

Unexpected Destinations

Where you've arrived may not be where you've landed.

~ by Kerry Fores ~

The sales brochure promised a low cost, great performing, quick-building airplane. During the airplane's gestation period in my garage, which included regular check-ups by my EAA tech counselor as well as the airplane's designers, nothing unusual was noted. The airplane was born 98% to plans, the FAA signed the birth certificate, and I had an airplane. Flight testing went well and I believed I had built exactly what the sales brochure had promised. But about a year after my first flight, with 100 flight-hours logged, the truth of what I had built was revealed.

Time to Fly

On an unusually warm February morning in 2005 I settled into the cockpit of my Sonex, "Metal Illness," and flew to Rantoul National Elliot Airport in Urbana, Illinois. Rantoul National Elliot was known by thousands of airmen and women, including many of the famed Tuskegee Airmen, as Chanute Air Force Base. Chanute was one of the many air bases that closed in the late '80s and early '90s. I had driven to Chanute in 1986, while it was still an active air base, to visit one of my Air Force buddies for a weekend. That trip took six or seven hours but on this particular morning Chanute's shrunken runways appeared over the cowl of my airplane less than two hours after leaving Oshkosh, Wisconsin.

Some of the former hangars and most of the aircraft on the base at the time of its closure formed the foundation of the Octave Chanute Aerospace Museum. Exploring the

hangars and seeing the same aircraft that were on active duty during my visit in 1986 was eerie. Somehow, during the two-hour flight south, my Sonex transported me 20 years back in time. Nearby I heard the low rumble of a V8 engine but I didn't dare look. I was afraid I'd see my friend and I drive by in his Corvette-powered Nova, on our way to his home elsewhere on the base.

My visit to the museum was necessarily short, as I had to beat the early February

sunset home. Arriving back in Oshkosh that evening I was anxious to check the memory card of my camera. Had I really flown from 2005 to 1986 and back in seven hours? The images were there; it was real. I had built more than an airplane – I had built a time machine!

A Change of Seasons

My next experience with time travel in the nimble Sonex occurred in April 2006, when I flew to Lakeland, Florida for the annual Sun and Fun fly-in. Unlike my flight to Rantoul, this trip became a trip forward, not back, in time. As the sun and "Metal Illness" rose together into the Wisconsin sky on a chilly spring morning, it never occurred to me that six flight-hours later she'd deliver me to a sun-baked ramp in summer. Anyone watching from the windows of the air-conditioned FBO in southern Georgia saw me quickly strip off the layers of my flight gear – bomber jacket, fleece and sweatshirt – so I'd blend in with the locals and not attract attention to my time-traveling self. One week later "Metal Illness" reversed the process and in the span of eight hours delivered me safely back to April and Wisconsin, where I waited four months for the weather I had left that morning to catch up to me.

Past and Current Lives Collide

In July of 2006 a clear spot on my calendar coincided with Minot Air Force Base's nearly annual Northern Neighbor's Day Air Show, so I made plans to return, if only



*My GPS ticked off
the miles, but not
the years.*

A view from the cockpit of a B-52 bomber looking out at a setting sun over a dark landscape. The sun is a bright, glowing orb on the horizon, casting a long, dark shadow of the aircraft's wing and fuselage across the sky. The sky is a mix of dark blue and black, with some lighter patches near the horizon. The overall mood is somber and reflective.

briefly, to North Dakota and the memories it held for me. You see, in 1983 the Air Force assigned a much younger version of me to Minot to put my recently acquired skills as a B-52 weapons loader to use.

I was 19 years old then, and enjoying more freedom, yet more responsibility, than any other time in my life. My days in Minot were spent defending the country, and my nights and weekends were spent in typical GI fashion: playing with cars, drinking and chasing girls. Airplanes were also a part of the equation: renting a Cessna from Pietsch Flying Service, marveling as B-52s worked the pattern with their peculiar nose-down climb attitude, and watching F-106s of the 5th FIS ride their long flame into the night

sky. Everyone who has survived young adulthood knows that the memories created at that age are carried forever. Some call them the good ol' days, and I've yet to meet anyone that wouldn't "go back," if they could, and relive some part of that period of their life. My excuse to go back was the Minot Air Force Base air show.

