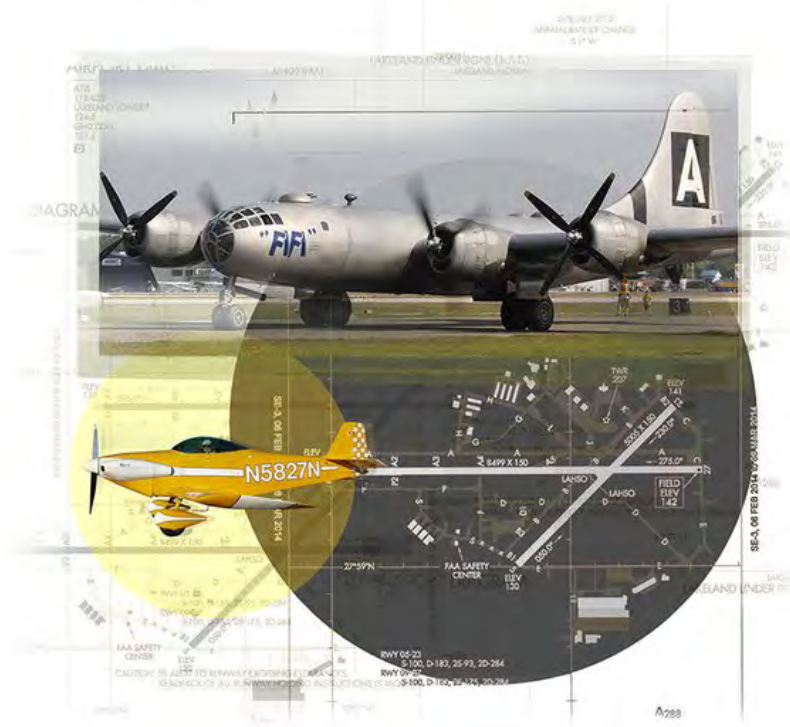


Chased by a B-29 Over Florida

A close encounter with Fifi at the Fun Fly-In Expo

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Fifi was the only B-29 still flying in 2012, when the author, in an RV-1, had a close encounter over Lakeland, Florida. (Photo-Illustration by Théo)

Lakeland Tower, RV-1, out of the flyby pattern for landing on Two Seven Left.”

“Roger RV-1, continue your crosswind and fly downwind as close as you can. Your traffic is a B-29 on a 45 entry to the downwind.”

“Roger the B-29, I have him in sight. Do you want me ahead of him or behind?”

“Definitely ahead!”

It was day three of the 2012 Sun ‘n Fun Fly-In Expo at Lakeland, Florida, and I was flying the first aircraft designed and built by Richard “Van” VanGrunsven. The RV-1 was created in 1965 and served as the prototype for the RV-3, Van’s first all-metal airplane and first kit. Over the decades his prototype had changed hands several times, and recently a group of dedicated RV enthusiasts had restored it to flying condition. Because I was the one who found the airplane and persuaded a benefactor to fund its restoration, I had the honor of flying it to Sun ‘n Fun. The organizers invited me to take it up in the Flyby Showcase, wherein a handful of aircraft are permitted to fly a few passes over the crowd before the airshow proper begins.

During the big fly-in week, Lakeland's main east-west runway is in constant use for departures, so the parallel taxiway north of it is pressed into service as a second runway; aircraft arriving via visual flight rules and large aircraft arrivals are typically directed to this temporary alternate. Volunteers with batons direct aircraft from their parking spots toward the takeoff threshold, and the taxi routes can be long and circuitous.

I had the 12:10 p.m. time slot. Flying just before my RV-1 was a replica Curtiss pusher; following immediately after, a pair of Cessna 195s. We were all instructed to be at the staging point 10 minutes early so we could be flagged into the flyby pattern for takeoff.

We quickly discovered the air boss had failed to tell the ground handlers where the Showcase airplanes were supposed to go for takeoff. Regular arrivals and departures were going on all the time, and almost all arriving aircraft simply needed to be directed to a parking spot. But when the ground handlers encountered one that needed to go elsewhere, they had no radios to ask for instructions.

The RV-1 has a tip-over canopy, and with the engine running, it can't be opened safely; a gust could cause it to be damaged or even ripped off the airplane. But with it closed, I had no way to talk to the ground handlers. I'd have to wave them over—behind the wing, obviously—crack the canopy, and yell over the engine, "FLYBY PATTERN STAGING!" Most of them had no idea what I was talking about. I had a map, though, so if they didn't know where to send me, I simply began to turn toward where I thought I needed to go and let them catch up. No one wanted to argue with my spinning prop.

