Early in 2018, TTOMA contacted the North Pole Operations with a request to deliver gift baskets to the owner and staff of the North Georgia Turf Farm (NGTF) as a gesture of appreciation for permitting the club to fly our outdoor activities on their property. This mission is a favorite with Santa as a practice run before the Christmas Eve world flight.

This year, two smaller baskets were prepared for the office staff that gave a larger than usual volume of chocolates and seasonal cookies .....more of the good stuff! The elf in procurement had a problem with the content of the standard baskets when it was time to select a big basket for the farm owners, Aaron and Linda McWhorter. One selection on the production line had smelly cheese and Peruvian olives in the mix! Mrs. Claus came to the rescue and sorted the matter quickly with a fine basket for the family. The card at the left is an example of the way the baskets were marked for delivery. The card is 6X5 inches and the yellow airplane has been on the cards for the last five years.

Sleigh preparations went reasonably well although current tariff restrictions made it expensive to get some special materials to upgrade the vehicle. The shop was able to get a new polymer to coat the runners to improve braking on short landing sites. Have you ever tried to get parts for a 2016 Super Sleigh? The FAA was particularly helpful and speedy in clearing the sleigh for this year’s flying.

Crew training went well this year. Some of you may recall that we had some HR problems recently with Blitzen, but this year he was in good spirits and had a positive work ethic during our workouts. On the other hand, Comet had to spend some extra time with the sprint coach as he clearly had been cutting his workouts short. All the boys seemed fit this year as our focus on less beer and pizza kept them in slimmer condition. Rudolf met his standards with a full-strength glowing nose as well as his workout schedule.
The sleigh was loaded on the night of December 16 for a run on Monday, December 17. The load to be delivered was light, so ballast was added to bring the vehicle up to standard weight and to set the correct center of gravity. Although the weather forecast was good, Rudolf was assigned to fly to get the full team working together. At 9:15AM EST, the sleigh launched for the 2018 run. There was a light frost on the area, calm wind, bright sun, and a true blue-bird sky as we lifted off. The takeoff was quick as the Hemi team was off like a shot! Approaching the metro Atlanta area from the north, the plan was to work on a new route this year to minimize the congested air space over the city. We flew a track over I-575 and then rolled out on a westward heading following Hwy 92. As soon as the turn was complete it was already time to give the big command, “Run, Rudolf, run!!” and off we went. About an hour out we began a slow turn to the south and set a course for Douglasville. The only air traffic we encountered was a three-ship formation of geese that passed under us and a couple of hawks having a grand morning of soaring. After passing over Douglasville, we flew a steady, slow descent over the next twenty miles into the final approach to the sod farm. The parking lot was quiet and the landing was soft. A lady from the office came out to meet Santa and as always, she was happy to receive a basket gift. She then placed the McWhorter’s basket on Aaron’s desk and we exchanged a few holiday pleasantries.

It was then time to go and the team had to be watered. While Santa was in the office, the boys helped themselves to some of the fine looking sod samples stacked on pallets near the front door. We just hope nobody notices the “reindeer rash” on the sod!! We made a quick takeoff toward home and had another smooth, safe return. The team members were clearly pleased with their performance and there was the usual reindeer trash talk. Santa was proud of the boys and this year we did not have a single case of texting and flying among the team!!

All the Thermal Thumbers members can be proud of the gift baskets delivered this year. Anyone would be pleased with the content of the baskets and the spirit behind the effort. Continue the spirit and celebrate this season in a meaningful manner. Look forward to a fresh start in 2019.

Reporting with boots removed and a fresh adult beverage in hand.....S. Claus