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Someday

Realizing a dream...and letting it go

by GARY ROWER



This story first appeared in the November 2025 issue of AOPA Pilot.

The year was 1942 when Boeing Model 75, serial number 75-553, rolled off the production line. A World War II trainer, she completed the war intact and, like so many of her sister ships, she was sold for pennies after the war. In the next 28 years she did a bit of everything from hopping rides for a church to spraying fields.

In 1973, Dick Reade and the team at Mid-Continent Maintenance Division tore her down and did a full reconstruction, number 24 in a long line of incomparable Stearman aircraft. Then she was sold, bought again, sold again, retrofitted with a Serv-Aero STCed R985, bought, and sold again.

Ultimately, she ended up back at MCMD in Hayti, Missouri, as Reade's personal Stearman. Around 2000, Reade and his team, realizing she needed work, tore her down again and in 2002 finished what amounted to another rebuild or more accurately an IRAN (inspect, repair as necessary).

Meanwhile back in 1973, a 16-year-old boy learning to fly in a Super Cub landed at Kobelt Airport (N45) in Wallkill, New York. Parked on the east side of the hangar was a bright red Stearman biplane known as Big Red. It was the coolest airplane and the only Stearman he'd ever seen. Diamond treaded tires, leather combing, and a stunning wooden prop. The open cockpit called out to him. Someday, he thought.

In the subsequent 27 years, the teenager—me—grew up to fly gliders, towplanes, F-16s, and airliners among other aircraft. I learned a bit, scared myself a few times...but I never forgot that day at Kobelt. I never forgot Big Red.

Along the way I'd looked at a few Stearman aircraft, but with a young family it was not to be. Then there



was an ad in Trade-A-Plane. I climbed into my 1949 Beechcraft Bonanza along with my teenage son and flew up to Hayti. Reade walked us into the hangar and there she was glistening under the hangar lights. It wasn't Big Red, but this airplane was gorgeous. Reade knew we were coming back; 75-553 would have a new home. A few months later, Reade checked me out and sent me on my way. Three landings on the grass and that was it. Yup, that was it. I didn't know anything

about radial engines. I didn't know anything about biplanes. I didn't know what I didn't know, but I knew it had been 30 years since I'd first seen Big Red.

The airplane was straight and honest. Hands off, there was no rolling tendency. She was well balanced, although with 1,000 pounds forward of the firewall she was nose heavy. In the world of aerobatics we talk about hidden corners, places where the airplane doesn't always respond the same way. The Stearman didn't have any. When I messed up a maneuver, she told me the same thing she told me the last time: "Don't do that!"

The aircraft, structurally, is a stock airframe. Single landing wire, single ailerons, original control stop settings, all with a great big engine and propeller out front. That translates into heavy aileron forces, smooth elevator, and an incredible rudder. She'll take off inside a football field rotating around the tailwheel. The rudder is so effective that knife-edge slips on final are no problem, and she'll drop like a rock. She'll climb at well more than 1,000 fpm, and while her original service ceiling with the stock engine is around 12,000 msl, she's happy to climb up to 14,000 feet. She'd keep going if I had oxygen and a snowmobile suit. An R985 likes to drink, though, and she never met a gas pump she didn't like. Low-power cruise made 20 gph and 100 knots. Five miles per gallon. Easy flight planning.

If the wind was favorable on a cross-country trip, I'd climb until I couldn't stand the cold. If the winds were bad, I'd be as low as legally possible. With only an hour and a half of range, climbing was always limited.

A few months after I brought her home, I received a call from a friend for whom I'd flown co-pilot on the Boeing 757. He and his team were airshow performers and would be practicing at what is now Atlanta Speedway Airport (HMP). He suggested I bring over the Stearman. His first comment was, "You are going to do shows with that, aren't you?" I didn't know anything about flying airshows. As pretty as she was and with the heritage she had, though, I knew we were going into show business.

Practice, practice, practice. Eventually, the loops got round, the rolls got level, as level as they can be with a Stearman, and the hammerheads got awesome.

The R985 spinning a nine-foot prop makes an incredible sound. She'll make smoke like nobody can, and in a Stearman she'll do a loop in about 700 feet. In fact, the entire airshow routine, loops, rolls, hammers, and humpties were all below 1,000 feet agl. She'd have to climb to fly in the traffic pattern.

