



# Grand Champion Birddog Returns to Oshkosh

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Ping! Ping! Ping! If you've ever seen *Saving Private Ryan*, you can't forget the sound of German bullets ricocheting off the steel landing obstacles as the American infantry tried to advance on Omaha Beach. Fast-forward 25 years and put yourself in an O-1G Birddog flying over the lush green canopy of the Vietnamese jungle. Ping! Ping! Ping! The sound of bullet hits tearing through the fabric or ricocheting off the tubular frame might cause you to fly lower to avoid the groundfire or dread having to climb to 6,000 feet to establish a ra-

dio relay. If Randy Maiville's Birddog could talk, it would describe what it was like to have been a Vietnam combat aircraft, survive political change and upheaval, and then be saved to come home and become the Grand Champion: Post-World War II warbird of EAA AirVenture Oshkosh 2006.

Looking for a suitable warbird restoration, Randy, an engineer from Onondaga, Michigan, found it on a Birddog association website in 2000. It would be a challenging project based on the few pictures he had seen, and it was in New Zealand. Nevertheless,

he bought it because he had a good idea of what he was getting, based on the serial number. After crossing the Pacific, it was offloaded at Long Beach, California. He then had it shipped to a freight yard in Chicago. He took possession in Chicago in March of 2001. Not jumping into the restoration project immediately, he spent the first few years doing research and seeking parts unique to a combat aircraft. In 2004, he finally began the heavy restoration.

By then he had learned quite a lot about the aircraft he had brought



**Randy Maiville**



home to Onondaga. The plane was a Cessna L-19 or O-1A built in 1952 as a 1951 contract. In 1968, at the height of the Vietnam War, it was sent back to Cessna to be modified and upgraded for Vietnam service. It went in as an A model and came out as an O-1G model. With the same stock engine, its weight increased from 2,100 pounds as an A model to 2,800 pounds as a G. Much of this weight increase was due to a radio package dedicated to Vietnam service that was housed in the baggage compartment and under the passenger seat. This package tended to affect the center of gravity in an already nose-heavy taildragger.

O-16886 arrived in Vietnam in December 8, 1968, and was assigned to the 185<sup>th</sup> Aviation Company in Ban Me Thuot, Vietnam, and served until June of 1970, when the 185<sup>th</sup> stood down. It was then transferred to the 183<sup>rd</sup> Aviation Company. Part of its service with the 183<sup>rd</sup> was at Phu Hiep and Tuy Hoa on the coast near the South China Sea. The 183<sup>rd</sup> stood down in October of 1971, and O-16886 was turned over to the South Vietnamese air force. When South Vietnam fell in April of 1975, the aircraft was claimed and flown by the North Vietnamese. Markings found on it during the restoration verify this. With plenty of spare parts, the Communists flew several different types of American aircraft over the years that



had been left behind. Eventually they became obsolete. This Communist Vietnamese service is another factor in the Birddog's uniqueness.

Randy points out that none of the American museums with Vietnam displays have an O-1G combat vet aircraft like his, including the Air Force Museum and the Smithsonian. They rely on a stateside training example, which presents another unique feature of his aircraft.

So how did O-16886 get out of Vietnam and into New Zealand? There was an aircraft sale at the former U.S. Air Force Base at Bien Hoa in September of 1989 that was put on by a Japanese company. Americans were not allowed to participate. Australians and New Zealanders were not excluded, however, and 15 Birddogs were sold. Ten ended up in Australia and the rest in New Zealand. Eleven years later, Randy made his purchase.

Much of the restoration work was farmed out to specialty shops. The engine was as original as possible, since engines got swapped out when needed in combat theaters. Randy had the engine overhauled.

The fuselage had to be totally disassembled and every bulkhead taken apart. Corrosion was discovered, so every part was primed and put back together with new bolts, screws, and fasteners. This was primarily because anywhere a bolt or screw had touched an aluminum part, the aluminum had powdered. Randy was not surprised, given the aircraft's history.

One of his goals was to be as authentic as possible in line with the aircraft's service. There is a pair of antennae on the top of each wingtip and another set on the horizontal stabilizers that operate as a homing system. With an instrument in the control panel, the pilot could home in on a signal to get to a target or find some-

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one who was lost and needed a fix on where they were. This setup also was used as a relay system for two distant parties on the ground. Such a relay system operated at 6,000 to 7,000 feet. While O-16886's mission was never search and rescue, it's possible it may have been used to locate someone but did not actually rescue them.

Depending on the role of its particular Army unit, rocket pods were available. The rocket pods that Maiville attached were used for marking targets before calling in a gunship or jet strike. To do this, white phosphorus warheads did the job. Randy points

out that the 2.75 folding pin socket warhead could have been switched out for explosive warheads, if needed.

Amazingly, the greenhouse is stock and was standard from 1951 for observation purposes. There are several sources across the country that have stores of new parts for Birddogs, and this helped Randy, who used as many original parts as possible, but also scrounged for original replacement parts when necessary to be true to his goal of authenticity.

With a cruising speed of about 100 mph, O-16886 served a variety of roles in Vietnam. With two of the 10 aviation companies in Vietnam, it served well and had eight bullet holes to prove it. Those, of course, were repaired. Randy finished the project and got the aircraft certificated just before AirVenture 2006. As a Grand Champion that year, it attracted its share of attention, but Randy didn't restore it to win an award. He did it for the veterans to show their families that this was what they flew in the Vietnam War more than 30 years ago.

Because pilots in an aviation company flew out of a pool, any pilot who was in either unit for more than 30 days would have flown O-16886. Five of these pilots showed up in 2006 and said they flew it. When Randy brought it back as Returning Grand Champion in 2007, two more came forth. While the Ping! Ping! Ping! of a distant war may have faded, the accolades for a great restoration will be heard well into the future. 