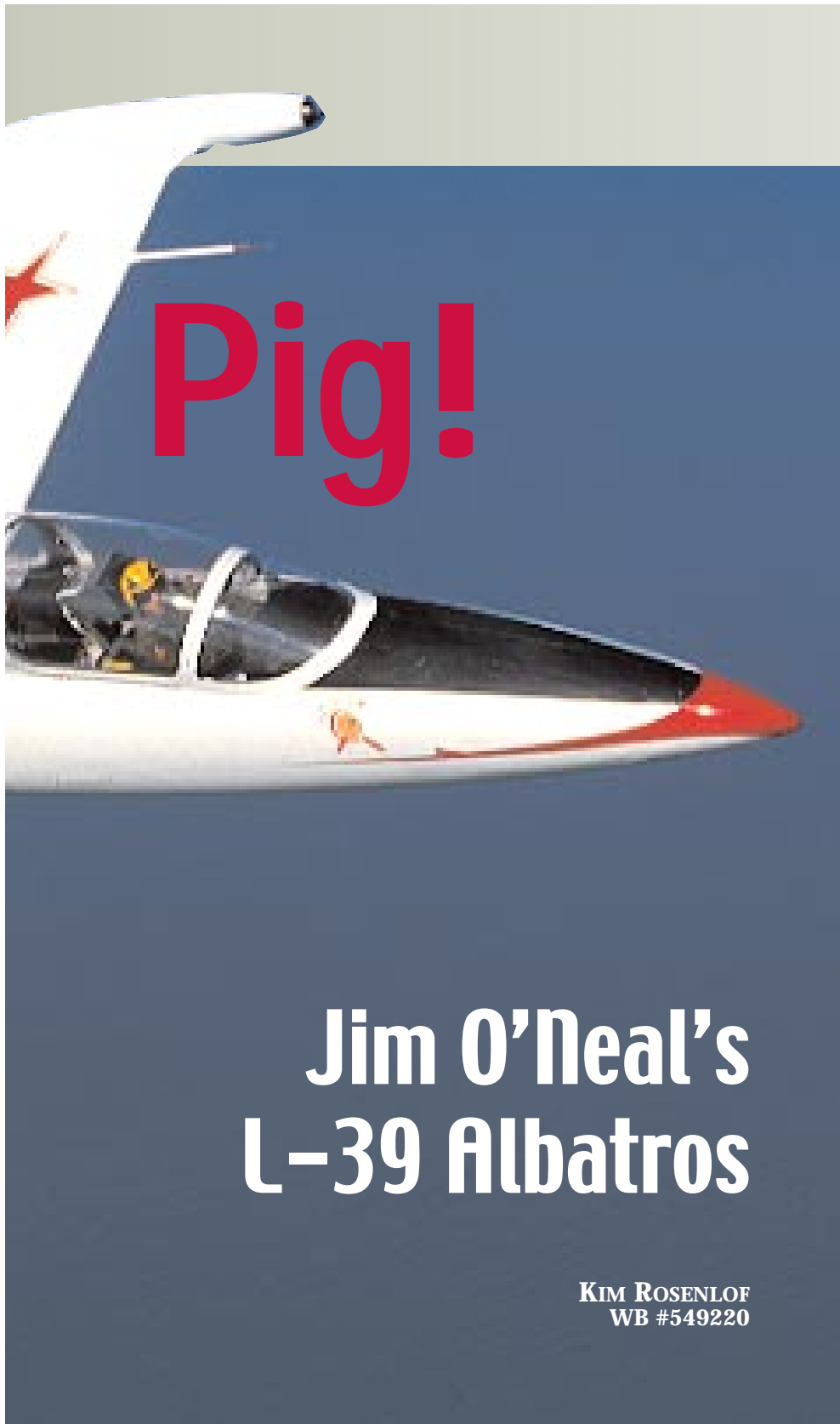


Capitalist





Pig!

Jim O'Neal's L-39 Albatros

KIM ROSENLOF
WB #549220

I'm not often nervous when I go flying. As an aviation writer and editor, not to mention being a private pilot myself, I've flown back seat or right seat in a number of warbird and corporate aircraft with no problem whatsoever. But the perspiration running

down my cheeks on a warm April morning during Sun 'n Fun 2003 wasn't due entirely to the fact that the air conditioning in the Aero Vodochody L-39 Albatros wasn't on yet.