In the past 22 years and 130,000 miles, 75-553 and I have flown the Hudson, the Blue, the Green, the Red, the Mississippi, the Colorado, the Columbia, and a few more rivers. She's flown past mounts Hood, Rainier, St. Helens, Glacier Peak, Pikes Peak, the Cascades, Rockies, Superstitions, Appalachians, Smokies, Adirondacks, and more. She's flown Monument Valley, the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, and the Tetons. She flew dogfights against the Red Baron and for 10 years flew dissimilar formation with a Christen Eagle and a Pitts. Her greatest feat, though, was the unofficial world record for the highest airshow

ever performed. She launched from Leadville, Colorado, 30 miles from the show site crossing over 10 Mile Range through a saddleback at around 12,500 feet. She rolled into the aerobatic performance box from 13,500 feet over Imperial Bowl at the Breckenridge ski area on July 4, 2012. The whole show was above 10,500 feet. You'd have to be a little crazy to ask a 70-year-old biplane to fly an airshow where the density altitude is above 13,000 feet. She just smiled and said, "Why not?"

She flew shows to raise money for children's cancer research. She flew shows for U.S. Army soldiers who had just returned from a Middle East deployment. She flew shows for the Marines, the Navy, and the Air Force and mostly she flew shows for the next generation of aviators, for the kids who like 16-year-old me, said, "someday," and "can I learn to do that?"

A friend once told me that we don't own classic warbirds, we're merely caretakers. There comes a time when it's someone else's turn to be the caretaker. That time is now. At nearly 83 years young, 75-553 has found a new caretaker, and she's hopping on a ship to head down-under where she'll bring smiles to the next generation. Fair skies and favorable winds. Our paths diverge but our journeys continue.

Gary Rower began flying at age 16 in the Super Cub. He flew airshows for 22 years in his Stearman and is now in Colorado flying his Husky in the backcountry while also competing in STOL competitions.



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- Leading Edge Lights
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2,414 A/F TT, 2,414 Engine TT, 750 HP, 4 Blade, Bantam, Flow Control, MCAC Single Point Fuel, Kayak Throttle, Leading Edge Lights, Garmin G5, Load Hawk, VGs, Smoker, SS Booms

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1975 CESSNA A188B N9482R

4,219.9 A/F TT, Engine 0 SMOH, 900 SPOH, AG-PILOT-X GPS, SMOKER, VGS, SPREADER

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2023 THRUSH S2R-T660 N2427C

696 A/F TT, Duel Cockpit w/Seat, Hopper Rinse, Leading Edge Lights, 7.5" Electrical Gate, Reabe Hopper Packer, Level Indicator, Smoker, Lane Electrical Brake, Kayak Throttle Quadrant, Falcon Satlock, Radio-Parr-200 Com, Garmin G-5 Attitude Indicator, Smoker, CP-11 Nozzles, Intelliflow, Bottom Load Fuel, Spreader, Garmin-3325, Transponder with ADS-B Out



2021 THRUSH S2R-510P N534PW

875 Engine TT, 750 HP, Left Wing Landing Light, Tall Stick, Hatfield Bottom Load Fuel, Load Hawk, Standard Booms with CP-11 Nozzles, Reabe Hopper Quantity Gauge, Hopper Rinse, Smoker, Storm Shield Windshield, Ag Pilot X, Garmin G5, Garmin GTR-22f Comm Radio with ADS-B Out, Flow Control

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2011 THRUSH S2R-T34 N986MM

7,269.65 A/F TT, 750 HP, Leading Edge Lights, Cascade, Micro Vortex Generators, SS Booms, New Tailspring, Smoker, Single Point Fuel, Bantam GPS w Intelliflow, MVP-50T Glass Panel

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2017 THRUSH CASCADE-140 CONVERSION N813MC

4,500 A/F TT, 1,654.2 TSMOH, 4 blade Hartzell Prop 561.07 SNEW, Converted 2022, Cascade 140 Conversion with Lights, Hydraulic Gate, VGs, Smoker, Electric Brake, Leading Edge Lights, Load Hawk, Hopper Rinse, SS Booms, CP Nozzles, G4 & FC, MVP50, Fast Start, Side Load Fuel

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**2021 THRUSH 510P2+
N912MC**

1,670 A/F TT, 867 HP, MVP50, G4 & FC, Reabe Gate (Electric), Load Hawk, VGs, Hopper Rinse, Smoker, Electric Brake, Leading Edge Lights, Reabe Hopper Gauge, SS Booms, CPII Nozzles, Side Load Fuel



**2025 THRUSH 510P2
N877MC**

NEW, Smoker, Leading Edge Armor



**2021 THRUSH S2R-T660
N701NW**

1,439 A/F TT, AG Pilot X GPS, AG Laser Altimeter, CP11 Nozzles, Lane Brake and Fan, Stainless Steps, AFS CCheck Valves, Fast Start, Garmin Comm Radio, AFS Booms, Reabe Hopper Gauge, Garmin Transponder, ADS-B Out, Swathmaster Spreader