On the Thursday prior to the air show, "Metal Illness" and I departed Oshkosh at 5 PM for our evening's destination of Fargo, North Dakota three flight-hours away. We leveled off under a thin overcast at 6500 feet and followed the flaxen sun toward the western horizon. We've all seen enough movies to know that time travel requires some type of vehicle, or pod, and a weather phenomenon to open the door to the "other side." The sudden clearing of the

*The Setting sun was my compass west
to Fargo and, as it turned out, 1984*

sky 20 miles east of Fargo should have been my clue something was up, but I was too focused on the arrival and landing to give the weather change more notice than to welcome the additional sunlight. The 1985 courtesy car I was offered after securing "Metal Illness" at Hector International Airport for the night should have been another clue something was afoot.

A few blocks south of Hector International Airport is North Dakota State University. In the fall of 1984, while stationed at Minot, I spent several weekends in Fargo with my girlfriend who was attending NDSU. Like most other young loves this was destined to end, but not before many lasting memories were created. After checking in to my hotel and getting dinner, I drove to the campus to see if the memories were real or if I had

only imagined them. I walked around the familiar campus, stood outside the dorm that served as my weekend home, and found that the memories were indeed very real. Were some of the fresh oil stains in the parking lot from the Triumph I drove in 1984? Time travel can leave one tired, and melancholy, so I returned to my hotel room and its poor cable reception and broken toilet.

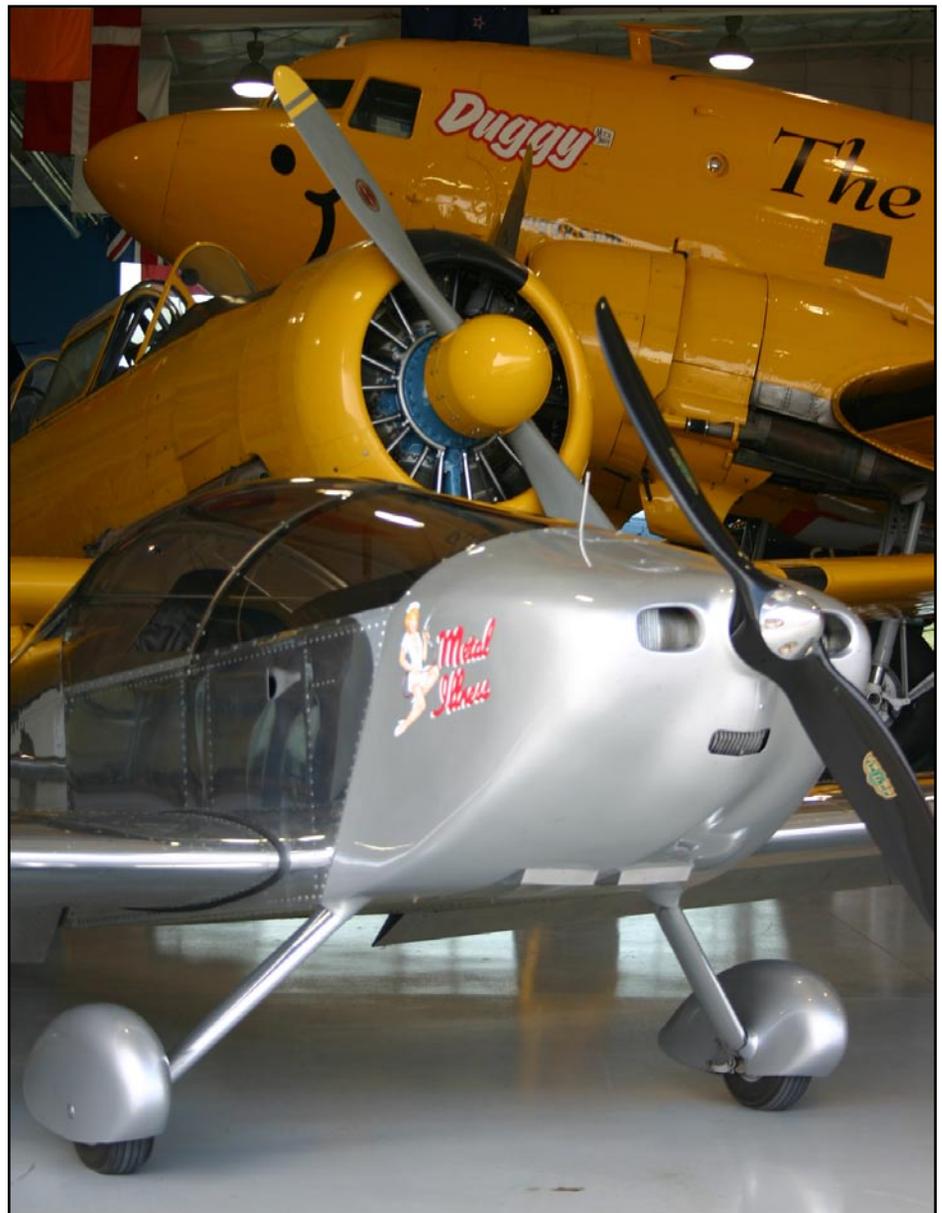
Friday morning I returned to the Fargo Air Museum where "Metal Illness" had spent a restful night listening to war stories and other tales of high adventure from her temporary roommates, including a genuine Mitsubishi Zero. The day promised to be like so many other summer days I had experienced in North Dakota: hot and windy. Shortly after noon I taxied to the active runway and waited while two "Happy

