



# Rendezvous With Liaisons

## L-Birds tell their stories at Sun 'n Fun

STORY AND PHOTOS BY TOM COLE WB #10747

**B**y the beginning of World War II, the United States military searched for planes that could serve as artillery spotters, reconnaissance planes, liaisons, and general utility aircraft. Many American companies competed for government contracts; corporate winners included Stinson, Aeronca, Taylorcraft, Interstate, and Piper. U.S. Army General Innis P. Swift dubbed the light aircraft “Grasshoppers,” and the Army Air Corps also formally adopted the nickname. The aforementioned companies built hundreds of Grasshoppers during the war, some of which survived to appear at Sun 'n Fun EAA Fly-In 2002. As the sun shed its rays on the first day of the event, a wide variety of liaison aircraft from World War II to the Vietnam conflict had already parked in the grassy Warbirds area at Lakeland Linder Regional Airport.

### This Piper Is Airborne in More Ways Than One

Bill James, a retired Delta Airlines pilot of 38 years, learned to fly in high school and served the last few months of World War II in the U.S.

Navy. The Piper L-4J that he flew into Sun 'n Fun was also a veteran; it had been sold as surplus by the U.S. Army after the war and retrofitted

**SOME L-BIRDS  
IN KOREA  
DROPPED  
ITEMS BESIDES  
BOMBS, SUCH AS  
TURKEY DINNERS  
TO TROOPS ON  
THANKSGIVING  
DAY.**

back into a J-3 Cub. When Bill got the Cub, most of the U.S. Army equipment had been discarded, and Bill set out to restore it back to its military configuration. He says the L-4J is still a work in progress.

After the U.S. Army authenticated the Cub's serial numbers, Bill

decided to give it the paint and markings of the 101st Airborne Division, 58-J. The number “58” represents the division, while “J” is the plane's identifying letter. But Bill says that the *Dixie Grasshopper* nose art is of his own doing, representing Bill's home state of Georgia. He restored the greenhouse and fabricated many of the parts, including a missing radio antenna. To create the antenna, Bill borrowed an original and replicated it in his shop. When the word got out that he could fabricate this part, he began receiving requests for antennas from as far away as Alaska.

As he rebuilt the plane, Bill found and restored internal touches, too, such as the seats, radio and headset, uniform jacket, sidearm, and a hand grenade in a Mason jar. Why in a Mason jar? Bill explained that pilots had tried dropping hand grenades from the Grasshoppers but found that the grenades would explode before hitting the ground. The pilots began putting the grenades, with the pins already removed, in small Mason jars, which would drop faster.

◀ This Cessna L-19E from the Korean War era is owned by Biff Johnson, Ron David and Scott McGaw.



Row of Cessna L-19 Birddogs.

### More Unique Pipers

One stunning Piper L-4H, Jack Hofbauer's *Rosie the Rocketeer*, bears authentic nose art and invasion stripes, and carries the numeration 53-K on its side, which means it was part of the 4th Armored Division. Its original pilot, Major Charles "Bazooka Charlie" Carpenter had six bazookas mounted on the wing struts. It was said that Major Carpenter killed seven German tanks with this modification.

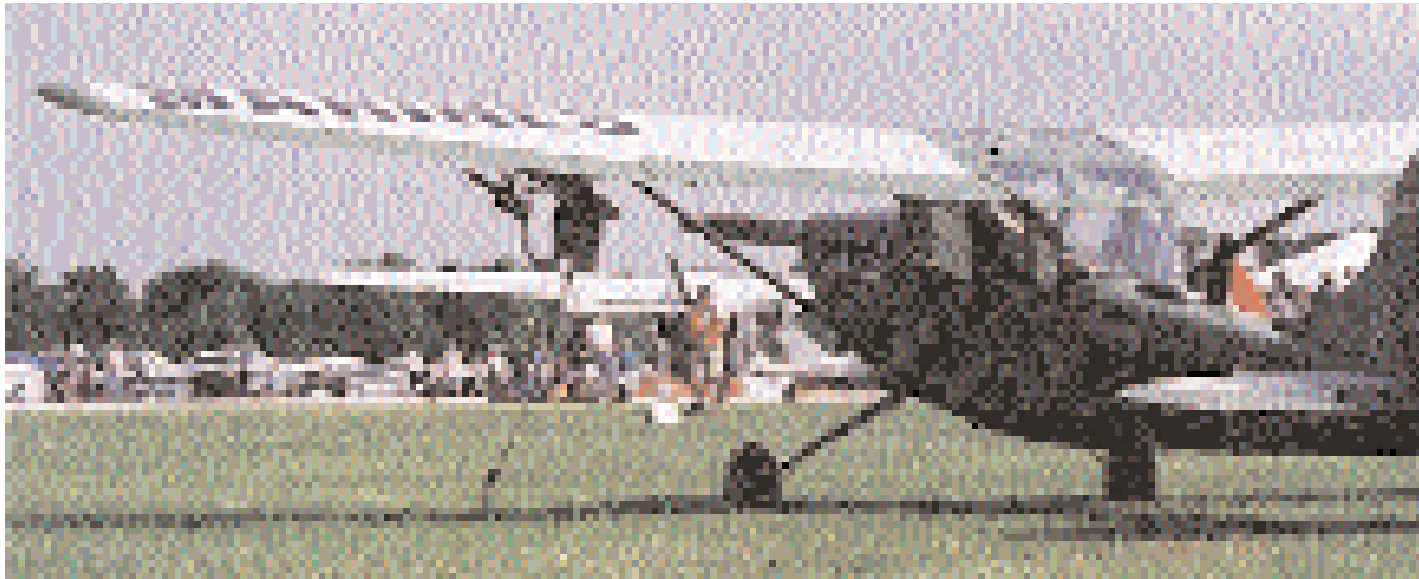
The last of the Pipers in the L-Bird lineup was Dick and Rick Brown's L-4B with the Brodie take-off and retrieval system mounted on top of its wing. Originally designed by Lt. James H. Brodie to protect North Atlantic convoys from U-boats by



