

The L-4 Grasshopper...

... commanded more firepower than any other aircraft of World War II

BY JACK MORRISSEY



KEVIN END

Anything puzzling about the above statement? "Commanded more firepower than any other aircraft of World War II?" The answer to this is simple. The L-4's function was to direct artillery fire against the enemy. With one radio call this small, slow Piper aircraft could bring down upon the enemy literally tons of shells from a mixed bag of artillery pieces, depending on who

was called. This Grasshopper, as it was known, was an aerial forward observer that could direct artillery fire with more accuracy than anyone else. Its height in the air gave it a broader view than could be obtained by a ground observer, and its slowness in flight allowed it to cruise the area and observe the artillery's effect.

Mr. Donald S. Miller of Hickory, North Carolina, won the best L-bird

award at the Sun 'n Fun Fly-In at Lakeland, Florida, held in April. His N number is 73490. The restoration is a work of love, and the completed aircraft is a product of a TLC restoration. This Piper Aircraft Company product has a long and proud history, starting in World War II. If you are not aware of the L-4's background, it is interesting! When we were drawn into World War II the Army Air Corps (AAC) was not technically



RICH FUSAKIO

separated from the United States Army. But there was little contact between the two factions. On June 6, 1942, the secretary of the Army allocated air assets to the Army ground forces (AGF). Friction still existed between the AAC and the AGF, so the AAC only provided “low performance” liaison aircraft. The AAC did provide the training for these

“low performance” aircraft pilots. Artillery barrages were an integral part of the AGF, and they wanted to make sure their requirements for aerial artillery spotters would be met.

The need and supply of these light planes had to be a simple conversion of a standard civilian aircraft. Taylorcraft, Piper, Aeronca, and the Stinson

division of Vultee all contributed to the program. With Piper Aircraft Company the choice was a standard J-3 Cub. Initially this aircraft carried an “O” designation for “observation,” but this was later changed in 1943 to an “L” designation, denoting “liaison.” Thus the original O-59 became the L-4. More than 5,606 were built during the war, and it became the most numerous of all liaison aircraft associated with World War II. Ground troops referred to the Piper L-4 as a “grasshopper,” and that’s where the L-4 got its name.

For the pilot, the L-4 was a great airplane to fly. Fully loaded it was off the ground in just more than 400 feet. The plane carried a pilot and one observer. The aircraft was radio equipped, and the seating was in tandem. Quite a few of the trips were made without the doors off, so as to improve the visibility factor. Skis or floats could be added if it was necessary, and cases existed where this was done.

To say that flying anywhere in the vicinity of the front lines was hazardous would be one of the great un-



RICH

The Sky's the Limit with Jet Edge Waterjet!

Make aviation parts in minutes instead of months with a Jet Edge Abrasive Waterjet Cutting System.

"Jet Edge has been absolutely outstanding."
- Dave Wilcock, Profile Waterjet Cutting, Ontario



Ultra-High Pressure Waterjet Cutting Systems

Jet Edge

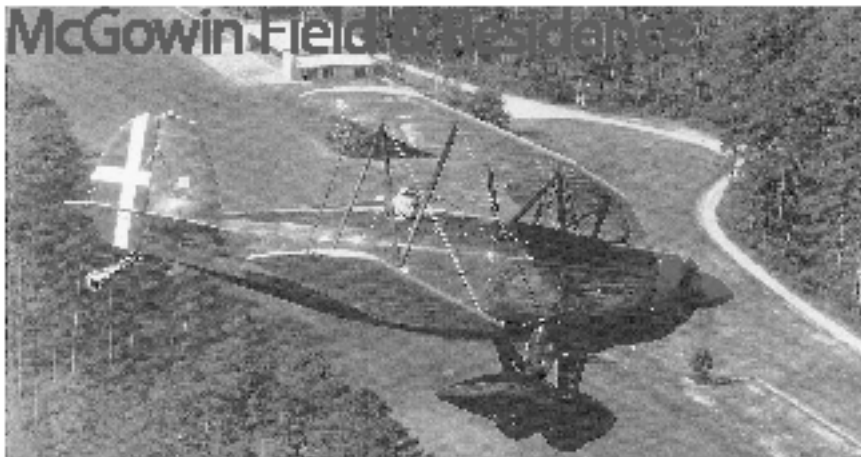
1.800.JET.EDGE www.jetedge.com sales@jetedge.com

derstatements of the war. The enemy knew precisely why the Grasshoppers were flying around, and did its utmost to shoot them out of the sky. It was the low-speed maneuverability of the L-4 that made it a difficult target. The minute an L-4 pilot and his observer saw they were drawing ground fire, they called for an immediate artillery barrage. The enemy learned quickly that retribution for ground fire was just a radio call away. The L-4 crew could call in for artillery fire upon a designated area and have delivered more firepower in one salvo than a flight of B-17s could drop. And after the initial salvo, the L-4 could make the necessary corrections for the artillery to make the next salvo devastating! It must have been a moment of great satisfaction to the two occupants of the L-4 to be able to direct such a massive amount of explosives with just a radio call.

While the L-4s flew without any defensive armament, some of the pilots were not without a little ingenuity. On occasion as many as three bazookas were strapped to the struts on the left wing. To activate the bazookas the pilot merely reached out the window and pulled the lanyard attached to the bazooka. A few dogfights did occur when an L-4 pilot outmaneuvered an Me.109 and caused it to fly into the terrain. Another pilot took on a Fieseler Storch with the two crews shooting at each other with handguns.

So, while the L-4 may rank way down toward the bottom of the warbird list, its role in World War II, the Korean conflict, and Vietnam was much appreciated. It was slowly phased out with the development of the helicopter. When they were released to the civilian market, they were eagerly sought out and acquired for many reasons.

Flight training and personal transportation were just a few of the chores they performed when they entered the civilian market. Quite a few of the L-4s, after being returned to the civilian market, were painted the familiar Piper Cub yellow. Most Grasshoppers fall into the category of a highly prized acquisition and are taken care of with a lot of TLC.



PRIVATE AIRPORT & ESTATE HOME FOR SALE

Spectacular! Upper bracket - rare opportunity. Located 45 minutes south of Montgomery, AL. Just minutes from historic Greenville. Private, historic airport with 3000' paving green runway, great approaches, large main hangar with offices, 2 aux hangars, 10,000 gal. fuel facility and much more. Charming Southern estate home features 4,500 square feet and is situated on picturesque private lake. Located in area of other exclusive property. 60 acres total, more acreage available. Transcendent development potential. Possible upscale hunting club privileges available. When only the best will do! \$2.5 million. For more information visit www.mcgowinfield.com or call Janice Ann Campbell at Prudential Ballard Realty (334) 221-5800.



Prudential

Ballard
Realty

© 2007 Prudential Real Estate Services, Inc. All Rights Reserved. Prudential Real Estate Services, Inc. is a service mark of The Prudential Insurance Company of America. All Other Marks are the property of their respective owners.

