

ARIZONAFLYER

THE ENTHUSIAST'S GUIDE TO LIFE ON THE WING

60 minutes over Phoenix

By Joe Sage
Photos by Randall Bohl



Any company being as generous as Goodyear has been, contributing many thousands of dollars' worth of highly collectible racing tires for auction sales, to generate funds for the Support Our Troops program, is also thoughtful enough to put some icing on the cake. Thus, they brought the Goodyear Blimp to Phoenix, so local military veterans could get an aerial view of Phoenix International Raceway, on Friday of the Kobalt Tools 500 NASCAR race weekend. And they invited the press along. Lucky us.

Flights, appropriately enough, were from Phoenix Goodyear Airport in the southwest Valley, located 6.7 miles northwest of PIR. The town of Goodyear was established in 1917 when the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company purchased 16,000 acres of land to cultivate cotton for tire treads. Goodyear became a town in November 1946 and a city in 1985. There are still plenty of cotton fields in the area, though many are for sale and no doubt destined to sprout new HOAs.

There are three Goodyear Blimps in the fleet: the

Spirit of Goodyear, based in Akron, Ohio, Goodyear's headquarters city; the Spirit of Innovation in Pompano Beach, Florida; and the Spirit of America in Carson, California, between Long Beach and Torrance, just east of the 405 at the 110. The Carson blimp was assigned to our Arizona duty.

As we headed to our rendezvous from the north Valley, we spotted the blimp high in the sky, as we all often have. But this was the first time it was headed to meet us, a distinctively neat thought as we continued down AZ 101. Another half hour or so brought us to our precision rendezvous and boarding.

The pilot and the ground crew of 16 have a few minutes of intense focus during the landing. Despite the apparent complexity of it all, pilot Jon Conrad takes it in stride: timing is pretty precise, he says, but it's more subject to the craft's own power than to any wind. The only thing that slows it down is passengers arriving to take off, but Conrad tells us arrival time for a landing is very predictable.

As the craft lands, we receive simple but firm instructions. Stay in a group. Let the crew land the airship, then we're going to walk out there single file. We will board one at a time. Get on board, find a seat. No smoking, no cellphone usage, no seatbelts (the third seems unusual but is not explained). We're given the okay for cellphone photos, just no calls and no texting. Everybody receives a headset, for hearing protection and voice-activated communications.

In the days after our flight, a number of people said, oh, it must have been so peaceful just floating up there. Well, no. As pilot Conrad said at the time, feel free to take videos, but your audio will be nothing but RRR-RRRR-RRRRRRR. Right he was. The engines are right outside the lightweight gondola the passengers and crew ride in. We had in fact entered a few key factoids on voice recorder during the flight, but there was only zero to maybe two percent audibility for any voice.

Joining Conrad and the two of us on the ride were Steve Post of Motor Racing Network on Sirius NASCAR Radio, Christie Poe of Bakersfield, and two others: a photographer from phxspotters.com and one passenger from Boise. We ascended over Goodyear and headed southeast toward PIR. There's no mistaking a change in direction in a blimp: Conrad skillfully angled us down

KEEP RIGHT >>



Photos (2) courtesy Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company

GOODYEAR, NASCAR, TROOP NEWMAN AND PIR

GOODYEAR AND RYAN NEWMAN BENEFIT SUPPORT OUR TROOPS PROGRAM

The famed Goodyear Blimp was brought to Phoenix in November in honor of Veteran's Day, to provide rides to Armed Forces veterans. Last summer, Goodyear held an online auction of race-used, driver-autographed Eagle Racing tires featuring a red, white and blue color scheme reading "Support Our Troops." The Kobalt Tools 500 weekend's races at Phoenix International Raceway marked the culmination of the Goodyear Support Our Troops program. With the proceeds of the red, white and blue tire auction, Goodyear made a sizeable donation before the weekend's races to the nonprofit organization, Support Our Troops.

Ryan Newman, winner of the last Sprint Cup Series event at PIR and driver of the #39 US Army/Tornados/Haas Automation Chevrolet, teamed up with PIR to create Troop Newman. The program, part of PIR's Salute to Military Families initiative, sent some 500 military troops and their families to the Kobalt Tools 500 NASCAR Sprint Cup Series race on November 14—Veteran's Day weekend—free of charge. Newman also visited National Guard



units at the Papago Park Military Reservation in Phoenix to donate race tickets funded by Troop Newman. Race fans and military supporters who made a donation to the Troop Newman program were entered to win a private meet-and-greet session with Newman during the weekend and were recognized on PIR's website. Large donors received a photo op in Gatorade Victory Lane and an exclusive PIR patriotic hat.

The US Army and Stewart-Haas Racing created special graphics for Newman's #39 Soldiers' Car. Veterans, families, friends and loved ones could submit photos online to become part of the car's art. "It's an honor for me to represent more than a million soldiers on the racetrack each weekend," Newman said. "Obviously, Veteran's Day is a very special weekend, and I think the fact that we are going to recognize some of the brave men and women of the US Army by carrying their faces on the #39 car is a pretty powerful statement." ■





A ground crew of 16 handles the Goodyear Blimp's landing and takeoff. It's a lot of beast to secure, even briefly, so passengers load quickly. • The heart of our mission was to fly above Phoenix International Raceway. • The route passed over University of Phoenix Stadium as the playing field was being rolled back inside after catching its daily dose of natural sunshine. • Photographer Randall Bohl appeared to be caught up in the general exuberance of the flight, but later told us this is when he realized his headset cord was tangled in the door handle. No seatbelts. His next shot might have been his most memorable. • Our host: Captain Jon Conrad, whose background as a helicopter pilot has turned out to be such an asset for this different kind of flying, Goodyear now recruits more of the same.

over the Salt River toward the racetrack, where we experienced our own Super Bowl view of the crowds and crews gathering for the big NASCAR weekend. From there, we swung north, gaining a surprisingly close view of a daring small aircraft pilot dragging an advertising banner toward PIR, then passing over the Arizona Cardinals' stadium, spring training fields and plenty of west Valley neighborhoods en route back to the field. You can hear the aforementioned engine noise and catch the general thrill by checking out our final approach video at www.adzoneaz.com/goodyearblimp/IMG_6475.MOV.

Even from the relative proximity of Southern California, having a blimp show up in Phoenix for our joyride is no mean feat. The crew not only flew one hour-long tour after another all day, but also performed about an 11-hour flight over from Carson CA and another one back. Ground support follows along, with rendezvous opportunities en route if need be.

Fixed-wing pilots say flying consists of "hours of sheer boredom, punctuated by moments of stark terror." Our Goodyear Blimp ride had neither. Only 1000 people a year go up in the Goodyear Blimp, so with three in the fleet, that averages less than one person a day, overall. A very nice opportunity. ■