Hooligan" F-16s from the North Dakota ANG departed in front of me. I requested a similar departure with an unrestricted climb to 35,000 feet, but instead was cleared for a right turn westward and a climb to 4500 feet, where the outside air temperature was still 94 degrees.

A strong headwind hampered my progress west so I made the best of my reduced ground speed by descending to do some sightseeing and play a game of "find the missile silo." I never spotted any silos but I found the crossroad on Highway 52, just north of Jamestown where I ran out of gas on a drive home 23 years earlier and spent the night trying to sleep in a convertible, on a dark highway, next to a cemetery. I followed Highway 52 to Minot, picking out familiar landmarks as I flew and noting that

"Metal Illness" spent a restful night under the watchful eye and contagious smile of "Duggy", the Fargo Air Museums well-known DC-3.

Doors to my past: NDSU's Sevrinson Hall, below, and my dorm at Minot Air Force Base, bottom. Both were unchanged after 23 years.



"Time travel can leave one tired, and melancholy..."

every cluster of trees on the Great Plains marks the location of a farmhouse.

After landing at Minot International Airport I taxied to a ramp from which I had flown in my previous life, but that flying was in a rented Cessna, not my homebuilt Sonex. I picked up a rental car and placed a call to the organizer of the Northern Neighbor's Day Air Show. He agreed to vouch me onto the base so I could take my own driving tour of a place I called home half a lifetime ago.

Once through the main gate security check I drove directly to my old dorm, passing familiar sights on the way. A T-33 mounted on a post was still guarding the

edge of the golf course, and the neighborhood of base housing I was most familiar with looked unchanged. It had a worn look to it in 1984, and appeared little had been done in the past two decades to change that. If new paint had been applied, it was of the same faded shades of green and yellow.

Driving past the auto hobby center/car wash I was sure I would have found part of the sponge I used to wash my car in 1983 if I had taken the time to look. And what of my old dorm? Updates had been made in some areas: the large windows were replaced by smaller, energy efficient units; and the dual-occupancy rooms I endured during the cold war, with gang showers on each floor, had

been converted into single-occupant rooms with individual bathrooms. It's the new Air Force, I guess. However, the main entry was just as I remembered it, right down to the 5th Munitions Squadron welcome mat and the beat-up, faded brown doors. Hearing those doors swing open and closed unlocked another vault of memories for me.

Just 24 hours earlier I was working and playing in July 2006 and Minot was two decades behind me. But that changed when I pressed the "Start" button in the Sonex. Suddenly it's Friday night in the dorm and I'm looking for familiar faces with whom to eat dinner, cruise the parks, and catch a late movie at the mall. And out on the flight line 12 of the 24 B-52s present may still have had traces of my DNA on their bomb bay doors.

When I left the base early that evening and drove back to the city of Minot I was glad to see "Metal Illness" still waiting on the airport's ramp. She was my assurance that I had a way back to 2006. That evening, driving around Minot by myself, I learned a few things: memories are lonely places to visit alone, and cell phones can bridge decades. I parked the rented van on a hill that overlooks the city of Minot and placed a phone call from 1984 to 2006. The sweet voice of my wife, Anne, answered. I felt caught between decades, between lives.

