



LAURAN PAINE JR.
COMMENTARY / SPIRIT OF AVIATION



Flying over the Sierra Nevada of Northern California.

Visiting E45

Different airport, but still right at home

I DON'T GIVE SPEECHES, but from time to time, I do get invited to give talks to various aviation groups. "Talks," I do. Not many, because I'm shy, but I do give them, generally as long as they are within one hop, in RV-8 time, from KSLE (Salem, Oregon).

The request from the people at E45 came in right on the ragged edge of one hop, more likely two, but I considered it anyway. Sure, it involved time and expense, the usual excuses for not doing such things, but here's why I accepted it: I meet the dang-nabbit nicest people on such trips. They're fun, interesting, polite, generous, involved, and productive. I can read newspapers for a month and forget that there are good people out there; I can visit E45 for a weekend, give a talk, and come home feeling warm and fuzzy all over. That's the reward, and it was worth the trip.

E45 is Pine Mountain Lake Airport. It is southeast of Sacramento, California, in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, near Yosemite. In the remarks section of the airport description it says,

"Deer in the vicinity of the airport at all times." And it's an airport community with, it turns out, some very nice people and a couple of characters thrown in. I like characters. Airports are known to have personalities, and this one certainly did—my kind of place.

Leaving Salem it was a little scuddy—not unusual—but about 50 nautical miles to the south, it cleared up nicely. Turns out I could have made it on one tank, but it would have been "stretching" it a bit. I don't like going into airports I've never been to, in the foothills, with tanks bouncing on minimums, so I made a stop; then it was on to E45.

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I turned left past Sacramento and headed for the foothills. There, on top of one of the foothills, sat the runway, 2,930 MSL, 50 feet by 3,625 feet. I dialed in the UNICOM, listened, heard no one, flew the prescribed pattern, landed, and pulled up to the gas pumps. I was met by Mike, who had invited me, and Marle, my host for the weekend. They pulled out the hose and filled my tanks. How’s that for a great beginning? Free avgas!

Then Mike and Marle pointed me in the direction of Roger’s hangar. I taxied there, and Roger tucked my airplane in with his RV-6A. He’s a retired airline mechanic. He built his airplane, and his bride decorated it with gumdrop-like stickers. Look for it at AirVenture. It’s a very happy airplane. What’s Roger doing now? Restoring an Airstream travel trailer. Hey, it’s aluminum and rivets—that’s what builders do!

I then got into Marle’s car. I noticed the license plate frame said, “U.S. NAVY, RETIRED.” As I rode along, I asked, “So, you were in the Navy?”



Lauran’s RV-8 spent the night in Roger’s hangar with his RV-6A.

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“Yeah,” he said.

“Fly?” I asked.

“Yup,” he replied.

“Type of airplanes?” I asked.

“Mostly A-4s and A-7s,” he said.

“Like the A-7?” I asked.

“Yeah, but it was a little underpowered,” he said. “We burnt up engines because we always just left them at 100 percent.”

Now picture this: Marle is totally soft-spoken and polite, a real gentleman. Nothing was said about landing on pitching, wet carrier decks at night. So here was my early “take” on Marle: This guy is really understated. Turns out I was right.

Marle and I then went to Mike’s hangar to see his RV-6A. (Or was it a -7? I don’t remember.) It’s loaded with more technology than the last airliner I flew. I told Mike I’d just flown to E45 with a whiskey compass and charts. He just smiled; he knew I was talking trash. Besides, he’d seen the handheld GPS I had tucked away in my airplane.

We then visited Marle’s Glasair. It never ceases to amaze me just how slick-looking they are. Slick and fast just go together. But his Glasair was down for a prop spinner problem that was causing

some vibrations, and he was in the process of fixing it. Or, put another way, he was “awaiting parts.” While standing around the Glasair, Marle introduced me to Mike (a different Mike). In talking with Mike he told the story of flying from California to Oshkosh in his Bonanza. On base leg—base leg, mind you—to Wittman, his engine quit. Poof! Just like that. He was too low to make the field so he turned right and landed in the soybeans. He thought to raise the gear to lessen the chances of flipping on the soft ground; he just bellied into the crop and slid for what seemed like forever before coming to a halt. Airplane totaled; two people aboard unscathed. Moral of the story? Be ready, Mike was.

