

Flight Test - Alabeo Gee Bee Model Z

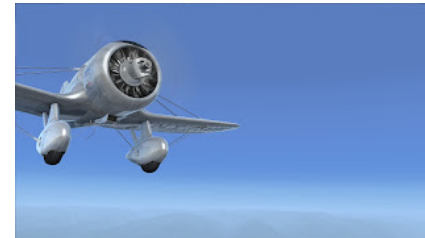
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FSX. So this evening I wasn't planning on doing a flight test, review, recap, impression, or whatever you want to call it. But it struck me; it's rare that I buy a new aircraft that really enhances my flight simulation experience. However, the Alabeo Gee Bee Model Z has done just that. Considering this is a rare occurrence, I thought I'd write a brief recap of my flight this evening for those of you interested in the aircraft.

The Gee Bee Model Z was a purpose built racing

aircraft from the 1930s, an era when racing aircraft was a glamorous feat. History remembers Gee Bee aircraft for their notoriously poor safety record due to countless deadly crashes. In essence, the aircraft is an engine with wings and it certainly looks the part.



Anyways, this evening's flight was to take me from Spokane, WA (KSFF) to Airdrie, AB (CEF4) routing over Bonners Ferry, ID and Cowley, AB. The reason for this odd routing is simple; the aircraft has a service ceiling of only 11,000ft so a routing around higher mountain peaks is a must. The true purpose of this article is not to review the aircraft but simply to provide an overview of the unique flying experience the Gee Bee offers.



Now, the aircraft is very challenging to fly, not so much because the flight dynamics are impossible but because the forward visibility is almost nil.

Although this is not necessarily a problem at altitude, ground operations and landing are particularly difficult.

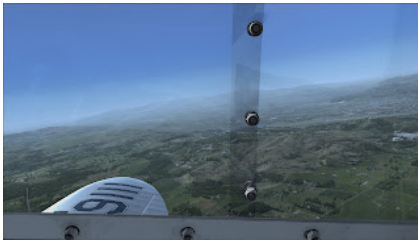
Starting at the executive terminal at Felts Field (SFF) the aircraft is completely cold and dark. Getting the Gee Bee started is very simple and no manual is required, of course there is no manual so this is a moot point anyways. Master battery, fuel selector, mixture and prop forward, fuel boost, boost coil, prime, then starter and that's it.



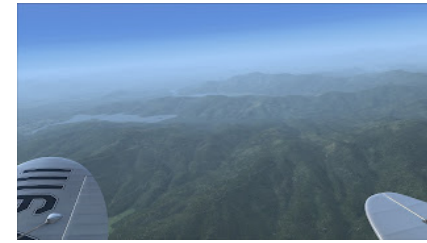
The first thing most people will notice is the poor visibility, naturally, taxiing is a complete nightmare. You can either slowly zigzag taxi in an effort to see what's in front or alternatively, reference your position on the runway or taxiway by looking to your sides and gauging an equal distance between the edges, the ladder being much more effective. The taxi out to runway 21R at Felts is very slow, maintaining approximately 5kts ground speed. Very little power is required to get the aircraft moving and even less is required to maintain taxi speed. There is no need to ride the brakes.



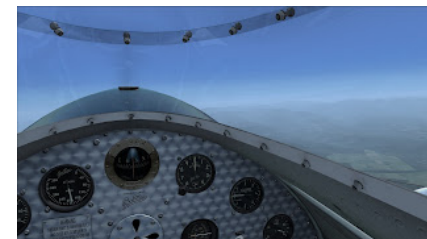
Takeoff is a little bit tricky due to poor forward visibility and the aircraft's quirky behaviour. Once lined the throttles are slowly pushed forward to the stops, no trim or flaps to worry about here. At 55 knots the nose must be pushed forward so that the bottom of the cockpit window is in line with the horizon, not doing so will cause the ailerons to stall.

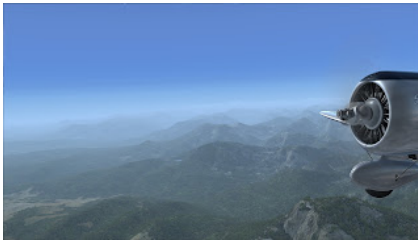
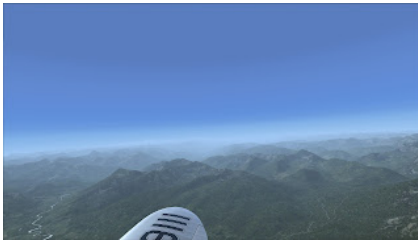


Immediately after departure we turn northeast towards Bonners Ferry, trying to maintain about 2000fpm although the aircraft will do much more. There is no manual so this is just the number that feels right to me and provides an excellent combination of speed and altitude gain. Since the aircraft is being pushed towards the upper levels of its maximum service ceiling the vertical speed will have to be dropped down to approximately 1000fpm simply to maintain airspeed. Ascent is non eventful with several adjustments to the mixture and prop levers. Soon, we are flying along at an initial cruise altitude of 10,000ft and indicated airspeed of 170kts. Later in the flight the altitude will have to be pushed right up to 11,000ft to make it over the Rockies.



