

M.I.T. Flying Club in 1948 – 1949

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Having just become an octogenarian, I think that it is high time to respond to the Tech Flying Club's request for historical information¹. I was president of the M.I.T. Flying Club, Inc., in 1948, when we operated four Cessna airplanes with about 80 members. This article is a personal supplement to the outstanding article *The Institute Fly-Boys* by Hubert Flomenhoft, in the February 1949 issue of *The Tech Engineering News*, pp.132-146, available from the Tech Flying Club¹ (TFC). I want to acknowledge the valuable resource at *The Tech* newspaper website² where my memory was refreshed by searching the 1946-1946 issues for "flying club" occurrences.

I arrived at M.I.T. in September 1946 fresh from Chattanooga High School at age 18. President Karl Compton reported on October 8, 1946, that the enrollment was 5000, the most ever, and that 60 percent of those were veterans just back from WWII. Single student housing was scarce, so the Institute purchased the war surplus Building 22 (former Radiation Laboratory) from the government. That temporary plywood two-story building housed 600 students, in my case 16 men in one large room. It was located at the site³ of the present Building 26, Compton Laboratories. My classmate Fred Newell, Jr. relieved part of my discomfort; his father was Executive Head of the Aeronautical Engineering Department. Their family home was in nearby Lincoln, MA, and I was often invited for weekends, especially holidays. My Deep South background and their New England charm entertained one and all. Tuition for nine months in 1946-1947 was \$700.

I had begun flying lessons nearly two years before and had a private pilot license and 85 hours in Piper Cubs, Aeronca Champions, and acrobatic Stearman PT-17 and Fairchild PT-19 aircraft when entering M.I.T. I heard that the HUMIT (Harvard University M.I.T.) Flying Club had existed a year earlier, but it was not recommended. The M.I.T. Glider Club (aka A.E.S, Aeronautical Engineering Society) approached me in October 1946 with the idea of sending me to Elmira, NY, to become a certified glider instructor. However, their two Franklin and Schweitzer gliders were launched by cable reel on an ancient truck chassis, so I decided that I would stay with powered aircraft. I occasionally flew rented Fairchild, Piper, Aeronca, and Stinson aircraft from the Bedford and Norwood airports from October 1946 through May 1947.

The new Tech Flying Club (TFC) had its first meeting on November 27, 1947. It had been formed under another name in 1946, now was recognized as a Class B activity by the Institute Committee, and was a fully insured corporation. It had a war surplus Aeronca L-3 liaison airplane, which was in very poor condition. I was told that the entire leading edge of the wings would deform and needed considerable repair.



Aeronca L-3 liaison plane in 1947 TFC

I joined the TFC and ran for President against John Sorrels, who touted his finance background. We started 1948 with me as President and John as Treasurer, Richard (Dick) White and Leonard (Buck) Nippe as VPs, Edward (Jake) Jacobsen as Operations, and Joseph (Joe) Day as Secretary. The first order of business was to junk the Aeronca L-3, which I only flew once for 10 minutes in March 1948.

The replacement was a used 1946 Cessna 120 (N76546) with 100 hours total time; it cost \$1500 and I flew it back to our base at Bedford (Hanscom Field) from a small town in western Massachusetts in February 1948. We had 38 club members who were M.I.T. students and staff. On May 3, 1948, Buck Nippe flew the C120 into Briggs Field³ on the west side of Massachusetts Avenue, taxied down Memorial Drive, and displayed it in



Day (L) and Cuthbert by 1946 Cessna 120



Briggs Field is just above the wing tip at right.



Stopping morning traffic on Memorial Drive

front of the M.I.T. dome. On May 7, 1948, we bought a used Cessna 140 (N89028), using a \$1000 loan from the Institute Committee and our expansion to 68 members. The 140 had more equipment than the 120, especially a radio, soundproofing, a landing light, and flight instruments. In October 1948 we had 70 members and a waiting list, so we bought another used Cessna 140 (N2489N), this one with a direction finder and even more complete instrument panel. In December the Institute Committee allotted \$300 for the club expansion.



L-R: Nippe, Jacobsen, Cuthbert, & Sorrels



Instrument panel of N2489N

There were only two flying incidents worth mentioning. On October 22, 1948, I had returned from Maine to our Bedford airport base at midday in C140 N89028 with Dick White waiting to take it on to New York City. The engine just didn't sound right to me over the forbidding Maine woods, so I got a Bedford mechanic in the right seat, he approved the run up, and we took off on a test flight. We only had climbed to about 70 feet when the engine quit cold and I landed long onto the grass overrun but OK otherwise. The problem was a stuck valve. Also, a club member landed N89028 in a farm field in western Massachusetts, but apparently it was recovered OK. I have pictures of the farm field and my pointing to the location on a map, but other details escape me, including the reason for the emergency landing.

