



(Photo by Lee Fray)

# Flight Of The Phantom

*By Gene R. Chase*

WHEN THE VOICE on the phone asked me how I'd like to spend a weekend in Texas, I knew that Joe Johnson had sold his Luscombe Phantom. Of course this call was by pre-arrangement, as one month earlier George Ramin phoned me from his home in Houston to say he was considering buying the Phantom. His plans were to loan it to the EAA Museum and he wanted me to fly it to Hales Corners, Wisconsin.

In the meantime, after Paul Poberezny agreed that the Phantom would indeed be a rare and welcome addition to the Museum, George convinced Joe that the plane should change hands and that it would continue to have a good home and receive all the tender loving care to which it had become accustomed.

Final arrangements were made for me to pick up the Phantom and during my airline flight from Milwaukee to Dallas I re-read Jack Cox's excellent article in the February 1973 issue of *SPORT AVIATION* about Joe's restoration of this plane. I also mentally reviewed my single previous flight in the Phantom. This occurred during the 1972 Texas Chapter AAA Fly-In when Joe asked me to pick up his Phantom while he flew his Luscombe Sedan from his home base at Grand Prairie Airport to Denton, the site of the fly-in.



I'll never forget when we opened the hangar door and I first saw Joe's latest restoration. I knew the quality of Joe's work because for a couple of years I had greatly admired his Sedan. But I was not prepared for the sight that greeted me. The Phantom was indescribably beautiful, glistening in the morning sun, and I simply could not believe my eyes. In fact when we pushed it out of the hangar, I used my handkerchief to keep from getting fingerprints on that gorgeous airplane.

After the preflight, Joe gave me a cockpit checkout and described the plane's ground handling characteristics as best he could. I vividly recall his advice to stay off the brakes during landing rollout because the Phantom's tail is extremely light. In level position, the weight on the tailwheel is only 15 pounds!

This impressed me, to say the least, and then while taxiing out for take off, I really discovered what Don Luscombe meant when he said, concerning the Phantom, "You could master the violin easier than the fancy footwork needed to avoid ground looping." The heel brakes are mechanical and are adequate, but this, combined with the forward placement of the full castering, non-steerable tail wheel, really makes things interesting.

That morning at Grand Prairie the 15 knot southerly wind necessitated a long downwind taxi to the active runway. Fortunately the tail wheel is lockable for take offs and landings, so I made use of this feature while trying to learn the aforementioned "fancy footwork". By the time I reached the run-up area I felt a little more competent in the plane but did mention to my passenger, Gene O'Brien of Tulsa, Oklahoma, that it would take more than one flight to master this beautiful machine.

The smooth-running 145 Warner checked out perfectly and the take off was completely normal. The short 36 mile flight to Denton was over all too soon as we joined up with Joe in his Sedan for a fly-by before landing.

On base leg I slowed the Phantom to 80 mph, lowered full flaps and double checked that the tail wheel was still locked. On final I slowed to 70 mph which Joe had recommended as over-the-fence speed and noted that the plane felt very much like a Monocoupe. The flareout and 3 point landing were as normal as the take off, with plenty of directional control provided by the big rudder. I was glad that my first landing in the Phantom was without a cross wind to contend with, particularly because it was also on concrete.

Releasing the tail wheel lock to turn off the runway immediately presented me once again with the difficult task of taxiing the plane with the delicate and judicious use of the heel brakes. Joe, who had landed ahead of me, parked his Sedan and motioned me into a parking spot. As I shut down the Warner I know I wore an ear to ear grin that indicated how pleased I was with my first flight in a Luscombe Phantom.

Returning to my airline flight into Dallas one year later, I was eyeballing the weather as the Braniff 727 cruised high over the rolling green hills of eastern Oklahoma and on into Texas. It was a typical hot, summer day with only a few small cumulus in sight. The forecast for the next day was more of the same, so at least for the southern portion of my return trip, the weather should be no factor.

As I deplaned at Love Field in Dallas, I began looking for Joe as he said he would meet me and take me to his home where I would spend the night. As I spotted him in the crowded terminal I was pleasantly surprised to see that four other Texas Antiquers were also there to greet me. It would have been great to see George Ramin, too, but he was unable to make the trip up from Houston to watch his newly purchased Phantom begin its trip to Hales Corners.

Instead of going straight to Joe's house, we drove about 22 miles to the Grand Prairie Airport where several antique and homebuilt planes are based. As we neared the field I spotted a slow moving biplane in the traffic pattern, and sure enough, it was the recently-restored 1929 OX-5 powered Alexander Eaglerock that we had heard so much about.

This rare and authentically-restored plane landed shortly after we arrived and I met two of its owners, Reagan Ormand and Jack Brouse. I also took several pictures and these, along with a story will appear at a later time.