Dressed in a Nomex flight suit, gloves, and a cotton skullcap under

a heavy helmet, my main concern was whether, in a real emergency, I'd remember everything Ed Noel, (WB #550417) the crew chief of *Capitalist Pig*, had told me during his half-hour briefing on L-39 basic systems and ejection procedures...Eject canopy first using the red "Emergency Canopy Jettison" handle on the right side. But if it doesn't blow, you can release the canopy manually using the red handle on the *left* side. Tuck your knees, ankles and feet in, then grab and pull the red ejection handles between your legs. If the seat doesn't blow, use the red "Eject Seat Unblock" switch at the rear of the right side panel, then try the ejection handles again. As a last resort, *Capitalist Pig's* owner and pilot Jim O'Neal would flip the L-39 upside down, and assuming the canopy was gone, I could use the red "Emergency Chute Release" handle on the right side of my seat to drop out of the cockpit sans seat.

That was a lot of "red" to keep track of!

Of course the hour-long flight, approximately 40 minutes of which was spent as an EAA photo subject, went fine, and I didn't have to put my memory to use. Jim did comment that flying formation with the Cessna 210 photo ship and P-64 replica [See the cover of June 2003 *Warbirds*], keeping the L-39's nose high and barely hanging in the air at 122 knots (stall speed with full flaps is 103 knots), was the hardest flying he'd done in quite a while. And I noticed that as soon as Bruce Moore, the pilot of the EAA photo plane, released us from our photo subject duties, Jim put the "pedal to the metal" as the airspeed indicator jumped past 260 knots seemingly without effort.

Capitalist Pig is based at Ellington Field in Houston, Texas, where the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)

Special Jet Section



Capitalist Pig owner Jim O'Neal was tired of "burning up" in his T-28.

KIM ROSENLOF

and had to land gear up in front of 8,000 people and a worldwide television audience. The first three people that met me getting out of the airplane were the head of the FAA, the head of the NTSB, and Chuck Yeager. I had an [U.S.] Air Force pilot with me flying in my back seat. He called home to tell my wife that'd I made an "almost perfect wheels up landing," and she said, "What's almost perfect about a wheels-up landing?" So, that was my first AirVenture.

I kept the T-28 about three years, and then I decided that I wanted an L-39. I sold the T-28 and then bought the L-39 directly from the deputy minister of defense in the Republic of Kazakhstan.

WARBIRDS: How did you do that?

Jim: Well, I actually got it through a connection from a guy named Dan Wesley, but I had help from one of the cosmonauts, and a few of the astronauts including Charley Precourt. I had a few contacts in Moscow help me locate a good airplane.

WARBIRDS: Why the L-39?

Jim: I got tired of burning up in that T-28. I've never been as hot in my flying life as when I was in some of those air shows in Oshkosh in the T-28. And it's not that the T-28 is bad; I had a lot of friends that were having trouble with the Wright 1820 engine. I had had personal knowledge of nine engine failures, and of the nine, I'd known five of them personally. The problem is that you can't get new parts; "new" parts are actually 40 years old. So, I decided to sell the T-28 and buy the L-39.



Jim and the Pig in flight

JIM KOEPNICK

is a major tenant. A Houston native, Jim grew up around the space program and initially worked as a systems and integrations engineer for various NASA facilities before switching over as a management consultant at Gulf/Chevron for 34 years. He also flew F-4 Phantoms in Vietnam and has approximately

2,400 hours of turbine time out of 5,200 flight hours logged.

WARBIRDS: How did you acquire the aircraft and why an L-39?

Jim: Well, I had a T-28 Trojan, and in fact my first trip to EAA AirVenture Oshkosh in 1995, I had a malfunction on my -28

WARBIRDS: When you got the L-39 where did you go?

Jim: The aircraft was restored in Reno, Nevada, by Alby Redick at Aviation Classics. Tim Bowers at Bowers Specialty did all the painting and trim work. They did a really nice job of restoring the airplane. The white and red is one of the paint schemes the Russian aerobatics demo team, the RARS, used in the early to mid '80s.

WARBIRDS: What had to be done to the L-39?

Jim: Well, it wasn't what *had* to be done, it was what we did. We took every nut and bolt

out of that airplane. I mean we completely disassembled it, went through every system on it. We replaced everything on it that needed replacing, even minor things like screws, nuts, fittings, pushrod ends, bearings, and a little bit of skin damage that had occurred in shipment.

