

Return to the skies

A Roanoke flying legend is reunited with his old Taylor E-2 Cub after selling it to a retired commercial pilot 40 years ago.

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The last time Wes Hillman saw his 1934 airplane, it didn't have a propeller. Or wings. Or a motor.

Thursday morning, Hillman got to watch his old Taylor E-2 Cub take off for the first time since he "cracked it up" in a minor crash in 1939. He hadn't laid eyes on the plane since he sold its worn-out hull 40 years ago.

When he saw the plane again, he joked that it "just knelt down when I walked up and said, 'Where you been, buddy?'"

Howard Miller, an 86-year-old retired commercial pilot from Winston-Salem, N.C., who bought the aircraft from Hillman, piloted the plane to Roanoke on Wednesday evening while en route to a gathering of Piper Cub enthusiasts in Lock Haven, Pa. His son, Perry Miller, is traveling with him and flying a 1946 Piper J-3 Cub to the gathering.

Hillman, 90, a Roanoke aviation pioneer and a member of the Virginia Aviation Hall of Fame, and his wife Edith visited the Millers and the old plane Thursday at the Landmark Aviation facility at the Roanoke Regional Airport just before the Millers took off for Pennsylvania. Perry Miller turned the spruce propeller by hand four times before the 37.5-horsepower engine fired up, sounding barely louder than an average riding lawn mower.

"That's great! That's great!" Hillman said, beaming as he listened to an E-2 engine for the first time in decades.

Hillman was just a teenage flyboy and barnstormer when he flipped the plane during a takeoff from a grassy field in Covington in 1939. He had made a forced landing, which cracked the wooden propeller. He put on a replacement, but the propeller was too small to get the plane off the ground. Hillman clipped a fence trying to take off and flipped the plane on its back.

Hillman wasn't hurt, but he never flew the plane again and sold it off piece by piece, as World War II raised the demand for recycled metal.

"During the war, I sold the engine during a scrap drive," he said.

The fuselage of the old plane was stored in a barn in Vinton for years, until Miller bought it about 1972. Miller spent 10 years restoring the old Taylor E-2 Cub and getting it back into flying shape.

Miller, a former pilot for Piedmont Airlines and USAir, lived and worked in Roanoke from 1964 until 1972. His twin brother, Harold, also worked in Roanoke, flying Norfolk and Western Railway executives for Piedmont. Harold died of a brain tumor in 1975. Howard's three sons all work in the airline industry - Joe and Tom are pilots, Perry is a mechanic.

While living in Roanoke, Miller got to know Hillman, already a flying legend and instructor who had trained Navy pilots during World War II. Before moving to North Carolina, Miller visited Hillman's home, where he spotted an old wooden propeller mounted above a door.

"I said, 'what does that prop fit?'" Miller recalled asking. "He said, 'a Taylor Cub.' I said I wanted to buy it, but he wouldn't sell it to me. It took nearly a year before I could talk him into selling it.

"It didn't have a motor. The wings were gone. No struts. The rotor was gone. It took me 10 years to find all the parts."

The E-2 Cub was built by the Taylor Aircraft Co. a year before Piper bought out the Taylors. It is one of only eight 1934 E-2s left in existence, Perry Miller said. Five of those are in museums, he added, making his father's plane one of only three '34 E-2s still airworthy.

The Millers had arranged to meet Hillman on Wednesday morning in Roanoke, but radio problems forced them to land in Mount Airy, N.C., and again in Blacksburg for refueling, which delayed their Roanoke arrival until about 5 p.m. By then, Hillman and his wife had left the terminal.

Even under perfect conditions, the E-2 doesn't travel fast, reaching a cruising speed of about 60 mph. The Millers were navigating their trip using road maps and following highways during some stretches of the flight.

The Hillmans journeyed back to the Landmark Aviation terminal at 7:30 a.m. Thursday to see the Millers and admire the old red and white plane. After a reunion of less than an hour, Howard and Perry Miller climbed into their airplanes and taxied down a runway. Landmark Aviation manager John Wilson drove the Hillmans in a van to get a better view of the takeoffs.

Edith Hillman said she was about to cry as she watched the old airplanes slowly lift off the ground and rise into the hazy skies between Tinker and Read mountains.

"It looks like the old days," she said.

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