Saturday's return to Minot Air Force Base was by Sonex for the day long air show. While engrossed in the experience of displaying "Metal Illness" alongside some of the greatest weapons in the Air Force's inventory, a warm wind stirred the smell of hydraulic fluid, exhaust, diesel fuel and Jet A with the sound of generators and whining turbines into a potent sensory concoction that whisked me back to my days on that very flight line, loading nuclear weapons into the cavernous bomb bays of B-52s. I lingered in those memories, eyes closed, allowing long forgotten snippets of my past to resurface. The day was bitter sweet.

Home to Oshkosh...and 2006

Sunday morning I rose early to a clear sky and an unusually light breeze. Within 30 minutes of rising I had "Metal Illness" packed, prepped, and the GPS programmed for my return to Oshkosh. I took off on runway three-one and made a left turn to the south. My plan was to locate a little pond



North Dakota's landscape is timeless, from the expansive agricultural areas dotted by farmhouses, to the undeveloped central region defined by thousands of water-filled potholes.





"Metal Illness" enjoyed a parking spot next to a B-52H at Minot Air Force Base's 2006 Northern Neighbor's Day Air Show.



called Rice Lake, south of Minot, but immediately I found myself in danger of entering a low, broken layer of clouds. Where did they come from so suddenly? I amended my flight plan and continued the climbing left turn to an easterly heading to remain clear of the clouds. Climbing eastward I found myself on top of the broken layer of clouds that swirled in ways I had never seen from above. The clouds slowly thickened and I chose to descend below them before I lost sight of the ground, giving up the clear sky and smooth air I had been enjoying.

Though the cloud layer was only a few hundred feet thick, it was low and obscured the sky. Beneath the clouds I was in a different world: a wispy gray world with muted light and muted colors. Though not a fan of scud running, I proceeded forward with a sharp eye out for towers, a sense that the glow on the distant horizon was the edge of the cloud cover, and the knowledge that central North Dakota has no threatening terrain. I traced the western edge of the Devil's Lake MOA southward, and then took a bead on Jamestown, passing over mile after mile of water-filled craters and potholes with not a house in sight.

My flight path east took me well south of Fargo. Only their fading radio chatter and the passing landmarks on my sectional marked its presence. Shortly after leaving North Dakota the clouds disappeared just as quickly as they had appeared. I landed for fuel in Alexandria, Minnesota under a perfectly blue sky. The date on the fuel receipt read "7/9/2006."

The weather and my Sonex had again worked their magic, combining nature



Above, a 19-year old Kerry Fores performs a Critical Circuits Check on a B-52 prior to a weapons loading operation. Minot, 1983.

Left the wispy tentacles of time travel appeared as soon as I departed Minot for the flight home.



The weather and my Sonex had again worked their magic...bringing me "back" to the present.

with machine and bringing me "back" to the present. In the movies, time travel happens instantly, often with stunning effects. In real life it takes some time – two hours and 42 minutes on this particular morning – and goes mostly unnoticed until exiting the aircraft. Behind me, to the west and into the weather, lay my past. In front of me, to the east and into the sun, lay my future, my family and my home. I continued eastward.

The project in your basement, garage or hangar may look like an airplane, and there is likely nothing in the plans identifying where to install the now famous "flux capacitor", but I can assure you, if flown properly, it will take you places that aren't shown on any sectional. I never imagined that while slipping the bonds of Earth in my Sonex, I would also be slipping the bonds of time.

Kerry Fores scratch built his Sonex, affectionately named "Metal Illness", prior to joining Sonex Aircraft. Kerry logs nearly 100 hours per year in his Sonex flying cross-countries, aerobatics, and patrolling the local lakes and waterways for U-boats. You can reach Kerry at kerry@sonexaircraft.com.



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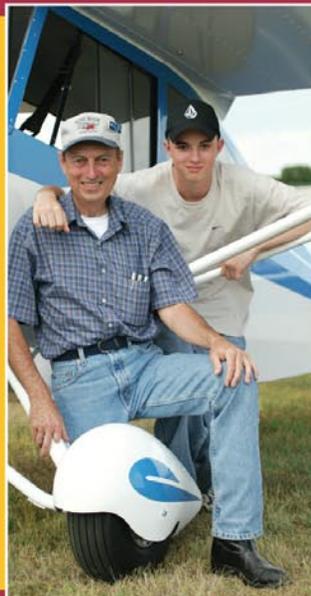
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