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ESP WAS RECENTLY COMMISSIONED TO PHOTOGRAPH TWO WW2 STEARMAN TRAINING AIRCRAFT OVER ROCKINGHAM IN WA. THESE AIRCRAFT WERE IMMACULATEDLY RESTORED BY ROB POYNTON AND HIS TEAM FROM PERTH BASED PANAMA JACKS VINTAGE AIRCRAFT COMPANY. HERE JON GIVES AN INSIGHT INTO THE SUBSEQUENT SHOOT OF THESE CLASSIC AIRCRAFT.

WORDS & PHOTOS by Jon

In 1929, aircraft designer extraordinaire Lloyd Stearman, who at the time worked for the Boeing Aircraft company as president of the Stearman Division, laid the design foundations for one of aviation's classic and legendary aircraft. His design drawings for his Model 70 'Cloudboy' trainer became the basis of Boeing's legendary Stearman Kaydet trainer of World War Two fame.

Although an almost obsolete design by 1939 standards, the Kaydet's rugged yet simple design made it the perfect aircraft for novice US Navy and US Army Air Corps trainee airmen to gain their wings in. The Stearman was designated N2S and PT17 respectively by both services. Boeing ended up producing over 10'000 of them, including spares. Later Lloyd left Boeing to form the Stearman Aircraft Company.

Previously he had worked with two other future aviation pioneers, Walter Beech and Clyde Vernon Cessna. All three had a shared dream to produce an aircraft with a tubular metal fuselage, rather than wood. Both Cessna and Beech went on to create classic and long lived aircraft designs.



THIS PAGE:
JON AND DAVID (FLYING
SIDWAYS) FOLLOWING
LEON AND ROB AS
THEY TOUCH DOWN AT
JANDAKOT
OPPOSITE: KARL AND
ALAN (WITH CAMERA)
JUST BELOW OUR SKIDS



I had photographed Rob Poynton's beautifully restored aircraft over the years, mainly the Stearman and T6 Texans, but never two of the same aircraft at the same time together. So when Rob rang up and asked if I would like to do an air-to-air shoot with two Stearmans that he had restored for clients Carl Ende and Bob Merkenhof, well what could I say? I suggested that we do HD video footage as well, so my colleague Alan Bacchelli, a great HD cameraman would go along in one of the Stearmans.

As with most complex A2A shoots, it was a matter of all the elements being aligned at a given point in time. The two aircraft were ready and air worthy, the weather was clear with good blue skies (although it was 40 degrees, and had been for about a week) and the pilots were in town! Leon Dunbar, Rob's partner, would fly owner Ben Merkenhof's aircraft 'Big





Bob' in the lead with Rob as a passenger, whilst Carl Ende would fly his own aircraft, with Alan as passenger. So we had a go.

We had arranged for a Sunday morning sortie, so myself, David and Alan met at Rob's hangar. The two aircraft looked as new, as would be expected with Rob and Leon's superb work in bringing these aircraft back to life. It was amazing to think that these aircraft were responsible for training just about every US pilot of WW2.

The cruise speed of the Stearman was around 90kts, so for a change the R44 camera helicopter could keep pace with the target aircraft. In fact we would have an extra 20kts up our sleeve if needed, and would enable David to get me some great angles. Usually we are hard at it keeping up with our subject aircraft, all who are usually 20kts faster than us! So more often than not we are in a dive as a formation to get the speeds matched! Here we could fly sideways to get head-on shots, plus matched speeds for either formation takeoffs or landings.

We took off in formation with the R44 slightly ahead, it was a great angle to get the two Stearman's only meters away, with the runway beneath. No matter how many times I do this, it is still an awesome feeling shooting from an open door (In fact because of the 40 degree outside temperatures, today all doors were off!) with your subject alongside you.

We flew over the reef system off Penguin Island where there were some great colours that contrasted with the brilliant yellow and white of the two aircraft. My style is always to try and incorporate this in



**OPPOSITE TOP:
THE TWO STEARMANS
LOW OVER PENGUIN
ISLAND**
**NEXT SPREAD: OVER
ROCKINGHAM**



my compositions, to try and show something of the environment in which an aircraft operates. Here it reminded me a lot of the Naval Air Stations based in Florida during the war. These aircraft would have been flying daily off the beaches and reefs from the late 1930's, through to wars end in 1945.

Ben's A75-L3 Stearman 'Big Bob' is a story in itself, but here it is in brief.

Ben started Hunter Valley Joy Flights with a 1942 Tiger Moth, to offer his late father Bob Merkenhof's aircraft for others to experience. It was Bob's dream to also include a 1930's Boeing Stearman 'Big Bob' and contracted Panama Jack's in Perth to start work on restoring this classic aircraft. Sadly in 2009, at age 59, Bob passed away from heart disease. Ben subsequently took over the project of 'Big Bob's' restoration, and Panama Jack's completed the immaculate restoration in March 2011. Ben understood his father's passion for the project and made it his mission to see "Big Bob" roar into life once again. On March 23rd Ben flew the Stearman from Perth, back home to Cessnock in NSW to raise money for The Heart Research Institute (HRI). He landed back home on April 5th after flying 4000 kilometers with 21 fuel stops. The epic flight was covered by National press and television, and was tracked by GPS. Ben gave live video feeds every night to his viewers on facebook.

As a photographer, you always wait to get a connection with your subject, and if you don't get this, then the shoot is probably not going to work. I still find it odd that you can even get this connection with machinery. And it was happening on this shoot almost from takeoff. It was a privilege to have photographed both these aircraft, knowing you are making a connection with the past and the present. ©

Jon Davison

