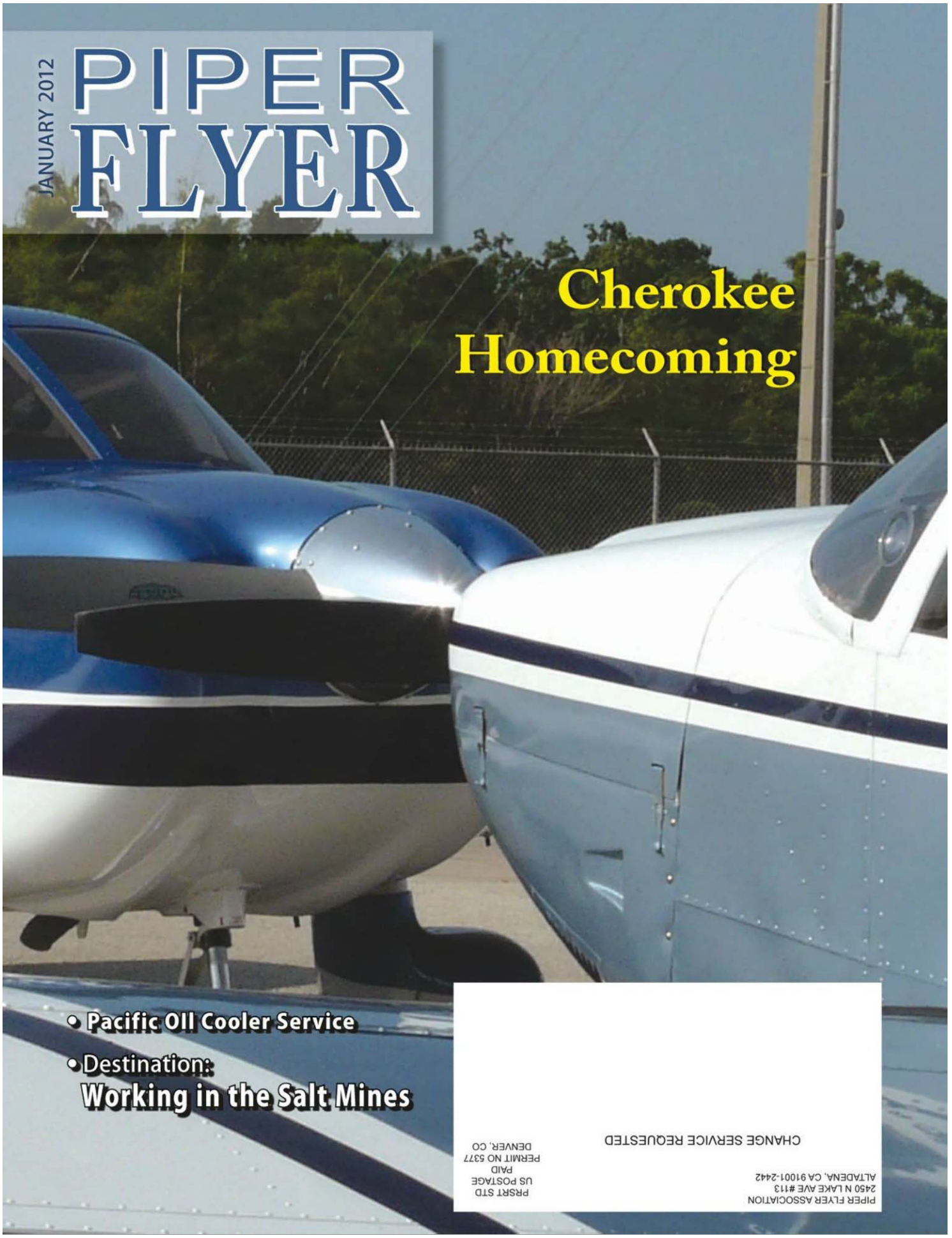
JANUARY 2012

PIPER FLYER



Cherokee Homecoming

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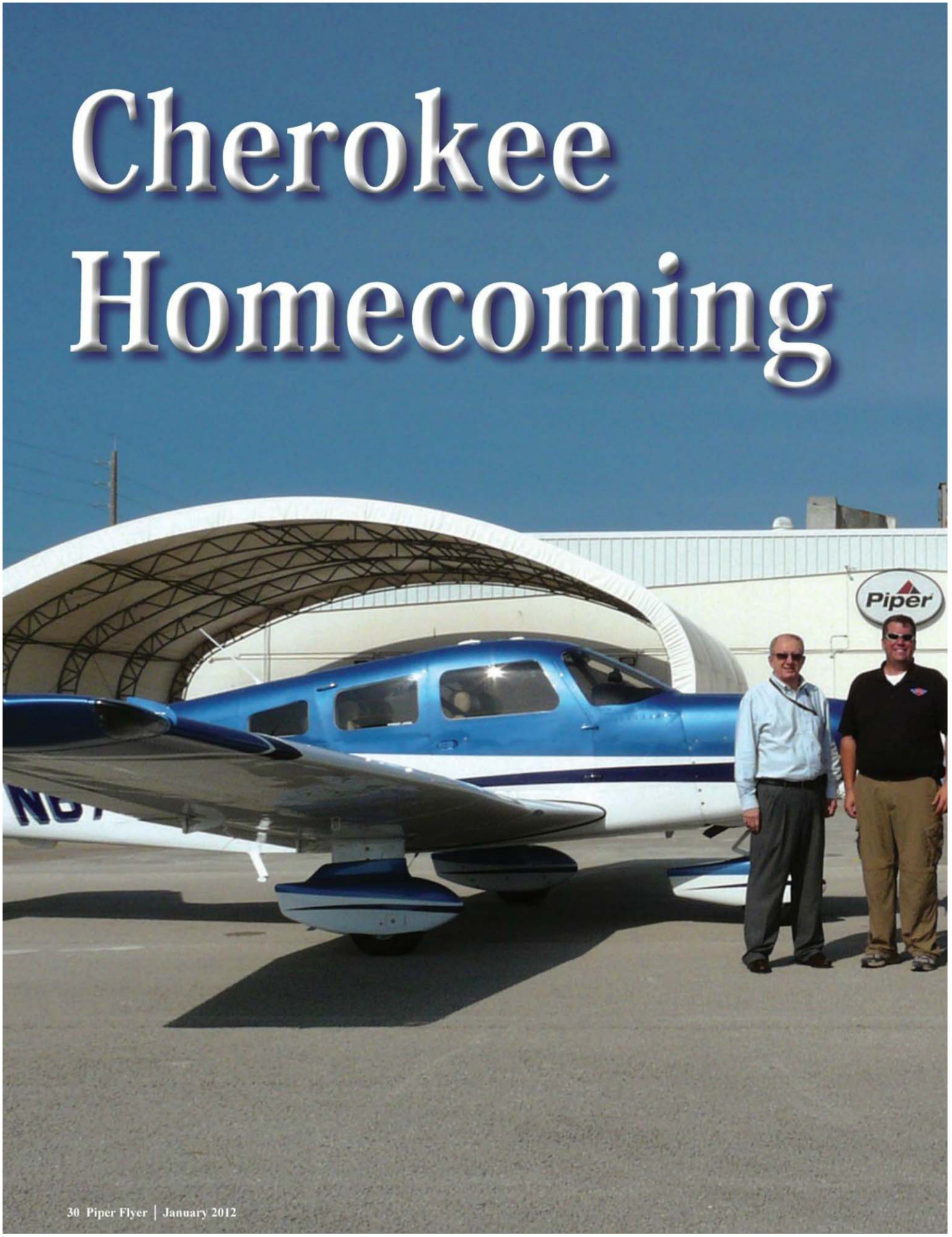
Cherokee Homecoming



by Jason Blair

Piper aircraft on the ramp at FlightSafety, Piper's neighbor at Vero Beach Municipal (KVRB).
Pages 30-31: L to R, Chuck Glass, Director of International Flight Training and Fleet Programs; the author, Jason Blair, Executive Director of NAFI; and Hans Stancil, Fleet Sales.

I am convinced that airplanes have personalities. When we get to really know our planes, we know when they are happy and when they are grumpy, when they are feeling good and want to fly, and when they are begrudgingly doing their job.

