



Play It Again, Sam!

Sam Taber's "movie star" L-5

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Someone on the set of *Catch-22* yells "action," and cameras begin to roll just as a Stinson L-5 Sentinel, painted in pseudo military colors of olive green with a yellow band running around the fuselage, begins to make its run toward a raft floating on calm, blue waters. Flying the L-5, veteran movie pilot Frank Tallman is to circle the raft, then make a high-speed low pass to strike a paper mache mannequin holding a camera that had been placed on the raft.

As he advances the L-5's throttle, Frank lowers the nose and smashes

into the mannequin head-on; pieces fly everywhere as he pulls the L-5 skyward. The L-5 continues climbing and is in the beginning stages of stalling when Frank, unaware that the mannequin's hand holding the camera is now lodged in between the elevator and stabilizer, tries to force the stick forward. The elevator, however, is jammed in the full nose-up position. As the L-5 begins to stall, Frank retards the throttle and rolls in full nose-down trim. The L-5 begins to oscillate vertically; throttle movements al-

low only minimal control. It takes Frank two attempts to land the L-5, which he does successfully, saving himself and the airplane. But this is not where the story begins...

The legend of Sam Taber's award-winning L-5 begins in World War II. Stinson Aircraft of Wayne, Michigan, delivered the L-5 bearing military serial no. 42-98319 to the U.S. Army Air Forces in August 1943. Serving as a trainer, 42-98319 remained stateside for the duration of the war, preparing pilots for the 2nd Air Commando Unit, stationed



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Frank Tallman flies the L-5 toward the raft during the filming of *Catch-22*. (Inset) A better view of the L-5 before the filming incident.

in Brownwood, Texas. The Army Air Forces struck the L-5 from its inventory and sold it as surplus in 1946. L-5 42-98319 spent most of the next 20 years flying throughout Texas and California before being acquired by the legendary Frank Tallman in 1968.

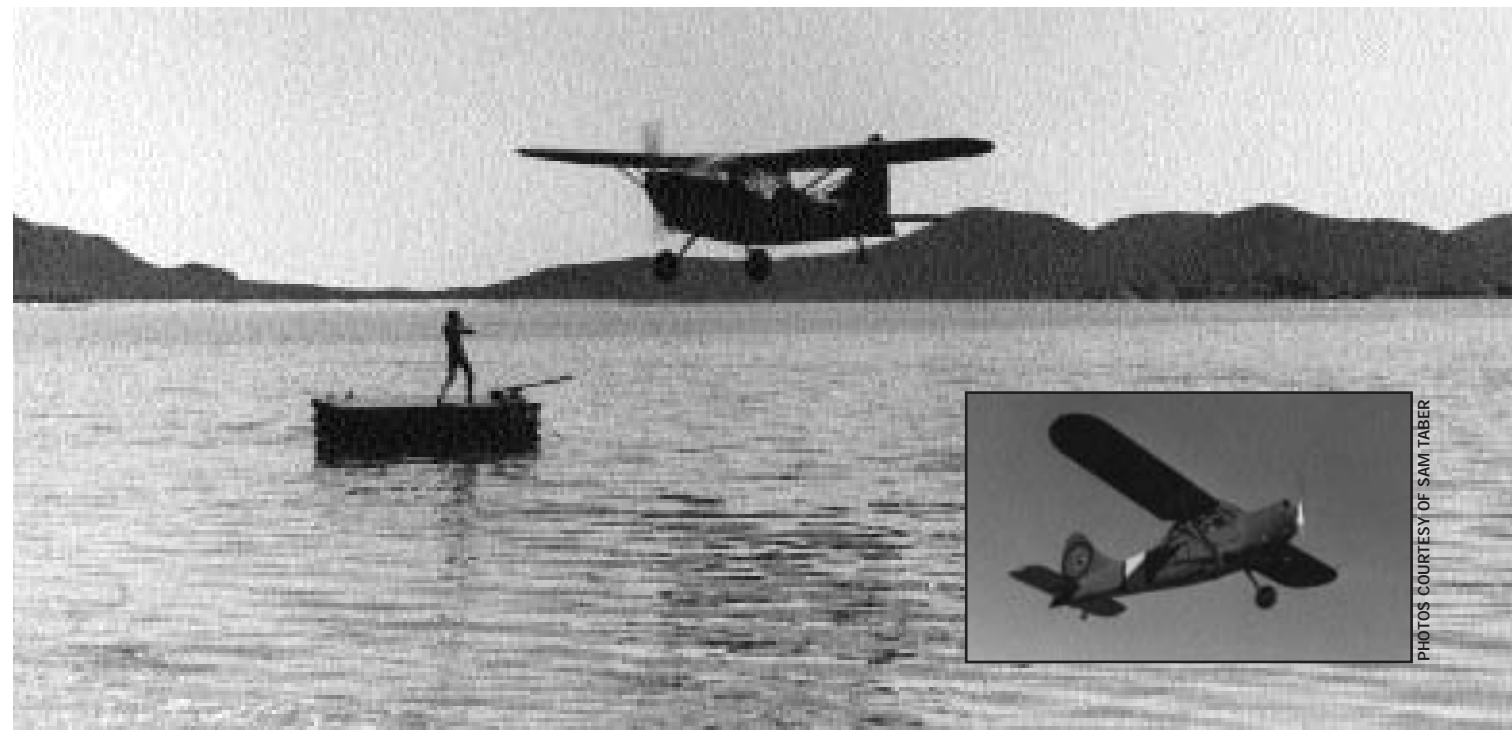
The L-5 became part of the Tallmantz Collection and received its “15 seconds of fame” from being flown in the movie *Catch-22* aside an assortment of B-25 Mitchell bombers. After filming, the L-5 and remnants of the mannequin’s appendage lodged in the elevator (now forever known as “Mr. Hand”) composed a display at the now defunct Tallmantz Museum in Orange County, California. During a 1972 fabric re-covering operation, restorers found that the right wing and tail group had deteriorated and would require a complete rebuild. The museum staff decided that the L-5 would have to wait “a couple of years” for its restoration. Thus the L-5 sat atop the beams of the museum where it began a nearly 30-year hibernation.

