled" with 30-gallon gas tanks but is completely silent on how much gas the Ranger throbbing up ahead might devour at any power setting. It pays to be conservative while one becomes acquainted with such aircraft.

Weight and balance is an interesting computation in airplanes of the 1930s. The manufacturer would publish a gross weight as well as forward and aft CG limits, but then the manual often would be silent on how to calculate anything useful from this information. A cursory reference may be made to the datum point that was used, commonly the firewall or the leading edge of the upper or lower wing, but the rest is left to you. Well, you and a tape measure. You normally cannot see the gas tank location so you take a guess as to where it

might be and measure for the arm. The seated position of the passengers and any cargo is a little easier to visualize, but how do you figure the center of weight for all that oil in the Ranger's long snout? A little educated guesswork and longhand calculation can lead to a somewhat unscientific conclusion, but that's as good as it gets.

#### THE ARISTOCRAT

This is an early model Fairchild built in 1937. Only 25 Ranger-powered Fairchild 24s left the factory in that year compared to 100-some Warner-powered versions. The Ranger inline six-cylinder engine boasted anywhere between 145 and 200 hp depending on the Fairchild's model year. The Warner Super Scarab seven-cylinder radials were of either 145 or 165 hp. Interestingly, the Ranger-powered versions were less than 30 percent of total Fairchild production even though Ranger Engines was a division of Fairchild.

Both engine options led to an aircraft with a very distinctive appearance. Nobody ever confuses a Fairchild with any other aircraft. From 1932 until the last Fairchild 24 was assembled from leftover parts in 1948 more than 2,200 aircraft would be built.

#### TIME TRAVEL

As the Fairchild rounds Chicago I set course for Indiana, and not for the first time reflect on how inside this aircraft it is 1937, yet outside those glass windows it is 2014. Sometimes progress has brought little.

The Wright brothers first flew in 1903, yet only 34 years later this comparatively luxurious aircraft was available for anyone with the purse to afford such magnificence. The Fairchild was comfortable, reliable transportation whisking pilot and passengers to their destinations at 120 miles an hour. It had heat for the winter and roll-down windows to enjoy the warmth of summer. The plane could land and take off virtually anywhere, and could do it all with style. It would seem the years since have merely delivered incremental improvement on the Fairchild's wondrous form.

#### COMING TO EARTH

Landing is where the Fairchild truly excels. There are only two notches of flaps that are

deployed by a big chrome bar between the seats. These are split flaps providing more drag than lift, and the second notch brings forth the most magnificent aerodynamic howling sound that is best appreciated with the window open on a summer's eve.

Approaches should be made with the airplane at 60 knots or less because it will float forever. The airplane looks bit like a sophisticated Fieseler Storch, and it flies like one, too. With the speed properly controlled an easy flare can bring forth the most satisfying landings, but don't make the mistake of thinking it is all over merely because all three wheels are on the ground. The Fairchild is still doing what it does naturally—flying. The gear will continue to splay out as it slowly settles on those long struts.

#### GOODBYE, FAIRCHILD

My destination looms on the horizon, and it is time to say goodbye to this wondrous machine. I had at one time thought of being there when they drew the winner's name, with a check in hand to deliver an offer and make this airplane mine, so much do I think of the Fairchild. But today, one last landing will close out the 10.5 hours of flying time carefully noted in my logbook next to N16902.

Officially the time was spent in test flights and photo/video shoots for its sweepstakes role, but every moment was spent in amazement at the capabilities of this fine, old aircraft. The new owners await, and two better people could not have been selected. John and Marsha Fulton, EAA Lifetime 32139, have been to every EAA convention since it moved to Oshkosh and several in Rockford as well. They are true EAAers in the mold of Paul Poberezny and the early members who built this organization.

The Fairchild has found a new home with two people who will care for, appreciate, and most importantly fly this 77-year-old grand dame of flight. No more could the Fairchild hope for, no less does it deserve. **EAA**

---

**Jeff Skiles**, EAA Lifetime 336120, is an ATP and CFII-ME who has been flying as an airline and light airplane pilot for 38 years. He has owned a Cessna 140 and a Waco YOC and currently flies a Cessna 185. Jeff can be reached at [JeffreyBSkiles@gmail.com](mailto:JeffreyBSkiles@gmail.com).

# SPECIAL USA PROMOTION

Make It Your Deal. [Learn More.](#) >>>

803.726.8884 • [info@stemme.com](mailto:info@stemme.com)

[www.stemme.info](http://www.stemme.info)

**stemme** 



Photo: Evelyn Küpper