

BEECHCRAFT HERITAGE MUSEUM

Photo by EAA Vintage Aircraft Association



The World's Finest Staggerwing?

By Wade McNabb

What happens when you combine over 35 years of experience in rebuilding antique aircraft with a passionate owner who wants a best-in-breed example? A 2013 AirVenture award-winning 1947 Beechcraft Model G17S. Michael Stanko, owner of Gemco Aviation Services in Youngstown, Ohio, and James Hawkes, owner of NC80315, partnered on the restoration of arguably the world's finest Staggerwing.

Our story starts several years ago when Gemco restored this same aircraft, c/n B-14, for William G. "Bill" Quinn. Later, the aircraft was shipped to New Zealand owner Gerald Grocott. After flying the aircraft for many enjoyable hours, the time came to sell it. Mr. Grocott decided the market was better in the United States, so ZK-MOE was crated and shipped back to Gemco. Unfortunately, damage occurred during the voyage.

Mr. Hawkes acquired the airplane and commissioned Gemco to restore it to its former glory, and then some.

Jim's vision was the ultimate cross-country aircraft with an impressive equipment list, including a Garmin G600 with synthetic vision, a complete Garmin radio stack, a JPI graphic engine analyzer, and a Century autopilot. Range is well over seven hours and exceeds eight hours at economy power settings. Therefore, the interior

was outfitted with extremely comfortable seats and modifications to the ventilation system.

The Beech "Bird" stripe defines the Staggerwing and is the most misapplied trim scheme in all of aviation history. The factory used two different versions: pre-war (1937-1941), and post-war (1946-1949). With the majority of Staggerwings produced during the Second World War, no "Bird" stripes were applied, only military paint schemes. When the U.S. government released the Model 17 into civilian hands, owners attempted to copy the factory's pre-war trim schemes and failed miserably. In 1946 Beech released the final version of the Model 17, known as the G17S. Included

with its numerous refinements over the previously produced D17S was a new "Bird" stripe.

Gemco had an original "Bird" panel from a different Staggerwing. Subtle changes in the sheet metal between the two aircraft required careful measurement and several sets of eyes. One full day was spent laying out the stripe, with another full day of masking before the fuselage entered the paint booth for its gold and black stripes. This is just one example of literally hundreds of decisions that were carefully researched and heavily weighed before moving forward.


First flight occurred on July 9th and was extremely successful. Jim's flight instructor, vintage aircraft men-

tor, traveling companion, and good friend Randy Opat conducted the test flight according to Michael's carefully scripted procedures. The aircraft was rigged to perfection, and all systems functioned within defined parameters.

The first long cross-country was the trip from Youngstown-Elser (4G4) to Oshkosh. When I first spoke to Jim at AirVenture, he was grinning like a kid on Christmas morning. The Staggerwing attracted its share of attention, including multiple visits from the judges. The final verdict arrived on Saturday morning with the announcement of a Bronze Lindy award.

I asked Michael and Jim on separate occasions about the victory. Michael said that the real trophy was

in knowing that Jim was extremely satisfied with the result. Jim was more pleased for the Gemco crew who were properly recognized for their hard work. A final note of acknowledgment was Jim's present for Randy – painting his name in an elegantly scripted font underneath the copilot's window.

For this year's Beech Party, Gemco Aviation Services is a Gold Sponsor and will be conducting the Model 17 Maintenance Symposium. Michael plans to put NC80315 on jacks, remove all the inspection panels, cycle the gear, and highlight various points of concern. Whether or not you are a Staggerwing owner, this will be an impressive sight to see. 

Photos by Gemco Aviation Services except where noted