This Aeronca L-16 with Civil Air Patrol markings was built in 1947.

Built in 1945, this L-4J Piper is owned by 101st AirBorne jumper Bill James.





scouting and spotting them for the destroyers, the U-boat threat had diminished greatly by the time the secret project was up and ready for use, so units in the Pacific theater took up the idea instead. Using the 300-foot cable suspended from two booms fore and aft on the side of an LST (landing ship, tank), the L-4B simply launched, disconnected from the craft, and scouted the surrounding area. Upon its return, it approached the ship at its normal landing speed of 40 mph to hook

the cable. The pilot shut down the engine as the L-4B slid to a stop, and stayed in the plane as it was swung on board. Although the Brodie system was used with some success at the invasion of Okinawa, it was not widely employed.

### Grasshopper Nickname Not Restricted to Pipers

Other Grasshoppers at this year's Sun 'n Fun included a 1942 Interstate L-6, a 1942 Taylorcraft, and several Aeronca L-Birds. Between

1941 and 1947, these companies provided literally hundreds of liaison aircraft to the U.S. Army. Many of these aircraft were used to fill a variety of duties during the transition period between World War II and the Korean War.

By 1951, however, new requirements brought about the need for change, and the Cessna Corporation with its L-19 Birddog won the contract for a new kind of liaison aircraft. Built in 90 days for the Korean War, the Cessna carried a



Jack Hofbauer owns this L-4H Piper built in 1944.



◀ Marine L-Birds are called OE-1 Bird-dogs. This one is owned by James Wallace and was built in 1951.

and Scott McGaw. Ike flew as a passenger, of course, in those L-19s, but most people don't know that he was a trained pilot.

Frank Vranicar's L-19 still carried the original bomb racks on the wings. Some L-Birds in Korea, I was told, dropped other important things besides bombs, such as turkey dinners to troops on Thanksgiving Day.

### Bird-dog Pirates?

number of designations including L-19-O1A, OE-1, and O-1G Bird-dog. Several Korean War Bird-dogs found their way to Sun 'n Fun, including Jack Scroggins' O-1A, which Jack said was the kind that Eisenhower flew when he visited Korea. It did not carry the "Eisenhower step" modification, however, like the L-19 owned by Biff Johnson, Ron David,

A Florida-based clan called the Dog Pirates arrived en masse at Sun 'n Fun and was set apart from other L-Birds with their Arctic scheme, high visibility white paint jobs. Flying flags from their propellers, they were certainly highly visible. The upside of this paint scheme in Vietnam was that it made rescue of a downed Bird in the jungle easier. The downside was that the aircraft bearing this scheme were more visible to enemy fire. Ron Ruble's 1953 L-19A called *Maggie* had been remanufactured in 1966 to O1-G specs for Forward Air Control (FAC) work in Vietnam. Sporting an LA-140A camera



▲ The Brown's Piper L-4B with Brodie system was the winner of the Judges' Choice-Liaison.

mount used for aerial photography under its wing, *Maggie* still looks ready for duty.

One of the show's most unique L-Birds was Joseph Salomone's L-24 Helio Courier, which won a Judges' Choice award. According to Joseph, who nicknamed his plane *Tennis Court*, the aircraft can land in a space as short as a tennis field and has virtually no stall speed. Because of these unusual qualities, many Helio Couriers are now used in Alaska by bush pilots. Salomone dressed his Helio Courier in the colors of the 1st Cavalry Division.

So, once again Sun 'n Fun has come and gone for the year and so have many unique specimens of liaison aircraft from our nation's history. Having only scratched the surface of learning about these important planes, I can't wait for my next rendezvous to study and observe the many types of L-Birds that descend upon Lakeland Linder Regional Airport for Sun 'n Fun each year.



◀ Vertical view of the Dixie Grasshopper a Sun 'n Fun winner. Below, a detail of the cockpit. ▼

