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SECRETS of a Night Stalker

Painting warbirds with light!

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As a photographer for EAA, I have always loved to photograph EAA convention aircraft at night, especially the warbirds. The subdued airport lighting always creates a dramatic mood around the subject aircraft. I began this process many years ago, when we were using transparency film in our cameras. When the sun finally set, I would wander out into the darkness with my camera, tripod, and electronic flash to create some dramatic night images around the EAA

convention grounds. I soon discovered that the correct exposure and lighting requirements to photograph with film a large aircraft, such as a B-1 bomber, became very difficult to master. Unfortunately I could only look at the images I just took after the film was processed days later. During those early annual conventions, it was difficult because we didn't have access and staff to produce great night images. The advent of the digital camera, and the ability to view the image immediately after the image is photographed, led me to a very old technique called **painting with light.** This technique requires very little additional investment and is very portable. Just a regular-size flashlight is all you need, and my weapon of choice is a small handheld one made by Surefire.

During the daytime, my plan of attack is to scout out a unique aircraft that I want to photograph, and then later in the night I return, set up my tripod, compose my shot, and simply open the shutter of the camera. Because the area where the aircraft is located is in near or total darkness, no light will be recorded on the camera sensor with the shutter open. With the shutter now open and with no adverse light shining down on the area around the aircraft, I am free to walk into the picture and shine the flashlight at only the parts of the aircraft that I want to have lit. This allows me to control and complement the light placed on the aircraft. When I am finished painting the aircraft with light, I simply return to the camera and close the shutter. I cannot be seen in the picture because


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none of the light has shone on me. It is hard for some people to imagine painting with light, but imagine that the light were, say, water spraying from a hose, and instead of light beaming from a flashlight, you spray the water where you want it to go and wet only certain areas. As long as you do not get wet, so to speak, you will not be seen in the picture.

After the image is recorded in the camera, I remove the memory card from the camera and then place it in my laptop to review the image. I can immediately look at the image and make the necessary corrections in my light-painting techniques. Sometimes I will make seven to eight images of a particular aircraft. Each exposure will correct a spot on the aircraft that I would like to have exposed with more light. Each image will be slightly different because I cannot paint the light exactly the same way with each exposure. Most of the aircraft images

take about two to three minutes to completely paint with light.

This technique works very well, even on very large aircraft such as the C-5B Galaxy. It just takes a little longer to get them painted correctly. I have photographed some warbird cockpits very effectively, too, using the **painting with light** technique. This requires that the cockpit be in total darkness to complete, and the results speak for themselves.

The images that you see in this article are all single exposures with a minimum amount of manipulation to the image in the computer. I believe in getting the image and exposure correct at the camera-end of things, without any manipulation on the computer.

So if you find yourself up some late night and see a photographer walking around in the darkness shining a flashlight at an airplane, don't be alarmed. Just smile and say hello, because it's only me working on some more new night pictures!

B-24 Cockpit

L-39 Cockpit

P-40 Cockpit