About this same time (1972), a young boy from Janesville, Wisconsin, began collecting his own assortment of aviation memorabilia. When most boys were collecting football cards, 12-year-old Sam Taber

began accumulating aircraft trinkets and treasures and became a young “airport bum.” Sam recalls his mother yelling at him many times to “pick up all these dirty airplane parts” from his bedroom.

As Sam grew so did his passion for aircraft, especially those from World War II. Sam also wanted to become knowledgeable about the inner workings of these magnificent airplanes, so he obtained airframe and powerplant (A&P) and inspection authorization (IA) certificates. Soon he found himself employed by a gentleman with the same passion for World War II aircraft: Kermit Weeks. In 1983, Sam began his labor of love working for Kermit on such notable aircraft as the J2F Duck, P-40E Warhawk, de Havilland Mosquito, Beechcraft AT-11, TBM Avenger, and the P-51D Mustang *Cripes A’Mighty 3rd*, an Oshkosh Grand Champion winner.

In 1984 Sam traveled to California along with Kermit and other staff members to inspect the aircraft that Kermit had purchased from the Tallmantz Collection. Sam recalls, “We were going through the invoices and checking off the planes Kermit had bought. We had located all of the aircraft except one, that being the Stinson L-5. Many of the Tall-



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SAM TABER



JIM BISHA PHOTOS



Sam and Shari Taber are all smiles after a flight in the L-5.

mantz staff did not recall this particular aircraft, until one longtime employee remembered it was in the rafters of another building. Sure enough, jammed behind old boxes of parts and materials we found the L-5 where it had rested since 1972.”

All of the aircraft were sent to Miami, Florida, for display and/or restoration. The L-5 remained a basket case as Sam and the Weeks staff restored higher priority aircraft. In 1990 Sam grew tired of the predictable Florida warmth and longed for the harsh, cold Wisconsin winters. Before leaving the Weeks museum, Sam struck a deal with Kermit and purchased the L-5 and trailored it to Wisconsin. Sam thought it would be a “fun and easy” six months to a year “rebuild.” What else can you do during Wisconsin winters? In reality the “easy” one-year project turned into 10 years of on-again, off-again restoration.

When Sam returned to Wisconsin, he started his own maintenance and restoration shop, called TAB-AIR, currently located in East Troy, just a stone’s throw west of Milwaukee. Sam, his business partner Shawn Kinsey, and fellow mechanic Dan Haines specialize in World War II-era and vintage aircraft and have built up TAB-AIR into one of the Midwest’s premier maintenance and restoration facilities. Drawing on experience gained from working at Kermit’s museum, Sam and his staff have restored and maintained numerous warbirds from Piper L-4s

to P-40s and P-51s.