In addition to having their good and bad days, aircraft also come from somewhere, just like we do; they have a birthplace. Just like a person who hasn't been home in a long time, I think bringing a plane back to where it was born is a special thing. Last summer, I took the opportunity to bring my Piper Cherokee back to where she was born.

A Real Working Airplane

Some trips are more special than others, especially when you use your aircraft for travel with regularity. In my case, my 1967 Piper Cherokee (N9749J) is what I fly on a regular basis. My work takes me to airports—to conduct checkrides, to instruct, or to travel in my work as Executive Director of the National Association of Flight Instructors (NAFI).

Fortunately for me, I fly my Cherokee pretty much wherever I go; it doesn't matter if it is a half hour away, or halfway across the country. I use my Cherokee like most people use their cars. It is not uncommon for me to fly six- to eight-hour ranges for meetings or other work-related activities.

When I needed to travel to Vero Beach to visit with the folks at Piper Aircraft, my copilot for the trip was John Gibson, who also works with NAFI. While it might have been slightly faster for us to take a commercial flight from Michigan to Florida for our meeting, it was certainly more fun to use the trip as an opportunity to bring my aircraft back to where it was born.

As many of you know, Piper Aircraft was founded in Lock Haven, Penn., but in 1961, the company began building aircraft at its current site in Vero Beach.

Pipers in production.

Archer 2397C ready to get its wings.

The author flies his 1967 Cherokee to Vero Beach.

Hans Stancil shows a new panel in assembly.

One of the first lines produced in Florida was the Cherokee. In 1967, my aircraft—which is 10 years older than me, and was built the same year that NAFI was founded— rolled off the line. It was one of 542 Piper Cherokees built in 1967.

Pointed South

Our trip began in the morning—and it seemed early since the day before we had just returned from EAA AirVenture 2011 and we were a bit short on sleep. The good weather for our departure kept us invigorated. From NAFI Headquarters in Allegan, Mich. (K35D), we headed out to our first stop in London, Ky. (KLOZ) where we fueled and had some lunch at the airport restaurant.

The London airport is one that I am going to have to keep in my memory bank for future trips. The restaurant had a nice menu, good operating hours, and made for an easy in and out as the staff from the London-Corbin Airport fueled good old 49J before we finished lunch and headed back on our way.

A second stop of the day took us to Vidalia, Ga. (KVDI) where we again refueled and got an updated weather brief. While we were doing this, I noticed two students sitting across the FBO at the main table, looking like they were being briefed by their instructor about an upcoming flight lesson.

This is part of what local airports are for: to serve as the places from which our next generation of pilots will come. It was hard not to smile and remember when transient pilots came in and out of my own airport while I was being trained—being trained to be able to do exactly what I was now doing, in fact: flying across the country in a private aircraft on my own schedule. I smile again when I think that these students in Vidalia will soon have the same opportunities I am enjoying today.

So far on our trip the weather had been good, but going forward was looking to be a bit more challenging. With significant pop-up storms across all of Florida, John and I would have to do some work to pick our way through them IFR to our destination in Vero Beach.

Our last leg required us to shuffle around the storm cells a bit, more or less following the Florida eastern coast over the water to stay away from the storms popping up over land.

49J performed well in and out of the clouds—and the accompanying bumps (she's a tough little bird!). Arrival for us was just about a half an hour before dark, and we rolled off the runway, onto the taxiway, and made our way to the FBO. Late-afternoon storms should be no surprise for summer flying in Florida, but we were certainly happy to finish

Early afternoon, north of Vero Beach; headed home. Bumps in the making.

Frank Sosta (right) shows the author a wiring harness assembly layout.

our flight for the day!

With the rental car courtesy of Paris Air waiting on the ramp for us, we quickly tied down, unloaded our bags, and were off to the hotel and then to grab some dinner. The next day would be our chance to see Piper Aircraft, Inc.

Arrival at Piper Aircraft

At Piper, Hans Stancil and Chuck Glass met us in the morning and we headed into a conference room for our meeting. After some of the official business had been completed, Frank Sosta, one of Piper's long-term employees, gave us a special tour of the entire Piper production facilities.

Touring the 800,000 sq. ft. Piper Aircraft factory puts into perspective how an aircraft comes together. It really is what one would expect to see when you think of a facility that makes an aircraft from the beginning elements to the

The author and John Gibson ready to depart NAFI HQ in Michigan.

finished product, which is exactly what Piper does. In essence, an aircraft at Piper starts from a roll of sheet metal.

