

The May Report

One of the interesting fellows I met in the States shall have to remain nameless to protect us both but I shall call him The Red Baron. He bought a Pitts S-2B. Some owners just want the standard red and white sunburst - the Soucy scheme or the red, white and blue with stars and stripes - the Marion Cole scheme. Others want something special - there is one we later called the McDonalds scheme.

Red's colour scheme was unique. No-one else would want an aeroplane painted like this. The cowl was red. The rest of the aeroplane was covered in black and white checks with a Maltese cross under each wing. Red took some dual instruction in a Pitts S-2A before his aeroplane was finished but had never flown in an S-2B before we got in for the delivery flight. Red got in the front with his GPS and I got in the back with a couple of sectional charts. We both wore new Bose noise cancelling headsets. This was summer and we were on our way to Arizona so it should be a pleasant flight.

We departed Afton at about 10 am in clear blue skies towards Salt Lake City. Once established at our cruising altitude I further leaned the engine and sat back to enjoy the flight. (well as much as a 6 ft 2" frame can sit back in an S-2B anyway). A few minutes later the engine gave a little hiccup. It obviously wasn't the automatic rough experienced over water and I thought that maybe I had leaned it too much. The mixture was rest and we continued on our way and it wasn't long before we could descend to a lower altitude and thread our way around the mountains east of SLC towards the airfield at Provo. With the main fuselage tank and the wing tank full we had a total useable capacity of 27 US gallons and burning 11 USG/hr gives a safe endurance of nearly 2 hrs - a still air range of about 270 nm. It's rare that you find airfields 270 nm apart on the route and even rarer to go somewhere without a headwind so the typical distance between fuel stops was 200 nm. Today, the first leg to Provo was only about 180 nm. Nothing to keep us there so we left as soon as we had fuel, climbing direct to 12,000 ft to clear a mountain range. This leg was over pretty remote country towards Page at the western end of Lake Powell. A short stop for lunch then departing to fly past the Grand Canyon and on to Phoenix. Red had the opportunity to do most of the flying including the take-off from Page so I decided to let him try a landing at Phoenix which went quite well. The Bose headsets had worked really well as we didn't suffer from the usual ringing in the ears that you would otherwise get after a full day in the Pitts.

A couple of months later we had a telephone call from Red to say that the engine had stopped in flight for about a second and then ran alright. We organised a Lycoming representative to meet me down in Phoenix to have a look at this and he ended up changing a few components. Although as good as new again Red was concerned that the logbook now showed numerous repairs to the engine so we offered to swap engines with our demo S-2B. So, I went down to Phoenix again to pick the aeroplane up and fly it back to Afton with Red. Its worth noting that Red had, by now, checked himself out in the S-2B so he flew it from the rear seat.

Just down the road from the factory was a cafe called The Red Baron which was frequented by aviation people but it was across the road at The Homestead that Red found a greater attraction than the burgers. I was with Red one day when he told one of the waitresses that the best way for her to get out of Afton was to go with him in his aeroplane - and never come back. I am unable to record the answer he received. A few days later Red departed Afton again - alone this time - never to be seen again. We did hear from him again - when he was stopped by the authorities as he tried to cross the border into Canada in his Pitts. We heard again later that he also spent some time in jail resulting from yet another border crossing incident in another part of the world. Hopefully Red himself will provide a detailed account of his adventures in his aeroplane to be published in a later newsletter.

I met another bunch of interesting people on my way to the other Page Airport just outside Oklahoma City - the site of the 1996 World Aerobatic Championships. I left Fond du Lac in the 50th Anniversary Special S-2B in formation with another S-2B. Another section consisting of a Sukhoi and an Extra 300 left at the same time, also for Page. One Australian, two Americans and a German. On the radio I could only understand the German and she was only telling jokes all the way.

I had planned the route but the other Pitts pilot wanted to change one of the landing points to what looked like a bigger airfield where there would be a better chance of getting a decent lunch. Calling inbound we were advised that one runway was closed due to construction. Pity that - it looked like a nice big one. I was nearly stopped about two-thirds of the way down the 1800 ft strip and gave a radio

call that I was going to the end. When I got there I turned around and was surprised to see the other Pitts about halfway down still doing about 100 mph. I got off onto the grass and as he went past me, still doing about 50 mph I told him he had 100 yds to go - he stopped with the mains just on the bitumen! And then lunch was miserable.

Thinking about this reminded me of the number of times I took a Pitts away from Afton and found that the idle speed had increased just enough that the aeroplane would float all the way down the runway. When we finished an aeroplane we would try to set the idle to suit the destination but when we set it correct for conditions at Afton it would be way too fast for the rest of the world.

We arrived at Page just in time to attend the local dinner to welcome the American team as they commenced their practice session. One of the speeches referred to a correlation between aerobatics and breast sizes of the female team members - must have something to do with the bras not being designed to withstand negative g.

I went back home to Afton and returned to Page towards the end of the contest. Before the contest we had swapped propellers between the S-2B and the S-1-11B we were sponsoring in the contest. Some experts did the swap but when I did my next pre-flight inspection I noticed that the bolts were not lockwired. I tried to enlist the help of the American team with some interesting response - a loan of a torque wrench, advice that they don't bother with lockwire and a smile from Patty. I bribed an Australian mechanic to help me.

By the end of the contest a few of us had successfully spread the rumour that the next World Championships were to be held in Australia. One well known magazine even reported this as fact.