Being pushy with wand-wavers on foot is one thing; playing chicken with a B-29 is another. There in front of me on the taxiway was Fifi—until very recently the only B-29 in the world still flying. Its four R-3350 engines were roaring away as they prepared for takeoff. While the pilots of the big bomber went through its complicated preflight, the departing airplanes in front of me were being waved around its left wingtip to takeoff position.

I was likewise waved around, despite the fact that I was, as instructed, 10 minutes early for my flyby slot. I knew I was to stay where I was.

Using hand signals familiar to both pilots and New York City cab drivers, I conveyed to the ground controllers that I didn't want to take off right away. As soon as I was clear of the taxiway, the big relic of World War II began its roll onto the runway for departure. I shut the RV-1 down and cracked the canopy. As I crawled from the cockpit, a golf cart approached and a Sun 'n Fun official hopped out. He apologized for the confusion. We watched the Curtiss pusher appear on the taxiway, right on time.

Then the official's radio crackled with news: A pair of Marine F/A-18s were inbound. Since no one knew what they would be doing, the airshow man told me my flyby was canceled: The F/A-18s would get my spot to preen for the crowd. I watched the two jets on short final for landing on the main runway. This didn't look like a flyby to me. As they rolled to a stop instead of going around, I gave the official a questioning look: Fly or go home?

Consulting his radio, the man in the cart looked startled. Then he met my eye and twirled a finger over his head. I was airborne in less than a minute.

On the discrete radio frequency, I was told to keep it tight and quick, stay on the briefed path, and expect four passes. They went fast: The RV-1 can fly about 170 mph, and since I was descending from a high downwind leg to the 500-foot pattern altitude for the show pass, I was pushing that more than a little.

It was fun to show off the little yellow airplane. On pass three I gave the crowd a side-slip, and on pass four followed up with a vigorous wing-rock.

"RV-1, if you'll give us a nice tight base leg, we've got a B-29 on a 45 [degree angle] for the downwind, and we want you ahead of him. We'll extend the B-29 to get you down and clear." The tower was making them burn that much more fuel and giving me priority? They'd rather have me on the ground than rolled up in that thing's wake, I figured—less paperwork that way. "And if you can touch down long and make the turnoff at Foxtrot, we'd appreciate it!"

Restoring the RV-1 had required a lot of new parts, mostly donated by RV vendors who wanted to honor Van, the man without whom their businesses would have no business. One builder had offered a set of wheels that he had removed from his Cessna 180. Their big, dual-puck brakes were extremely effective in the RV-1. In the dozen or so hours I had flown the airplane, I'd adapted to these sensitive brakes; I knew how much room I needed to stop. I could keep my speed up until getting almost up to Taxiway Foxtrot, then slam on the binders to get out of the B-29's way.

I'd forgotten that since my last flight, we'd changed the brake pedal geometry, altering the length of some linkages to better fit taller pilots but reducing the total amount of braking force available. This was a good thing, because it gave the airplane the appropriate braking power for its size.

Or rather, it would have been a good thing on any other day. I knew that the big bomber was probably crossing the airport fence as I was chopping the throttle and planting the tailwheel on the ground for the hard braking I had planned. I slid my feet up the pedals and pushed hard. I imagined myself sliding past my designated turnoff, then spinning around to see four monster propellers attached to four big radial engines attached to a huge wing on a giant cylindrical fuselage, all tracking straight at me.

With the stick all the way back to keep the tail from coming up, I let off the right pedal just a little and stomped on the left, steering the tailwheel to kick me into a left turn. I aimed for the near corner of Foxtrot. I felt the left wheel get a bit light, but the wing stayed down. When I'd made the corner, I set up for an arcing turn that would take me almost to the grass on the far side, using all the pavement available. With a few chirps from the tires, I came to a stop well clear of the runway. A moment later, the shadow of the big B-29 rolled past my tail.

"Where's your parking sign?" one of the volunteers mouthed at me. I waved him over for yet another shouting match: "Show plane parking!" I barked. He shrugged and pointed.

"But be quick," he added. "There's a B-29 that's going to be coming from the opposite direction real soon!"

Tell me something I don't know, I thought. But I kept quiet.