The following morning dawned sunny and clear with a light southerly breeze, and I was anxious to fire up the Phantom and head north. But we couldn't leave Joe's house without taking a look at his current project, the one and only Luscombe Colt. This will also be one of his typically immaculate restorations, and when flying, is sure to be another trophy winner.

After taking several pics of the Colt, we headed for Grand Prairie Airport where we found a sizeable contingent of EAA and AAA types waiting for the Phantom to be rolled out. As the hangar doors were opened I again experienced the same thrill as a year ago when I first saw this fabulous airplane.

While preflighting we heard a round engine overhead and looked up to see R. J. and Mickey Hardin arriving in their well-known and beautiful 1935 Waco YOC. They, too, were coming to see the Phantom depart and hopefully to get some air to air shots.

After completing the preflight I bade goodbye to my Texas friends and climbed aboard. Joe pulled the engine through several times while I strapped in.

The starting procedure is simple: both left and right fuel selector valves on, carburetor heat off, electric flap switch neutral, radio and light switches off, throttle cracked  $\frac{1}{4}$ ", mixture rich, spark retarded  $\frac{1}{4}$ ", 2 shots of prime for cold engine and 1 if hot, battery switch on, check that propeller area is clear, depress start button, count 5-6 blades then turn mag switch to both. When running smoothly, advance the spark.

One of the unique cockpit checks which must be made is the position of the handle that adjusts the sensitivity of the mechanical brakes. Its function is to adjust the travel of the heel brake pedals and when cranked to its full 17 turn limit, it then serves as a parking brake, locking the pedals in the depressed position. I felt most comfortable with the "feel" of the brakes with 2 turns of the handle cranked in.

Completing the engine run-up and remainder of the take off check list, I taxied into position to go. I locked the tail wheel, removed my heels from the brake pedals and smoothly opened the throttle. All the engine gauges were in the green and the Phantom accelerated rapidly. The big rudder provided excellent directional control and after a short run we were airborne.

I circled the field once, watched R. J. take off in his Waco, then made a low pass down the runway at the request of the photographers. After leaving the traffic pattern I took up a heading for Justin Time Airfield, climbed to 2000 feet and skirted along the west edge of the control zone at Greater Southwest International.

In the meantime, R. J. joined up on my left wing and I saw Mickey slide from the right front seat into the back seat of the Waco where she began taking pictures of the Phantom. Soon we were over Justin Time Airfield, a beautiful grass strip where R. J. and Mickey are building their own home and attached hangar. As he peeled off to land, I rocked my wings and altered course for Tulsa where I planned to spend the night.

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The oil temperature rises very slowly in the Phantom and as it neared 200° I decided to climb into cooler air for the sake of the Warner. My southerly tail wind became more westerly with altitude, thus my reason for wanting to stay fairly low.

I leveled at 3500 feet where the outside air temperature was a comfortable 68° F. and after a few minutes of cruise at 1750 rpm the oil temp stabilized at 174° F. The 120 mph IAS computed out to 129 mph true and all was going well.

The ride was one of those bouncy ones and the plane would not fly hands off. It required constant attention to hold heading and altitude but I didn't mind. The Phantom was only showing her personality which is one of the reasons I prefer flying the older planes rather than the super stable modern type. Also, I've always enjoyed flying behind round engines.

While observing the fuel gauges which are located in the cabin above each door, it became apparent that with both fuel selector valves on, the right tank was draining faster than the left. Also, the left wing was getting heavier, so I closed the right fuel valve to begin managing the fuel flow to aid the balance situation.

Soon I was over Lake Texoma on the Red River separating Texas and Oklahoma. The small waves indicated a light tail wind, but according to my ground speed calculation I had a 5 mph head wind component.

The 145 Warner was performing beautifully, in fact I've never flown behind a smoother one. By this time I was really beginning to feel at home in the Phantom and began thinking about a rubber-powered scale model I had built of one about 33 years ago. Even then I thought the Phantom was one of the prettiest airplanes ever designed. I recalled that my model I flew quite well, but only after adding some weight inside the cowl on that short nose.

Coming up on my right side was Okmulgee, which meant I was only 28 miles from Tulsa's Riverside Airport. I eased the nose down and began a slow descent. I had chosen to go into Riverside rather than one of the grass strips around Tulsa because it was nearer my daughter's home where I would be spending the night, and I also had hangar space reserved there for the plane.

I turned on the radio for the first time during the flight and reported to the tower when I was 10 miles south, inbound for landing. I reported again on right downwind for runway 18, slowed the plane to 80 mph and cranked down about 10° of flaps. The flaps can be operated either electrically by a switch on the instrument panel or manually with a crank located on the overhead behind the right seat passenger's head. I preferred to use the manual method.

