

Making the pilgrimage: A '50 Flags to Kitty Hawk' pilot recounts her journey

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Thursday, Oct. 2, dawned bright and clear in the east Tennessee mountains — a beautiful autumn day for flying, although a bit breezy. It was a choice day to begin my flag-bearing flight in my 1948 Piper Vagabond for the Experimental Aircraft Association's (EAA) "50 Flags to Kitty Hawk."

My tube and fabric Vagabond is powered by a Continental 85, with only a 12-gallon fuel tank to quench its thirst. Although it is a "modern" airplane, it aptly symbolizes the vintage era of aviation when engines were hand-propped to start, aircraft didn't rely upon avionics and radios, and only basic flight instruments (compass, needle and ball, airspeed indicator, altimeter, tachometer, oil temperature and pressure gauge) were commonly used.

The weather was an especially important consideration for scheduling the flight. Several cold fronts had recently vanquished the hazy, murky visibility of late summer, and the next several days promised excellent visibility for the flight.

That afternoon, I departed the Johnson County Airport in Mountain City, Tenn., with the official state flag and a signed proclamation from Gov. Bredesen, which declared a "50 Flags to Kitty Hawk Day" throughout the state. Accompanying me was Denny Moore, owner of Roan Valley Aviation, the FBO at Johnson County. Members of my EAA Chapter 1136 volunteered their time to staff the FBO, and, along with local Chapter 442, generously contributed support for the occasion.

We expected turbulence over the gold- and scarlet-tinged tree-covered mountains due to the windy conditions, and certainly found it. But the winds were in our favor; our groundspeed was around 92 mph, and visibility was excellent. Our first stop, after nearly two hours and a 163 sm leg, was at Sanford Airport in North Carolina.

The following day, we flew 132 sm in 1.7 hours from Sanford to Plymouth County Airport, North Carolina. After refueling and checking weather once more, as well as calling Milagros Flores, the First Flight Centennial events coordinator with the National Park Service, to let her know our estimated arrival time, we departed Plymouth and flew the remaining 63 miles to First Flight Airport at Kitty Hawk in 1.1 hours.

Along the way, as the Albemarle Sound passed below our left wingtip, lingering evidence of Hurricane Isabel, including damaged docks and downed trees, was readily visible. Fortunately, the storm didn't damage the Wright Monument at the National Park, nor its surrounding facilities.

A cheerful National Park Service representative, Trevor Burnsed, was awaiting our arrival as we taxied onto the ramp. I presented him with the proclamation, and the Tennessee state flag, which had previously flown over the capitol in Nashville. Following the presentation, the flag was raised and flown at the Wright Brothers National Memorial site.

It was an absolutely gorgeous blue-sky day, with small white cumulus clouds overhead. While at Kitty Hawk, we enjoyed looking at the exhibits, and strolling along the location where the Wright Brothers' first historic powered flight occurred on Dec. 17, 1903.

Later that afternoon, we hopped in the Vagabond and flew the seven short miles to Dare County Airport at Manteo, where we tucked the Vagabond inside a hangar to rest for the night, after her long and successful journey. The Vagabond performed very well throughout the nearly five hours of flight, covering 358 sm from Johnson County to Kitty Hawk.

I was thrilled to have had the privilege to be included in this historic celebration of the first 100 years of powered flight. It was a great honor to represent the "Volunteer State" and its notable early aviation figures, including barnstormer Stacy Greer, early mechanic Phoebe Omlie, aircraft designer Walter Beech, and flight instructor extraordinaire Evelyn Bryan Johnson. And, on a personal note, it was especially rewarding to make this first long cross-country journey in my Vagabond, after working on her ground-up restoration for nearly seven years.