Piper's manufacturing process starts with the raw materials (i.e., that roll of sheet metal) and technicians build all the major components on site. From cutting sheet metal for the airframe skins and control surfaces, all the way to mocking up wiring harnesses and molding windscreens for the aircraft, Piper Aircraft's Vero Beach facilities are a one-stop shop.

The Personal Touch

Building a Piper aircraft is a personal experience for the staff. Every Piper Aircraft staff member we visited showed pride in their work. Many have been with Piper for years—in some cases, as second- or third-generation family members.

As Frank Sosta walked with John and I through the interior shop, we had a chance to stop and talk with one staff member who was sewing baggage door straps. She told us a story of when a friend of hers had called from Alaska to tell her that one of the Piper Mirage aircraft that had come from Vero Beach was on the ramp. She had made all of the windscreens that went into Piper Mirages, and here was an aircraft that she had personally helped to craft out in the field, doing its job, flying around.

This pride in workmanship is an important element of the Piper experience. It makes me proud to own a Piper aircraft, and certainly helps me to feel less surprised that my aircraft—now 44 years old—is going strong.

Making Connections

As we made our way through the fa-

cility on our tour, my heart skipped just a little when we rounded a corner and I saw the sign that said "Cherokee Assembly." It was right there that 44 years ago my aircraft had become the machine that I fly. Cherokee airframes are still working their way through the process—from the beginning to the end where they will be picked up by new owners, just like they were 44 years ago.

With our tour completed, we headed out to dinner with Hans and Chuck. All that, and dinner, too? The company couldn't be beat.

John and I returned the next morning to take a few pictures of 49J at Piper Aircraft's Vero Beach buildings, as well as with a 2011 Piper Archer (basically the same thing as the Cherokee, 44 years later). Nose to nose, there are some differences, but it is obvious that my 49J is the current Cherokees' predecessor in terms of its form.

Pictures completed, hands shaken, and goodbyes said, John and I began our journey home. The typical morning clouds that would likely turn into afternoon storms were already starting, and prodded us to get moving. As we headed out of Vero Beach, these clouds served as a great backdrop for our departure.

The Return Trip

The return trip included dropping John off at Orlando International (KMCO) where he flew (commercially) back to his home in California. Our trip into KMCO took us around the busy Kissimmee Gateway Airport (KISM) and right over Orlando Executive (KORL) as ATC set us up for the ILS 17R.

After our landing and a bit of taxi, we arrived at the Signature Flight Support ramp where I swapped John for a friend and flight student of mine, Jennifer Wright. Jen had flown down to Orlando to meet us just to take the flight home with me. With headwinds on the way back to Michigan, even though the route was nearly the same, the time it took was longer.

Jen was a great passenger to have on the way home, since she flew most of the legs and let me catch up on a bit of rest as I dozed off to the comforting drone 49J's engine. We arrived home a little before midnight. I came back with another great trip in my logbook and a

special understanding of the roots of 49J and Piper Aircraft, Inc.

Weathering the Changes with Loyal Owners

There are few aircraft manufacturers that have stood the test of time. Not all times have been great in the history of General Aviation, but Piper Aircraft certainly can count itself as a company that has been through the entire spectrum of market conditions and continues to be a respected force in its General Aviation.

In 1983, all of Piper's aircraft assembly was transferred to the Vero Beach location where it continues. Piper has a legacy of building durable and long lasting aircraft, as well as fostering innovations. Piper has built over 144,000 aircraft, with over 90,000 estimated to still be flying. I hope 49J will be one of these for many more years to come.

Jason Blair is the Executive Director of the National Association of Flight Instructors. Send questions or comments to editor@piperflyer.org.

FLIGHT LOG

8/1/11

K35D – KLOZ 2.9 hours

KLOZ – KVID 3.1 hours

KVID – KVRB 2.8 hours

Total: 933 miles, 8.8 hours

8/3/11

KVRB – KMCO 1.3 hours

KMCO – KMAC 3.0 hours

KMAC – KI39 3.3 hours

KI39 – K35D 3.2 hours

Total: 947 miles, 10.8 hours