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**1964 CESSNA 172/180
CONVERSION
N7834U**

5499.15 A/F TT, 624 SMOH, Bush Stl Kit, Flap gap seals, AVCOM Lycoming 180 HP Engine Conversion, Grime Strobe, Flasing Tail Beacon, Vertical Card Compass, Landing & Taxi Lights, Pilot and Co-Pilot Articulating Seats, Narco MK 12 D Nav/Com, Narco AT-150 Transponder and Encoder, Two-Place Intercom, Garmin 560 GPS

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**1970 CESSNA 182N
SKYLANE
N9051G**

3,462 AF TT, Continental 0470, 134 SMOH, 239 SPOH, PMA60000B 4-place intercom with Three Light Markers, Garmin GNS 430 WAAS w/ Glide Slope, King KX-155 Nav/Com with Glide Slope, KN62-DME, GARMIN GTX 345 Transponder with Encoder and ADSB in-out, King KFC 200 Autopilot with Flight Director, HSI, GPS Slaving, Control Wheel Steering and AP Disconnect, Electric Trim, Dual PTP Switches, Wingtip Strobes, Flashing Tail Beacon, Ridder Trim, Pilot and Co-pilot Articulating Seats, Shoulder harness, Insight Graphic Engine Monitor 610, Vented Fuel Caps, Precise Flight Standby Vacuum System

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**2019 THRUSH S2R-T660
N5119C**

1771.59 A/F TT, 1,350 HP, Falcon GPS/Flow Control, Reabe Hopper Quantity Spray Boom Pressure, Aire Repair Fast Start, Transland 7.5 Reabe Electric Gate, Kawak Throttle Quadrant, New Battery Plate Assembly, Load Hawk, Garmin G5 Flight Instrument, Garmin GTR-225 Comm, Garmin GTX345 TXP

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2012 AIR TRACTOR AT-402B N402Z

4,602.3 A/F TT, 4,602.3 TT Engine, 750 HP, Smoker, Bottom Load Fuel, Bantam w/ Intelliflow, Nav Lights & Strobe, Garmin Comm, Garmin TXP, Garmin Audio Panel, Nose Lights, AC & Heat, 4 Bladed Pump, Windshield Wiper & Washer

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2022 THRUSH S2R-T660 N549LG

1,159 AF TT, 1,159 Engine TT SNEW, 1,300 HP, 5-Blade Hartzell Prop, Satloc G4/IF3, Electric Fan Brake, Smoker, Reabe Hopper Gauge, Load Hawg, 2" Spray System w/ Agrinautics Pump, Rudder Wrap, Custom Paint Stripe, Dual Cockpit

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2022 THRUSH S2R-T660 N710NW

Dual Cockpit/Single Control, Single Point Fuel, MVP-50T, A/C & Heat, Garmin G5, 3-inch Side Load System, 2-inch Spray System, Streamlined Aluminum Booms, Hopper Rinse System, HSBO Half Boom Shut Off/RBSO, GTX-327 w/ GDL82 (ADS-B Out), GTR 225, Large Lane Brake, 6 Blade Fans, CP-11 TT Nozzles, K10-65P1 AFS Check Valves, CP-06 Swivel Night Working Lights & Taxi, Leading Edge Lights, Smoker, Reabe Hopper Gauge, Aglaser Altimeter, Transland Spreader, LAD Valve Dry Brake, SS Steps, Fast Start, Tinted Windows, USB Charge Point, Move Hopper Rinse Fill, Cascade Pressure Cowl

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1978 CESSNA TURBO 210 N59A

3,442 A/F TT, 68 SMOH By Jewell Aviation, Avionics Master, Garmin GMA-340 Audio Panel with Intercom and 3-Light Marker Beacons, Garmin GNS-530W With Glide Slope, Garmin SL-30 Com Radio, GARMIN GTX-327 Transponder with Encoder and ADSB In/Out, King KCS-55A HSI, STEC-55X Auto Pilot with Vertical Speed, Altitude Preselect, and Control Wheel Steering, Pilot and Co-Pilot Articulating Seats, Dual Push-To-Talk, Rosen Visors, Wing Tip Strobes, Rudder Trim, Aero-Safe Standby Vac, Precise Flight Speed Brakes, Turbo Plus Intercooler System, Electronics International MVP-50P Engine Monitor, Monarch Fuel Caps



1976 PIPER PAWNEE N312MM

6,067 A/F TT, Lycoming O-540-132C5, 9,335.48 TTE, 540.0 TSMOS, Salto Lite Star 3 Boom, CP-3 Nozzle

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Mod, Inflatable Door Seal, JP
Instruments EGT-CHT, Kinsley
Welding Exhaust System,
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