What’s this fascination with WW-I aircraft?

Every time the stalwart studmuffins (and studmuffinette) of The Kansas City Dawn Patrol show up at an airshow with our planes on their trailers, a crowd gathers. When our convoy stops at a McDonald’s on the way for a quick squat and gobble, a crowd gathers. When we stop anywhere, a crowd gathers!

You have to face it... WW-I aircraft are people magnets. They’re just plain neat. They’ve got that historic “Knights of the Air” mystique about them.

When you see a WW-I plane, you’ve got to think of the scene in that 1927 classic movie Wings where Buddy Roger’s guns had jammed during a swirling dogfight with a German ace over the trenches. He watches his nemesis get in position behind him, ready to send a stream of lead into his plane. In a WW-I aircraft, the result would be a fiery death. Seeing that our hero’s guns are jammed, the Black Baron of Verdun pulls up beside him in close formation, smiles and gives him a salute. He then banks away and flies out of sight. He wants to fight him another day on equal terms. Such a nice guy!

Incredibly, things like this actually did happen, even a few times in WW-II. After the wars were over, many opposing pilots, who at one time had been doing their best to kill each other, became great friends. It’s a warrior-to-warrior kinda thing.

Flying History

Even after 27 years, we feel the same way about our planes in The Dawn Patrol. (Yes, it’s been 27 years since Tom Glaeser and I first flew our neat little Graham Lee Nieuport 11s.) It’s still a thrill to open the hangar doors and see those fabric-covered wings glistening in the lights. With the black Maltese crosses, British and French roundels seem to shout romance and history.

And talk about flying one of these little jewels... well, what can I say? Every flight is a flashback in time almost 100 years to an aviation era drenched in history, daring feats, heroism and romance.

Now, a lot of people have made snarky remarks when we drive up to an airshow with our planes in tow. “Why didn’t ya fly them here?” is the common theme. The number one response is that we wanted to make sure we actually got there. A cross-country flight in a WW-I aircraft is not to be taken lightly. Most of the early WW-I warbirds could only exceed 90 mph if their wings fell off. The only other thing in the air our little canvas falcons can pass is a balloon. Besides that, any flight over an hour in these little torture chambers can really wipe you out. Winter flying is a particularly excruciating ordeal. Sometimes you don’t quit shivering until you get home!

A long cross-country flight against a headwind (they’re always against a headwind) is just miserable. If you’re unlucky enough to be in that situation... all bets are off. Glaeser and I flew our Nieuports

Dick Starks

has written two books about the joy of flying; “You Want To Build And Fly A What?” and “Fokkers At Six O’clock!!” He was the recipient of Flying’s 2001 Box Seat Award “for perpetuating the Gordon Baxter tradition of communicating the excitement and romance of flight.” Dick and his wife, Sharon, both fly WW-I replica aircraft.
to Oshkosh in 1986, fighting a headwind all the way. The ultimate insult was when we were flying the leg from Trenton, Missouri, to Ottumwa, Iowa. We got passed by a dump truck...on a gravel road! Our average ground speed to Oshkosh was 37 mph. The return trip to Kansas City was a little better, against another headwind. Yep, 44 mph average ground speed. We were reeling off the miles that day.

So, why do we subject ourselves to this abuse? Just for the sheer fun of it. Not to mention the attention our cheap little warbirds get. Showing off your warbird is an outstanding boost to your self-esteem. When you're parked on a flight line next to a $120,000, 250-mph, plastic go-fast and the crowd is gathered around your little $6,000 plane— it's just swell.

One of the real perks of having a WW-I plane is you get invited to more airshows than you can possibly attend. In fact, the reason we went to trailers is so we could actually make it to the shows we wanted to go to. Getting back home was another reason to build the trailers. One year, it took us nine days to get home from the annual Memorial Day Weekend Salute To Veterans Airshow held outside of Columbia, Missouri. Again, weather was the reason: 108 miles in 2 hours and 45 minutes...nonstop! That comes to 39 mph average ground speed. We were really kicking butt on that flight. That's when we all decided to build trailers.

