



## **As Beautiful As Ever**

By Kenny Miller

LINCOLN NE-“That can’t be,” I thought as I looked up from my driving as a plane flew by me about 1,000 feet above the ground. I rolled down the window to listen as it went by. There was no question about it. Those were radial engines and the plane was a Ford Tri-motor. Aviation’s first airliner was roaming the skies over Lincoln.

What was this old plane doing in Lincoln? We often have visitors from the past during and after Oshkosh week which is the first week of August, but this is late September. I interrupted my business and let curiosity have its way.

It wasn’t hard to track the Tri-motor down once I made it to the airport. There were little signs directing me right to the spot. Not only was this old plane flying, for \$50 you could be a passenger. For \$100 you could be the copilot. The plane is owned by the Experimental Aircraft Association (EAA) and Lincoln was the last stop on their fall tour.

Plenty of folks were waiting to go flying on one of Eastern Airlines first birds. Eastern was the original owner of this one. It was serial number 129 of 199 airplanes



Ford made. There are four still flying and this one is the only one the FAA certified to carry passengers. This trip was full with nine passengers and a very excited copilot.

One of the pilots conducted a briefing so I listened in. Top speed is about 100 mph. He thought the service ceiling was 12,500 feet but it didn’t get up there very much. Eight thousand was a popular altitude in its day. Range was 500 miles so a cross country trip was a big adventure. There used to be a potty seat on this one but the FAA and the EPA banned the use of it. After all, it was direct drop technology and there are a lot more people roaming the countryside below these days.

Once Eastern moved on to bigger and faster things, this bird served as the Presidential plane in the Dominican Republic. It also did some time flying forest fires. Ford didn’t make any more airliners because it lost out to some new company called Boeing and got out of the airplane business.

The EAA completely restored this one and it needed some major work after a tornado tossed it around in Wisconsin. The EAA asked aluminum giant Alcoa to help out since there was no spare sheet metal laying around for a Ford Tri-Motor. Alcoa built the jigs and the dies and turned out original shiny new parts for the project. They also made a second set just in case.

When you look at the wings, you are struck at how thick they are. That's because they served a dual purpose. They hauled 100 gallons of fuel from the engine inboard on each side and also opened for baggage storage.

After thousands of EAA member hours, the plane finally flew again. It has bigger engines than most of the original ones and they hum like only an old radial engine can.

The passengers boarded the plane and the three radials came to life. One of the EAA ground crew waved it on its way and it taxied out for takeoff on 17L. There was no need to use the full length of the runway; 800 feet would do nicely. The old Ford was in the air in just a few seconds and climbed slowly into the hazy afternoon Nebraska sky.

This was an interesting day at the Lincoln Municipal Airport. People watched and some boarded this old plane for the pure love of a chance to fly on a piece of history. There were no long security lines. There were no grumpy TSA agents and x-ray units examining everything. There were no bags and barrels to put stuff in that the TSA wouldn't let you carry on board. But there was living, breathing, oil-belching piece of aviation history coming to life right before your eyes.

And she looked as beautiful as ever.