Though busy with customer projects, Sam continued to work on the L-5, building the right wing and tail groups from scratch. As it was still in stock condition, some of the military hardware remained on the L-5, including the IFF (identification friend or foe) lights located on the belly. It’s very rare to see this series of green, amber, and red lights, which were used to send a predetermined signal in lighted code, on a liaison aircraft. The L-5 still contains its original radio receivers and transmitters, and spare crystals, headsets and microphones that Sam has had since his childhood days (“see, Mom, it wasn’t all junk!”) add to the original cockpit theme. First aid kits containing all original content except morphine are located on the pilot’s door. An M-1 carbine lies near the floor area next to the pilot, showing that even these “grasshoppers” (as they were called during the war) carried firepower to harass the enemy.

When it came time to finalize and paint the L-5, Sam chose the paint scheme used by the 25th Liaison Squadron during World War II. Lt. Col. Frank Bartlett commanded the 25th Liaison Squadron, better known as the Guinea Short Lines, and Sam contacted Frank at his home in Washington state to deter-



Sam kept the L-5 cockpit as original as possible.

mine accurate paint schemes and nose art. Talking with Frank at length, Sam learned some of the unsung heroism performed by Guinea Short Lines crews, including the rescue of approximately 30 Sikha Indians who had been prisoners of war (POWs) of the Japanese army. One of Frank’s pilots, Sgt. James Henkle of Texas, was the person responsible for flying the half-starving POWs out of the thick, dense jungles of New Guinea one at a time in an L-5! Sam also learned that the pilots of the Guinea Short Lines were mostly sergeants in rank and did not enjoy certain privileges offered to officer pilots. Yet they developed and perfected search and



The nose art on the right side honors “the beauty and brains” of the TAB-AIR operation.

rescue techniques to come to the aid of downed bomber and fighter pilots throughout the South Pacific. Landing in rough terrain and mountainous regions, the L-5s used by the Guinea Short Lines plucked downed airmen out of places where grass stood 6 feet tall and there was nothing but swamp underneath.

To honor these brave pilots and to ensure the legend of the Guinea Short Lines lives on, Sam chose the overall olive drab scheme with a white tail, along with the nose art of a yellow kangaroo with the words “Guinea Short Lines” painted above it. This duplicates the paint scheme worn by the 25th Liaison Squadron when stationed in the Philippines during World War II. Sam also painted the name *My Sweet Shari* on the right side of the nose to honor the “brains and beauty” of TAB-AIR, his lovely wife, Shari. Sam also uses a wood prop to give his L-5 that authentic and nostalgic look.

Sam fabricated shackles—from bomb racks to act as hardpoints under-

neath the wings. He then attached external cargo pouches wrapped in parachute material to those shackles to represent the large cargo pouches filled with supplies such as ammunition, food, field weapons, and tools that were either airdropped to downed pilots or ground forces or delivered after landing. The delivery mechanism was a very simple “pull and release” cable-operated device. Although Sam does not fly with the cargo pouches attached to his L-5, he has spoken with combat veteran L-5 drivers who said, “You hardly knew they were out there on the wings. The performance was not affected at all.”

With the 190-hp Lycoming O-435-1 on his L-5, Sam understands what the veterans are talking about, as the L-5 has the capability of carrying a large, heavy load. One can also see why this aircraft was selected for search and rescue missions: With its full “green house” surrounding the pilot, visibility is unrestricted. Also, the L-5’s STOL (short takeoff and landing)

performance capabilities made taking off and landing in very tight places much easier.

Just two weeks short of 10 years after the start of restoration, Sam officially rolled out the “brand new” L-5 from his East Troy facility. On a rare, snowless February day, Sam flew the L-5 1.9 hours on its initial test hop, reporting no squawks other than the adjustment of the rudder tab to center the ball a little. The L-5 indicated 105 mph at 2250-2300 rpm with wonderful climbing characteristics. During EAA Air Venture Oshkosh 2001, Sam received the Best Liaison award for his tireless dedication and preservation of the magnificently detailed aircraft. While displayed at Oshkosh, one item propped up near the tail of Sam’s L-5 caused double takes from almost everyone who noticed it. Prominently poised near the tail section was “Mr. Hand,” painstakingly restored to original condition, still holding the camera, waiting for the director’s “cut” command. 