

## Sound Of Freedom

-Peyton DeHart

Airplanes in flight overhead have caused me to crane my neck skyward since youth. The Doppler shift of sound coming from above has proven irresistible to my curiosity. Look up. See a plane. Wonder about how it is... that it flies.

For all the time I have devoted to the listening of aircraft in flight, in only one place, for only one year, did I absolutely know what was flying over before looking up. The year was 1980. The place was Pensacola, Florida.

I arrived as a student naval aviator having never before flown. My aviation experience was limited to airline seats and model airplanes. Arriving at North Whiting Field with a group of twenty or so likeminded students assigned to VT-6 (Fixed

Wing Training Squadron Six), I was informed by the Operations Officer that I was assigned to the last squadron at Whiting to transition fully to the T-34C Turbo Mentor. For a period of time, half the squadron still operated the venerable T-28B Trojan, the other half flew the T-34C.



"Who wants to fly the T-28?" he asked.

All hands shot into the air. "Thought so," he went on, "this always happens when the class is mostly Marines. Everyone write your name on a piece of paper and put it in this hat. I'll draw names for aircraft assignment."

And so it was that my name was drawn to fly a small T-34C with a simple power lever (throttle) and constant speed propeller, instead of the behemoth T-28B with throttle, mixture, cowl flaps, prop lever, high and low blower, and a propensity to suffer lost communications every other flight. Though I didn't know it at the time, I probably owe my eventual graduation with a set of wings to the simplicity of the T-34. I'm not sure I would have survived the T-28. So I was disappointed with the hand of fate, but it was actually looking out for my best interests.

Living on base, at the BOQ, was an auditory-overload experience; as we were under the traffic pattern of one of the busiest Naval Air Stations in

existence. In the constant flow of the traffic pattern, the whine of the T-34's prop would be followed in due time by the throaty rumble of the T-28's engine. Once I had those two sonic signatures down (took all of about ten seconds), the next trick was to try to determine the number of aircraft in the pattern by sound alone, or the number of aircraft inbound for the "Break" at the conclusion of a Formation training flight (normally two or four, depending on the syllabus flight, but sometimes a mechanical problem caused one to drop out... so three was a possible answer as well). For the alert listener, desperately trying to soak up any and all knowledge about things aviation, this process took about a week. From then on, the faint noise growing to crescendo told me exactly what was flying overhead at any given time.

The differences are so remarkable that it would be hard NOT to be able to "tell" the type aircraft by sound, but to the uninitiated, it seemed a parlor trick.

"How'd you know what it was?" the person would ask.

"How could you NOT know, if you live here?" was my unspoken reply.

The T-28 was the more pleasant signature in flight.



The rumble fairly bristled with power. Smoothly firing on all nine cylinders, it ground up the sky with huge flat paddles for propellers pulling it along. It throbbed a fast heartbeat of exhilaration. But the neatest sound on base

belonged to a T-34C taxiing. The annoying high whine of the prop would shift key and soften to a whir when the power lever was pulled back into "Beta" range. The constant speed prop twisted through its' range of motion until it applied negative thrust (pushing the wind forward, rather than aft). That was useful in helping to stop the plane upon landing, or helping to taxi slower without heating up the brakes. As neat as it is to fly when one wants to fly, it is an equally important attribute that one be able to stop when one wants to stop.

Something else comes to mind, too, when talking about the sounds of freedom. It bears remembering that though I love aviation and STILL rush out of the house to raise my thumb skyward to any aircraft that rumbles lowly by, there are other mortals, wretched creatures I suspect, who run out of their houses, clutching their noise-complaint-number-on-speed-dial cell phone, while raising skyward another digit.