Later, at Marle’s home, I met his bride, Judy. She’s sweet and friendly. And, like a lot of military wives, strong in character. I asked of some of their Navy assignments. Among other things, Judy mentioned that Marle had taught at the Naval Academy. Yet another accomplishment Marle doesn’t dwell on. And they spoke of trips across this country in a Volkswagen with no air conditioning and a couple kids in the back—all very much a part of the military experience.

I told Mike I'd just flown to E45 with a whiskey compass and charts. He just smiled; he knew I was talking trash.



The Boyz Club, where pilots come and go for a cup of coffee and camaraderie.

I had arrived at E45 a day early because I like to have slack in my travel plans, and it gives me more time to sample the local flavor. And sample it, I did. On Saturday morning, Marle took me to the Boyz Club. The Boyz Club? Yeah, it’s a house the owner leaves open so every morning the guys can come, have coffee, and, well, be guys. Is it sexist? No. Is it interesting? Yes. Nikki was there with her husband, Dan. “What do you make of this?” someone asked her. “Interesting,” Nikki said, smiling big. There are couches and chairs about, a pool table and a big coffee maker, and all manner of aviation

memorabilia on the walls. People just come and go, but you do not come through the door without enduring a couple insults. Neither do you leave without a couple more being tossed your way. I've been around pilots all my life and career; I didn't personally know any of these guys, but I was right at home.

Marle introduced me to the collective gathering: "This is our speaker tonight."

"Don't expect no ovation," John said.

I assured him that I didn't and then added, "I have a short program and a long program. If it's not going well, I go with the short program."

"Oh, great," John said. "It'll be our luck that it's not going well and you'll still give us the long program." You gotta love a gathering like this!

In the room was "Chili," who was on the first U.S. Navy ship to sail into Tokyo Bay right after the Japanese surrender. "We didn't know what to expect, but then we saw people on shore waving white flags," he said.

Then there was Larry, a bridge beam expert. If something goes wrong with a bridge beam in California, Larry's the guy they call. Everybody's somebody!

I noticed Marle was drinking his coffee from a cup that had "64B" imprinted on it. I asked him, "Is that your cup? That's an Air Force number."



Lauran in his RV-8 on the ramp at E45.

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I've been around pilots all my life and career; I didn't personally know any of these guys, but I was right at home.

"Yeah, I went through the Air Force Test Pilot School," he said. It took me two days to get that out of him. See what I mean by understated!

My talk that evening was in Norm's hangar. They rotate hangars every month and begin the evening with a potluck feast. Norm was in U.S. Army Helicopter Primary Flight Training at Fort Wolters, Texas, Class 68-34. His story was on a wall in his hangar. He flew Hueys in Vietnam. The "fast movers" often get the glory, but I'll tell you what, those guys who flew helicopters over the rice paddies of Southeast Asia had guts and courage. I salute and admire them.

The talk was fun. They laughed and I laughed. I knew it would be like that: E45 is a lively and good bunch of people. John even came up afterward and shook my hand.

Okay, I'm not one to smother you with just Pollyanna. Real life

isn't like that. There have been accidents and incidents at E45. People have died. But here's the deal: These people are there for each other, through thick and thin. That's obvious and it's wonderful.

Sunday morning I left Marle and Judy's warm hospitality and headed for home. The trip home was grand—clear weather and snow-capped mountains. I penned on my kneeboard, "What a blessing it is to be able to live and fly in this country." I felt it! Thank you, E45.

Okay, I'm rather a homebody. I like to be at home with my bride or at the hangar hangin' with the guys. I'm as content as a sleeping lamb doing those two things. But getting out and going to E45 renewed my faith in the people in the small towns across this great country. And golly, that's a good feeling. I'm still in contact with Harry from Livermore, California, from a talk I gave three years ago. I'll stay in touch with Marle and Mike. And if I ever get all cocky and full of myself (unlikely), I'll call John.

Thanks again, E45. *EAA*



Lauran Paine Jr., EAA 582274, is a retired military pilot and retired airline pilot. He built and flies an RV-8 and has owned a Stearman and a Champ. Learn more about Lauran at his website, www.ThunderBumper.com.

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