There is a downside to being invited to airshows, particularly big airshows where you are asked to fly. The odds that you're going to really embarrass yourself in front of the appreciative crowd are astronomical. Keep that little tidbit in mind. If you're afraid of making a fool of yourself, you don't belong in a WW-I aircraft. They're just lying in wait for a chance to turn around and bite you. Ask me how we know.

Taking off or landing a short-coupled, twitchy little taildragger WW-I aircraft on cement has the inherent potential for a real “Don't look, Ethel” moment.

Landing a WW-I aircraft on any cement runway is a terrifying challenge. Then factor in the difference that you're used to landing on a 1500-foot-long, 50-foot-wide grass runway. The sudden change to landing on a cement runway 6500 feet long and 150 feet wide is mind boggling. If you're using the same perspective you usually use, you'll end up rounding out at about 15 to 20 feet too high and really splatter her in.

Case in point: At the 2011 Memorial Day Weekend Salute to Veterans Airshow, I made a classic seven-point landing in front of about 20,000 cheering spectators. (Please note: A “point” is defined as a contact between any part of the aircraft and the ground.) I looked like one of the hippopotamus ballerinas from Fantasia tippy-toeing down the runway.

My “Ethel” moment was followed by my wife, Sharon, doing a real whifferdill while landing her Morane on that enormous runway. She got up on one wheel, swerved all over the place, almost dragging a wingtip, and finally ran off the runway. Demonstrating great coolness and presence of mind, she skillfully did the “taildragger tap dance” on
the rudder pedals and steered her bird around a landing light and then ran back up on the runway. (We have this on video, recorded from the tower catwalk accompanied by voice commentary and cheers.)

**Hail to Our Veterans**

We really treasure our appearances at the Salute to Veterans Airshow. We’ve attended every one since 1992. The whole purpose of the show is to honor and remember our men and women in uniform.

I was honored to have Col. Travis Hoover, the pilot of the number two B-25 to launch from the deck of the Hornet on that famous raid on Tokyo, sit in the cockpit of my Nieuport when he was at the Salute. Many modern-day military pilots who fly F-16s, A-10s, F-18s, F-14s, C-2As and C-17s have sat in our planes. These really Big Iron pilots must have wondered about the men who actually went into combat in those flimsy “flaming coffins”…without parachutes too. What incredible bravery they must have had.

The 2012 Salute to Veterans Airshow was a special one for us. We finally broke new ground and showed up with a two-seat WW-I replica. Yep, Harvey Cleveland was there with his 1918 Curtiss Seagull replica in U.S. Navy Coastal Patrol colors. It’s actually a Mariner amphibian, but we don’t care; it looks WW-I (KITPLANES®, April 2012). We were finally going to be able to give some rides to some very special people who were at this airshow. I’m talking about real live American heroes, the individuals that had done things in the air that other people can only try to imagine. It was the response from one of those riders after his flight that really hit home with us.

We'd received the OK from the airshow boss (or in this case...bossette) to give some rides in the Seagull to some special honored guests at the show that year. We were to make sure these flights were made early in the morning before...
the show opened and the “box” went into effect.

The first ride went to Col. William Bos-

ton, USAF Retired. Col. Boston has been

the air boss at the airshow for eight years;

he served over 27 years in the United

States Air Force, accruing nearly 2000

hours as a fighter pilot and attaining

the rank of colonel. He flew 260 combat

missions in the McDonnell-Douglas F-4

Phantom in Southeast Asia and received

three Distinguished Flying Crosses. He’d

walked the walk and talked the talk, in

spades. He was always asking when we

were going to bring a two-seat WW-I

aircraft so he could finally get a ride.

Well, this was his year.

Col. Boston jumped into the front

cockpit of the Seagull with a big smile

on his face. The Big Bad Twin engine was

started, and they waited for it to warm

up. Cleveland talked to the tower while

they waddled out to the active runway.

After getting clearance from the tower,

they took off and spent about 20 min-

utes making passes down the runway,

“yanking and banking” as they went by

the flight line.