We took the engine out and completely serviced it, flushed it out. We pressure washed it, stripped the fuselage. We got probably 45 pounds of mud or dirt out of it.

WARBIRDS: Where did the mud come from?

Jim: Well, it became mud when we washed it; before

that it was dirt. It had been flown by the Russian air force as a trainer at bases all over the Ukraine and Kazakhstan. The Russians don't hangar those planes, they sit outside, and it was just 20 years of dirt. There wasn't anything major wrong with the plane, but there were a number of minor things.

I have logbooks back to the day the airplane was built. I have about 150 pounds of records on the plane from day one. Everything that was ever in it and what's in it now. Of course, it's all in Russian. I got some of my friends down at the Johnson Space Center to translate part of it for me.

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WARBIRDS: Any mission info?

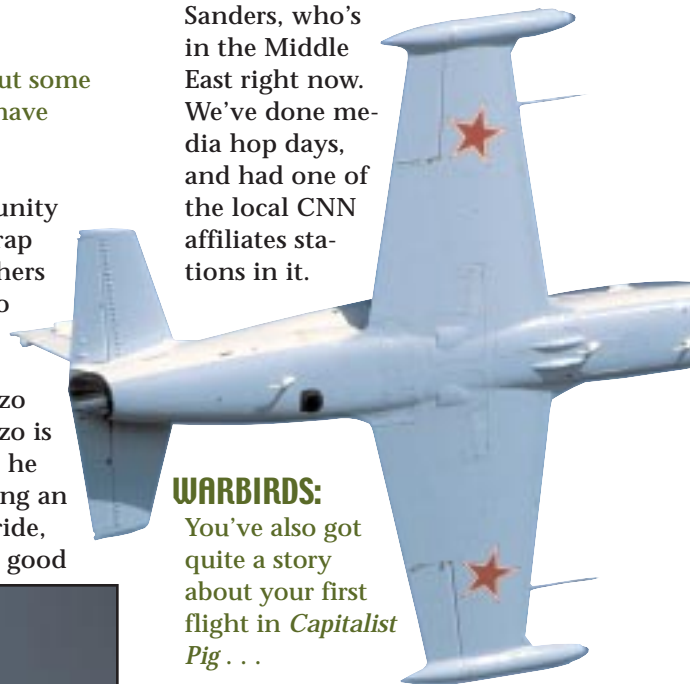
Jim: It's pretty plain information. It was a training aircraft. The L-39 was also the aircraft the cosmonauts used for their training, but they didn't do a whole lot of training with this one. It was made in 1981, and it was updated to a 1983 model on the last overhaul. But the designation on it was for the 1980. I haven't quite figured that out yet. But it was right at the time where they changed the serial numbers from the 80s to the 81s. And the Russians had an unlimited supply of labor. They'd completely redo them every five years.

with a logo, and he drew the pig in the sunglasses. Then the airplane kind of took on a life of its own.

WARBIRDS: Tell me about some of the celebrities that have flown in it . . .

Jim: Ed had the opportunity last year at Reno to strap in one of his frat brothers who is the first man to walk on the moon, Neil Armstrong. I've also had [actor] Lorenzo Lamas in there. Lorenzo is a very good pilot, and he was interested in buying an L-39, so I gave him a ride, and we became pretty good

shows some pictures of the plane. It was also on the *Today Show* flying reporter Kerry Sanders, who's in the Middle East right now. We've done media hop days, and had one of the local CNN affiliates stations in it.



WARBIRDS: You've also got quite a story about your first flight in *Capitalist Pig* . . .

Jim: My first orientation flight in that airplane when it was finished was on the pylons racing in formation with two astronauts. Jeff Turney, who works air operations for the Reno Air Racing Races Association and teaches at the test pilot school at Edwards (Air Force Base in California), gave me my LOA (letter of authorization). When I got into the airplane I turned around to Turney and said, "Are you out of your ever-lovin' mind?" He said, "No, we're going to go do this, and when we get back I'll decide how much additional flight time we're going to have to give you for your LOA." I took off in formation with Hoot Gibson and Curt Brown, out running around the racetrack with these guys. That was quite an interesting first ride in the airplane, all those guys 50 feet off the deck, wide out, trying to compete . . . and there I was.



JIM KOEPNICK

WARBIRDS: Who came up with *Capitalist Pig*?