Our club instructor was Charles (Charlie) E. Richbourg, an aeronautical graduate student, married with two children living in Westgate veterans housing on the west end of the M.I.T. campus. Charlie had flown Navy F6F Hellcat fighters near the end of WWII. I flew with him a few times, and he was outstandingly calm, conservative, and personable, and a great instructor. In early 1954 while I was a Navy pilot, I heard that Charlie had taken a test pilot job with Convair in San Diego flying the F2Y Sea Dart. That didn't fit my image of good old cautious Charlie Richbourg. Sadly, on November 4, 1954, he was killed in the Sea Dart flying low over San Diego bay before the press, wife Margaret, and his two children. I miss him to this very day.



Cuthbert and Richbourg in TFC office



Water-based Convair F2Y Sea Dart

TFC was moved to Beverly airport North of Boston in December 1948 for members' convenience in those days. (It was moved back to Bedford in February 1951.) As described in the The Institute Fly-Boys article cited above, TFC presented an air show at Beverly on January 8, 1948, attended by a Tech crowd of 300. Charlie Richbourg and his Navy Reserve squadron mate Charles Miller brought in Navy Hellcat and F4U fighters, respectively. VP Dick White had been dating a Wellesley girl who was a member of their Flying Club. Since they had no airplanes, I was immediately apprehensive when Dick invited them as our special guests, bobby



Wellesley Flying Club girls on Hellcat

sox, mink coats and all. I politely declined to consider any arrangement that had our already saturated flight capacity made even more complicated. After all, we seldom saw girls at Tech where there were only 69 among the 5000 students in 1946.

TFC leased a Cessna 170 four-place airplane (N4172V) for our members to fly from Beverly; having four planes was a big advantage for about 80 members. In February 1949 the Navy decided to dump its very old and ugly J2F-6 amphibian airplanes, and they were free for non-profit entities. So we ordered two, removed the wings, towed them up the highway to Beverly airport, and showed the reassembled beasts to the public on May 3, 1949. To this day I have no idea what we had planned to do with them or where they are now. There was a second fly-in to M.I.T.'s Briggs Field in February 1949, again piloted by then President Buck Nippe, who taxied up Vassar Street and down Massachusetts Avenue to the M.I.T. Aeronautical building for display. Alfred Paashaus, the newly elected TFC VP, made all those arrangements.



Navy J2F-6 Grumman Duck amphibian

I was out of office at semester's end in January 1949; one reason was that my Chattanooga Draft Board had indicated that I was about to be inducted into the Army. The TFC had often heard rumbles from the Tech lawyers that our name, incorporated or not, might get the Institute sued if there were a major disaster. So we took M.I.T. President Karl T. Compton out to see our Beverly airport operation. While riding in the Tech limousine, I asked his advice on my choice of Navy or Air Force flight training, and he recommended the Navy, since the Air Force recently had been separated from the U.S. Army. I took his advice, volunteered for the 16-month Naval Aviation Cadet pilot training program, and reported to Pensacola, Florida, in April 1949. I flew many different heavier- and lighter-than-air craft during the following 7½ years on active duty and 2½ years weekend Naval Reserve duty. Only after the first four years of constant Navy flying did my passion for flying reach a rational level. I went on to fly a total of 51 years, quitting at age 67 by selling my twin-engine Cessna 310 airplane⁴.

My passion for flying while at Tech led me to fly TFC planes 195 hours from February 1948 through January 1949. I took two 20-hour cross-country flights to Chattanooga and environs in June and December 1948 between semesters. Club member and Associate Physics Professor Clark Goodman asked me to fly him down to the Brookhaven Atomic Laboratory on Long Island, NY, on February 1, 1949, returning the next day for a 3-hour 20-minute round trip. Only recently when I Googled Clark did I see the declassified papers concerning the atomic studies he was then performing. I also made several trips to the Baltimore/DC area, to visit the only girl friend I had in those days. Other than that, most flights were short, even just 10 minutes, to check maintenance or to take airplanes

to other repair shops. I flew about every four or five days on average, and in hindsight that may have contributed to my poor grades at Tech. The dozen or so close TFC friends were a very important part of my life, and there were only a few others while I was at Tech.

On a brief professional note, I attended Georgia Tech from 1956 through 1958, receiving a BSEE with Highest Honors. Then my employer Collins Radio Company sent me to Southern Methodist University (S.M.U.) at company expense for MSEE and Ph.D. degrees from 1966 until 1980.

I can only repeat what career Air Force jet pilot and my brother-in-law, Col. Bill Strang, said upon retiring: "I am not sad its over, I am just glad that it happened."

Best wishes to the Tech Flying Club.

Hyperlinks in this article:

- (1) <http://web.mit.edu/mitflying/index.html>
- (2) <http://www-tech.mit.edu/>
- (3) <http://whereis.mit.edu/map-jpg>
- (4) http://web.mac.com/trcpep/TRCPEP_Personal/Welcome.html