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Those magnificent pilots (and navigators) in their flying machines...



By Simon Wong

Around 25 planes, dating from the 1940s to the present, competed in the 45th Annual Hayward Air Rally (formerly the Hayward Proficiency Air Race) on June 12-14.

The Rally was born in 1964. According to legend, Hayward's mayor and his golfing friends flew regularly to Las Vegas to play the links. One year, they decided to have a friendly competition to guess their landing times. This affable wager has evolved into the most enduring event of its kind in North America supported by pilots from all over the western United States. Usually, about 70 planes fly but the economic downturn has temporarily reduced the number of entrants.

Hayward Air Rally, Inc. is a non-profit that promotes air safety through its annual skills-based navigation and flight planning competition. Pilots of all levels test their skills using flight techniques seldom used today. Each Rally consists of two legs each of which has a start point, three mandatory checkpoints, a timing point and a stop point. Though the start and end points might not necessarily change, checkpoints change annually to vary the course. Competitors flew Hayward - Redding - Bend, Oregon for the first time this year.

Competitors landed at Hayward Executive Airport on Thursday, June 11, the day before the Rally, and were briefed for an hour by Chris Verbil, Chair, Hayward Air Rally Committee. Each team had a Race Book which sets out the procedures and checkpoints. Given this information, the capabilities of their planes and anticipated conditions, the pilots compiled their VFR (Visual Flight Rules) flight plans overnight and submitted calculated fuel consumption and time (hours, minutes and seconds) to fly each leg the next morning.

Entrants fly in either the Traditional Class or Digital Class and compete for the same prizes. Penalty points are assessed for incorrect identification of checkpoints, for each second of deviation from their planned time and for each tenth-of-a-gallon deviation from fuel estimates. The lowest score wins. This year's checkpoints, ground features that must be positively identified from the air, are not visible via Google Earth.

"Flying is three-dimensional and an art form. In today's environment of cockpit computers, automated flight control systems and auto-pilots, it's all TV screens in some of these airplanes and you lose flying skills," explained Verbil.

"I like to say, 'This \$100,000 computer is great but what do you do if your \$15 alternator belt breaks? How do you get home? Can you manage with a \$5 chart and stopwatch?' We ask them to use skills that were tested when they qualified as private pilots.

"We want them to do a basic flight plan, not use any advanced navigational equipment and tell us precisely how long it will take them, to the second, to fly 500 nautical miles in two legs and how much gas they will use on each leg, to the tenth of a gallon," Verbil stated.

"For many, this event is the flying highlight of their year. We enjoy recreational activities after the Rally but many rivalries exist. It's very good for the pilot community to examine themselves and work harder to hone their skills. It's quite a competition.

"Different planes fly at different speeds but teams compete against each other even though it's not a speed race. We score according to the accuracy of their predictions. Typically, winning crews score less than 100. Tom Neale and co-pilot Bob Edwards, winners for the past six years, fly a Cessna Cardinal RG and scored 85, which equates

to 85 seconds, in 2008. We don't carry much gas so can't use the throttle as liberally as a Southwest Airline pilot to meet an arrival time," Verbil explained.

"The competition challenges you," said Kim Purcell, the first woman to win the competition and the event's impound supervisor. "We might only see fellow competitors annually but the camaraderie is excellent."

Purcell and her husband, co-pilot Rob Kirkpatrick, revel in the freedom of flight. They fly to work from Placerville to the Bay Area. "There's no traffic. There's great visibility. It's possible to visit somewhere in a day that can't be reached by car in the same time," said Kirkpatrick. They set off for Redding in Purcell's 1950 Cessna C170A. They were placed 14th last year.

"We're very fortunate to have sponsors including the City of Hayward. There are marketing benefits for all the companies associated with the Rally and safety benefits for the airport," concluded Verbil.

Visit www.hwdairrally.org for more information about the Annual Hayward Air Rally and www.airracecentral.com for information about other air races and rallies.

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