The flaps are quite large and extremely rugged. They are the split type mounted 21" ahead of the wing trailing edge. Each is 9' 5" long and 7¼" wide and may be lowered at any speed up to 149 mph. 29 turns of the hand crank will lower them to the maximum of 45°.

As I neared the downwind end of the runway the tower cleared me to land. I turned on base, cranked down full flap and further slowed the plane to 70 mph as I turned on final. The wind was a gentle 8 knots from 190° and presented no problem as I flared out and touched down 3 point.

When I reached the turn off, I unlocked the tail wheel and once again started the "fancy footwork". I changed to ground control frequency and as I taxied to the gas pump, the voice on the radio asked me if the Luscombe was "modified". I explained that it was not, but was the certificated Model I called the Phantom and manufactured in 1936. He thanked me for the information.

As I shut down the Warner several of my Tulsa flying friends gathered around — it was great to see them again.

We topped the tanks with 18.5 gallons of 80 oct. and computed the fuel consumption at 8.5 gph. The 2 wing tanks hold a total of 33 gallons, of which 31 is useable. This would give the Phantom a no reserve range of slightly more than 3½ hours. The oil was down less than a quart and I was highly pleased with the plane's performance.

A few days before my arrival, Bert Mahon had moved his 1936 Fairchild 24 C8E to Airman Acres, a grass strip on Tulsa's north side, and allowed me to put the Phantom in his hangar at Riverside. I really appreciated this, because I definitely would not have left the plane tied down outside.

The next morning I checked the weather and heard the gloomy report of low ceilings and thunderstorms across Iowa, northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin. The forecast was for more of the same, possibly ending the following day. Not wanting to chance having to park the Phantom outside somewhere along the route, I decided to keep the plane safe and sound in Bert's hangar until I knew I could complete the flight in one day.

Checking the weather the following morning I heard a more optimistic report. I then drove out to the FSS at Tulsa International Airport to look at the weather charts myself. The picture looked good and I called Jack Cox at EAA Headquarters in Hales Corners to inform him I was on my way. He also verified the good weather picture at that end of the route.

Because I could not arrive at the Hales Corners Airport early enough in the day to get the Phantom moved into the Museum before dark, we decided that I should land at Burlington, Wisconsin where the plane could be put into the EAA hangar. I then filed a flight plan direct to Moberly, Missouri direct to Burlington, with a 30 minute fuel stop at Moberly.

I returned to Riverside Airport, cranked up the Phantom and took off. Again I leveled at 3500 feet and began flying the course as marked in red on my chart. The winds were light and variable and my 129 mph ground speed checked out the same as my true air speed.

As I approached the Missouri River near Boonville, Missouri, I spotted a low flying plane. It crossed my course from left to right, well below me and was the first sighting of enroute traffic, except for high flying jets, since I left the Dallas-Ft. Worth area. And some people are foolish enough to believe that the skies are crowded!

When I arrived at Moberly, I circled the airport once to check the wind sock. The wind was directly out of the east and had picked up some in velocity which I estimated at 10-15 knots. There being no E-W runway I had the choice of landing either to the northeast or the southeast. I chose the latter because it appeared that taxiing from that runway to the gas pump would be simpler.

As I lined up on final at 70 mph and with full flaps, I thought about the upcoming cross wind landing which was to be my first in the Phantom. I lowered the left wing and held enough right rudder to keep everything lined up, flared out and touched down on the left wheel and tail wheel. The plane immediately began to swerve to the left and the left wing started down but with prompt application of right rudder and full right aileron, the right wheel eased onto the concrete. It was obvious that this beautiful machine was not going to allow her pilot to forget that she has a mind of her own and is extremely independent!

During the landing roll out, it was necessary to lightly tap the right brake to keep the Phantom rolling straight because she wanted to weathercock into the wind. All the stories I had ever heard about Phantoms going over on their backs were passing through my mind, and I was





(Photo by Dick Stouffer)

Here is a close-up of that legendary Phantom landing gear. Don Luscombe, himself, once went over on his back trying to master its capriciousness.

paying careful attention to keeping the tail wheel on the runway. She soon decelerated and I unlocked the tail wheel and taxied to the gas pump.

Here the Phantom took 22.5 gallons of fuel and 2 quarts of oil while I took one bottle of root beer. I then called my wife to give her my ETA at Burlington so she could meet me there.

I gave the plane a walk around inspection, drained some gas out of each tank to check for water and crawled inside to begin the last leg of my journey for that day. Just then a car pulled up to the fence separating the auto parking area from the ramp and three young men piled out and immediately jumped the fence. They strode to the open door of the Phantom and began to alternately praise the plane and ask questions about her. They explained that they were fairly new private pilots and had never been so attracted to a plane as they were the Phantom. I agreed that she was a mighty pretty machine, and that they just don't make them like that anymore.

