

the *last flight of* the First GII

BY MATT BIRCH

Being an airplane enthusiast since childhood, and later an airplane photographer, I grew up appreciating aviation in the 1970s and 1980s — a golden era for the charismatic, smoky, noisy jets.

The Grumman Gulfstream GII was always my favorite, with its simple elegant lines, and for years I have followed the history of these wonderful airplanes. As their numbers began to decline in recent years as airplanes were withdrawn from service, to be replaced by more contemporary machinery, it only strengthened my resolve to photograph and document the fates of these airplanes before they disappeared for good. This quest eventually led me to the experience of a lifetime.

Following on from the successful GI turboprop, the first Grumman Gulfstream II took to the air in October 1966 from Grumman's Bethpage, N.Y., facility. It was one of only a handful of the total of 256 GIs that were initially built in Bethpage before the production line moved to the current site in Savannah.

Registered N801GA, serial No. 1 participated in Grumman's flight test and certification program, before being refurbished and sold to a customer in 1968.

That customer was Robert W. Galvin, a noted industrialist and innovator. He was the son of Paul Galvin, the founder of the Motorola Corporation, and served as



On the ramp in Charlotte, N.C., pilot Joseph Miller (right), co-pilot Joey Paterala (left) and the author Matt Birch captured some final photos with the aircraft.



After 46 years of service, the first Gulfstream GII, shown here landing in Luton, England, went to the Carolinas Aviation Museum in Charlotte, N.C., to take on a new role of education and inspiration.

CEO of the company from 1959 to 1986.

Now registered N55RG, GII serial No. 1 remained Bob Galvin's personal airplane for the next 44 years. Mr. Galvin passed away in October 2011 at the age of 89.

Appreciating the significance of this airplane, in early 2010 I wrote a personal letter to Mr. Galvin requesting permission to visit Chicago and take some photographs of his airplane. I visited Illinois on a sunny November day and got my photographs.

During my visit, I had the good fortune to meet Mr. Galvin's pilot, Joe Miller, who showed me around the airplane and entertained me with his stories of corporate flying over the last 40 years.

When I got back to England, I kept in touch with Joe. He appreciated my genuine interest in the airplane, and he kept me advised of the plans to eventually retire it, and the Galvins' wish for it to be preserved when a suitable home became available.

Following the passing of Mr. Galvin, Joe was given charge of the airplane and the negotiations regarding its destiny went on for some time.

On Tuesday, Sept. 4, 2012, out of the blue, I received an email from Joe. He apologized for the late notice, but he wanted to tell me that after conversations over the past few months with various interested parties, a decision was made

to retire the airplane and donate it to the Carolinas Aviation Museum in Charlotte, N.C. It was leaving Sunday, he said, and he asked if I wanted to go along for the ride.

Despite the short notice, the chance to fly on GII serial No. 1 on its last flight was something I simply could not refuse. On the evening of Saturday, Sept. 8, 2012, I was on a flight from London to Chicago.

Joe picked me up at my hotel at 8 a.m. and we drove to the Signature FBO at Chicago Executive Airport. N55RG was already on the ramp ready for its last flight.

Joe and co-pilot Joey Paterala accepted signed photos from Signature FBO Manager Al Palicki before we left, to commemorate more than 40 years of their association with the Galvin airplane coming to an end. On what was a very emotional day for the crew, they were utterly professional all day long.

The plane took off at 10 a.m. We were accompanied by the museum's executive

director, president, and the co-pilot's father. We turned south and flew over the airfield. The take-off was accented by the glorious whine of the Spey engines as they opened up, and at such a light weight, the acceleration was phenomenal.

High over the border of Kentucky and West Virginia the sky was beautiful and I thought how the airplane was as smooth as silk, in immaculate condition, and

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in such good shape for its age. Mr. Galvin had lavished a lot of care and money on the plane — it had the SP winglet conversion, hushkits, and only 9,500 hours on the airframe — it reminded me of someone who cherishes a 1960s Corvette.

Joe worked the cockpit, his "office," with skill and finesse. Despite its 1966 vintage, the cockpit had an upgraded electronic flight instrument system flight deck and a Jeppesen iPad kit. The lucky guests enjoyed the views from 41,000 feet.

Eyes became teary when we vectored downwind for this GII's final landing. It would never fly again once it was back on the ground. After 46 years of service it would take on a new role, one of education and inspiration at the museum as the centerpiece of an exhibit showcasing the influence and development of the corporate airplane in the U.S. and around the world. It will be displayed alongside another historic aircraft, the US Airways jetliner that Capt. Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger III landed safely on New York's Hudson River on Jan. 15, 2009.

On the museum's ramp, after a 1 hour and 25 minute flight, we posed for photos and admired the plane. Then it was turned over to its new owners.

After the airplane arrived at the museum, the Rolls-Royce Spey 511 engines were changed back to the aircraft's original engines from 1966, which first powered the airplane into the air all those years ago.

I left Charlotte around lunchtime Monday and arrived back home Tuesday morning after a hectic few days and

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memories I will always treasure.

I had experienced something special since that unexpected email a week earlier, and I had made a lifelong friend. It turned out to be Joe's final flight as well — after 40 plus years of corporate flying the world over, he went to work on his golf handicap.

I'm eternally thankful that Joe offered me the opportunity to join him on the last flight of Gulfstream II serial No. 1. It was a privilege and an experience I will never forget. ←

Matt Birch is an Air Traffic Controller based at the London Area Control Centre. In his leisure time, he is an airplane photographer and historian. His airplane photographs, including some from the story above, can be found at www.visualapproachimages.com.

Carolinas Aviation Museum Highlights the History of Flight

The Carolinas Aviation Museum, a Smithsonian affiliate, at Douglas Airport in Charlotte, N.C., highlights the history of aviation and how airplanes fly. It has a collection of military, civil and commercial aircraft, including helicopters, plus equipment, gadgets and printed material covering many years of aviation history.

Its interactive displays are designed to appeal to young visitors as well as aircraft enthusiasts of all ages. Visitors can even climb into the pilot's seat of several aircraft.

A main attraction is a replica of the 1903 Wright Flyer, the first piloted, heavier-than-air craft to achieve sustained, controlled flight. It represents the beginning of man's powered flight. The original Wright

Brothers aircraft was destroyed beyond repair shortly after it made its historic flight at Kill Devil Hills on the beaches of Kitty Hawk, N.C.

The museum also has the US Airways jetliner that Capt. Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger III landed safely on New York's Hudson River on Jan. 15, 2009. The plane, an Airbus 320 en route to Charlotte, N.C., that day, made an emergency landing on the river shortly after take-off because a bird strike shut down its engines. A flotilla of boats rescued all 155 passengers and crew while television cameras captured the scene. The event became known as "The Miracle on the Hudson."

— The Editors

VISIT THE MUSEUM WEBSITE AT WWW.CAROLINASAVIATION.ORG.