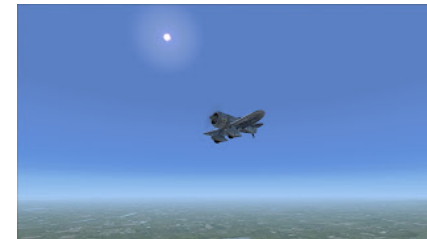
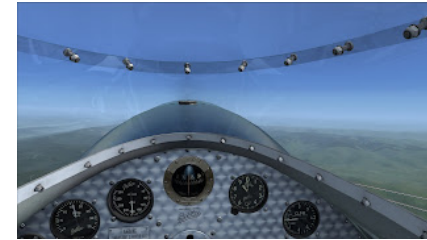
Cruise is simple but requires plenty of attention, constant trim and elevator adjustments are required to prevent altitude fluctuations. The mixture and prop lever must be adjusted for optimum cruise speed, sort of a trial and error type adjustment. Although the cruise portion of flight can be quite tiring, it is also very satisfying. Visibility is still poor and it is still not possible to see directly in front of the aircraft. There is very little more to say about cruise other than pay attention and maintain altitude. This particular flight is truly spectacular crossing mountain range after mountain range.





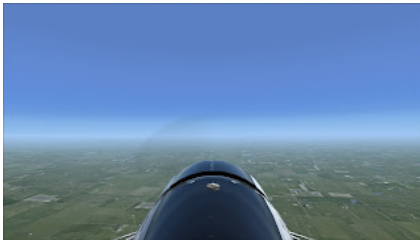
Much like cruise, descent is very simple, power back slightly and point the nose downwards. I suspect it is very difficult to overspeed this aircraft and I did reach some fairly high speeds during descent. As we descend over the Rockies towards Cowley the Alberta prairies appear in this distance, a welcome sight for this Albertan.

Getting closer to Airdrie I leveled off at both 9,000ft and 7,000ft as the terrain below flattened out.



As we approach Airdrie Airpark, the throttles must be pulled back and prop and mixture setting pushed forward. Circuit altitude for

Airdrie is only 4,200 feet, very low considering the airport sits at just over 3,600ft. The aircraft slows quickly but is easily controlled with delicate throttle movements. Entering the circuit speed should be brought back to approximately 120kts. The aircraft of course has no flaps but trim needs to be constantly adjusted to maintain level flight. Everything must be very stable in this phase of flight as landing is by far the most challenging aspect of flying the Gee Bee.



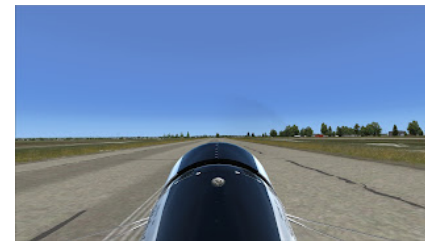
Lining up for runway 30 at Airdrie Airpark the fun really begins. Personally, I start the sideslip very early, about the only way to actually see the runway ahead. Approach speed is between 90kts and 95kts and the aircraft is surprisingly stable at these speeds. Approaching the Airdrie area is a familiar sight, a town I visit almost weekly for my real life work.



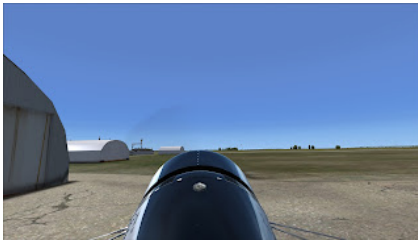
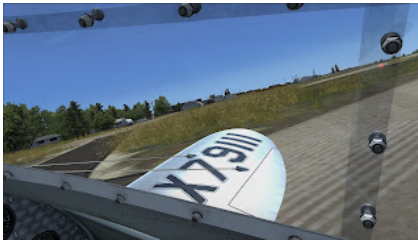


Touchdown speed is very important with the Gee Bee as you cannot brake until the tailwheel is settled at approximately 65kts. If you are too fast, you may run out of runway. However, if you fall below 75kts during approach or during the flare, you may experience an aileron reversal. The perfect touchdown speed is approximately 80kts, however, getting the speed right while coming out of a sideslip at 15ft is very challenging.

To sum up the approach, basically, sideslip approach at 95kts, aim for touchdown at 80kts while planning to exit the sideslip at approximately 15ft. Do not brake until the tailwheel is settled at 65kts and never fall below 75kts during approach or flare. Simple, right? This technique took me a significant amount of practice and I'm still nowhere near perfect. Luckily, this time around we were successful with a nice almost centreline touchdown with plenty of runway to spare.



Taxiing to parking obviously has the same challenges as taxiing for takeoff, poor forward visibility. The usual slow and careful taxi and we're parked at the hanger, a pleasant flight at just over 1 hour and 30 minutes.



The reason I love this aircraft is because of its quirkiness and challenging flight dynamics. It has added to my flight simulation experience and has probably made me an even better virtual pilot. The Gee Bee demands to be flown properly and requires constant attention. Every successful flight is more satisfying than the last. So, take

this article as you will but obviously I'm a fan...

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