Then one of them asked me about the radio, what kind was it, and was it accurate for navigation. I told him I really hadn't noticed what kind it was and that I only used it once when I talked to the folks in the tower at Tulsa. I added that for 30 years I've been navigating by flying a red line on the chart and hoped to use the same system for the next 30 years.

They didn't respond to this statement and apparently thought I was pulling their leg. I was sorry that I didn't have time to talk with them longer, because one of my pet peeves is the mistaken idea that omni and other assorted electronic equipment is necessary for flying cross country. I told them to be sure to come to the fly-ins at Oshkosh and Blakesburg where they would see lots of beautiful planes like the Phantom.

I then primed the Warner once, fired her up and taxied out to the southeast runway. The big rudder provided ample directional control for the cross wind take off and I departed the traffic pattern and climbed to 3500 feet on course.

As I neared the Mississippi River just north of Quincy, Illinois the visibility began to lower to about 6 miles in haze, which is not unusual for that area. My

ride now was very smooth. During this leg my ground speed gradually dropped from 124 mph to 119, but I was still going to make my flight plan ETA.

2 hours and 28 minutes after leaving Moberly, I was over Lake Geneva at which time I closed my flight plan with Milwaukee radio, advising them that I had Burlington in sight. I entered the pattern, made a low pass down the runway and as I passed the EAA hangar I saw my wife Dorothy with Jack and Golda Cox waving a friendly greeting.

I rocked my wings and set up the pattern for my first landing in the Phantom on grass. Man, what a difference! This plane wasn't meant for concrete and she let me know how happy she was to be on sod by touching down in a landing that couldn't be felt.

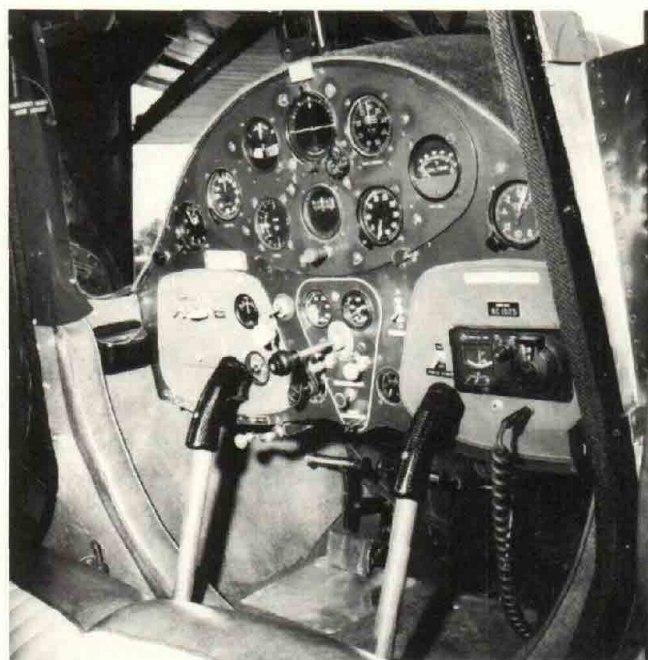
Thus ended one of my most enjoyable flights ever. I only wish that I could have shared the trip with someone riding in the right seat.

Because of weather and the press of business, it was 8 days later before I made the short flight of 22 miles from Burlington to Hales Corners. On that day the southerly wind was 15 knots gusting to 25 and my take off on the grass strip at Burlington was extremely short.

At Hales Corners Airport the runway most nearly into the wind was the short NE-SW sod strip, which meant I would have a 45° cross wind when landing to the southwest. I would not have attempted to land on a hard surface runway in the Phantom with that much cross wind, but felt that I could handle it on the sod.

The landing was identical to the one at Moberly — the left wing dropped as soon as the left wheel and tail wheel touched down, but immediate use of right rudder and aileron straightened things out.

The plane is now in the EAA Museum and I am very proud to have made the delivery flight. I now feel a little more qualified to describe the Luscombe Phantom's characteristics... a quick glance through the log book shows many repairs made to the wing tips, cowling, propeller, fin and rudder. This will substantiate the stories that she's a bear on the ground, and I concur 100%. But what a beauty in the air, and after all, that's where airplanes were meant to be!



(Photo by Dick Stouffer)

Forward visibility is definitely not the strong point of the Luscombe Phantom. The top of the instrument panel on the average lightplane of today extends no higher than the knob for the DG on this panel. Notice the close positioning of the rudder pedals and heel brakes.