They landed and taxied back to the

WW-I flight line. Just as soon as the engine

shut down, Col. Boston said, “After eight

years, I can finally understand why you

guys do this. This was an absolute ball.”

We realized then that we’d all become

a little bit jaded after over 20 years of fly-

ing these little gems. Yep, it is an absolute

ball, for all the reasons I’ve written about

in this article. It just took Col. Boston to

bring the magic back to us.

This photo was taken by “Sabre” Ron Sharek from the front cockpit in the Seagull on very

short final. This offers the perspective seen from the cockpit of The Dawn Patrol’s little

planes. Do you see the Nieuport exiting the runway on the right? The runway at Liberty

Landing International Airport is about as wide at the two white strips where the Nieuport is.

Can you blame the crew for rounding out a little high? By the way, Sharek flew 233 missions

in Southeast Asia in the F-100 “Hun” Super Sabre jet.
The next veteran to go up was a real American icon. Col. Charles McGee, USAF Retired, was a member of the famous ground-breaking 332nd WW-II fighter group. They were called The Red Tails, otherwise known as the Tuskegee Airmen. Col. McGee flew in three wars, WW-II, Korea and Vietnam. He flew P-40 Warhawks, P-51 Mustangs, F-80 Shooting Stars and F-4C Phantoms. He holds the record for the most combat hours of any pilot in the U.S. Air Force. He and Cleveland headed out to commit aviation. After 15 to 20 minutes, they made a nice three-bounce landing with Col. McGee at the controls. His smile when they came in told the same story as Col. Boston’s.

Capt. William “Whiskey” Bond, USN Retired, was next. Capt. Bond has flown the A-4 Sky Hawk, F-5 Tiger II, T-38 Talon and F-14 Tomcat. He has accumulated 4100 hours in tactical jet aircraft and more than 3000 hours in the F-14 Tomcat. Add to that his 830 “traps” or carrier landings, and you’ve got a man who’s done it all. Capt. Bond has been awarded the Legion of Merit, the Defense Meritorious Service Medal, the Meritorious Service Medal (three awards), two individual Air Medals (with Combat V), one

Strike/Flight Air Medal, the National Defense Medal, the Southwest Asia Service Medal, the Iraq Campaign Medal, the Navy Commendation Medal, the GWOT Expeditionary Medal, the GWOT Service Medal, the Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal and the Sea Service Deployment Ribbon (five awards). His flight in the Seagull was just like all the rest: He came in with a big smile on his face. He’d also made a flawless “greaser” landing in the Seagull.

Being able to show these great guys that flying can be fun was worth the whole trip to the show. Besides being able to take some great Americans for a flight in a WW-I aircraft, the Memorial Day Weekend Salute to Veterans Airshow is a great way to start off the year’s flying season.

When the show was winding down Sunday, we all pushed our planes back to the enormous hangar reserved for us to start breaking them down for the drive back to Kansas City. We were already looking forward to the 2013 show, which will be the 25th Annual Salute to Veterans Airshow. And so, the adventure continues. ✠

Col. Travis Hoover, the pilot of the second B-25 off the Hornet’s deck on the famous Tokyo raid, sits on the edge of the cockpit of the author’s Nieuport. Standing beside him is Tung-Sheng Liu, who rescued him and his crew. Liu helped lead the Americans through Japanese-occupied areas to a dusty landing strip where they were flown to safety. He was made an honorary member of the Doolittle Raiders. Both gentlemen have passed on.

Airdrome Aeroplanes
www.airdromeaeroplanes.com

Doolittle Raiders
www.doolittleraider.com

The Kansas City Dawn Patrol
www.kcdawnpatrol.org

Memorial Day Salute to Veteran’s Air Show
www.salute.org

The National WASP WW-II museum
www.waspmuseum.org

The Tuskegee Airmen
www.332ndfg.org

Wings
www.amazon.com/Wings-Blu-ray-Clara-Bow/dp/B0067MLCEI

The author (left) and Pierce make a low pass for the photographers on the tower catwalk. (And, yes, to answer your question, the tower asked them to do it and cleared them for the low pass!)