Jim: My daughter Megan. She said, "Well, Dad, you're a graduate of the University of Arkansas, you've gotten this out of the Soviet Union, your call sign is 'Hog.' It's pretty obviously a 'Capitalist Pig.'" So, I had one of my friends who's a crew chief on an F-15 and who owns his own graphic arts company come up

friends. John Travolta also took a look at it. He had two L-39s the last time I heard, but I don't know if he's kept them or not.

A lot of people have picked up on the plane because of its name. *Capitalist Pig* has been featured on Discovery Channel's *Friendly Bandits*, which chronicles the Russian airplanes currently flying under civilian license in the U.S. That was filmed at Reno, and it

I guess I did okay because I got my LOA in less than five hours, which is pretty good in the L-39. But I'd never worked as hard in my life. He really worked me hard in that airplane. It was also a 25-knot crosswind, 90 degrees to the runway. That was on the first takeoff and landing. The stick was almost to the stop. So I had an interesting indoctrination.

WARBIRDS: Ed, let's talk about you. What's your background?

Ed: Back in the late '80s, bad economic times in Houston caused me to sell my [Cessna] 310. And with two boys becoming teens, I was looking towards college. I put aside flying and put money away. And the second boy just graduated from high school last May [2002] and started into summer school. And I started

back flying. I looked up prices of 310s and fainted. So, I started looking around at comparable prices, and I realized that some of these warbirds were lower. I took an introductory flight in the L-39 out at Jet Warbirds in Santa Fe with Larry Salganek and thoroughly enjoyed that. [Later,] I also earned my glider rating and taildragger endorsement.

WARBIRDS: How'd you find Jim?

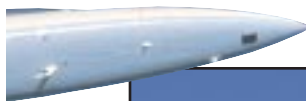
Ed: I looked up the registry to see if there were any L-39s in Houston, and found only one. I looked Jim up in the phone book and called him to ask if he wouldn't mind showing me the plane.

We met for lunch on my birthday, and that day he asked me to crew on the *Capitalist Pig* at Reno. I'd never been to Reno before, and I wanted to go for many years. He offered me the opportunity to be on the ramp at Reno; what a wonderful birthday present!

So, that's how I got to know him. And how I got into L-39s was that I liked the idea of the speed and the air conditioning! I've made a little promise to myself that I'll make sure I'm flying at least once a quarter. Where I'm logging front seat time. And I've been doing that since July 4 [2002].

WARBIRDS: Do you take turns?

Jim: I let him do some of the flying. He's a good pilot. He'll be fine in the airplane once he gets a couple more hours in it. I'm going to give him some front seat time. The plane's really a docile airplane; it's pretty straightforward. It's like anything else; if you treat it wrong, it's going to hurt you.



Crew chief Ed Noel insists on fueling the *Pig* himself.



KIM ROSENLOF



Splashes of red in the *Pig's* cockpit denote devices used to pop the canopy and engage the hot ejection seat in an emergency.

KIM ROSENLOF

Special Jet Section

But if you respect it, it's not an aircraft that has a bunch of bad character flaws by any stretch of the imagination.

Ed: In November, I got into a quarter interest in a 182. I've got three really good partners in that I am enjoying the commute from the west side of Houston to Ellington [on the southeast side]. I have the opportunity to commute to Ellington by air so I have fun.


Jim: And I have a lot of fun out there. We fly off of Ellington Field, and Johnson Space Center has its T-38 operations there. It's interesting to taxi by with my flight suit on with the air conditioning on, feeling perfectly cool, calm, and comfortable with the canopy

closed and see those guys with their T-38 canopies open, their sleeves rolled up, and they're just sweating like dogs.

WARBIRDS: Anything else you'd like to say about *Capitalist Pig*?

Ed: A lot of L-39s do not have hot seats. Jim's is very well maintained and operated, and Jim opted for that added expense.

Jim: Well, you know, being a former military pilot, the only way I'm coming out of that plane is if it's on fire or coming apart! But it's just one more safety net if I end up in complete trouble. I understand there's additional

upkeep and liability, but there's also the additional safety margin there. I looked at it from both sides of the coin. I can make a case for making them hot and for making them cold. Obviously, the FAA would like for nobody, including the military, to have ejection seats, but if they'd ever flown a high-performance jet . . . The one problem with the L-39 is it has a high vertical stabilizer, and the only way you could get out [without the hot seat] would be to roll it inverted, and even then I wonder if you could clear the tail. And that's the reason I decided to keep my seat hot. Plus, I also have access to a great supply of parts for it. 



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