

It can still take off!

By Kerry O'Connor / *Times Newspapers*

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The Cannibal Queen, a 1942 open-cockpit Stearman biplane, hit the sky over Northeast Philadelphia.

On a beautiful day in Northeast Philadelphia, a blue, cloudless sky stretched in every direction, and the yellow sun was the brightest object in sight.

Until the *Cannibal Queen* appeared. Powered by her big, 300-horsepower engine, the *Queen* – a 1942 open-cockpit Stearman biplane – roared into the sky over the Northeast Philadelphia Jet Center, her dazzling yellow paint job putting the sun to shame.

As the old bird sputtered to a stop at my feet, a shiny, sleek Lear jet taxied by on its way to the runway. Jim Lonergan – one of the *Cannibal Queen's* pilots and owners – removed his flight goggles and helmet and shot the jet a look.

“This,” he said while patting the fuselage of the *Queen*, “is *flying*. That is transportation.”

Lonergan would know. Since teaching himself to fly in an ultra-light plane that he built from a kit in his living room when he was 19, the 41-year-old pilot has flown a variety of aircraft – from private jets to banner-towing prop planes.

But it's his love of flying in the *Cannibal Queen* that he enjoys sharing with people, when is why he and his colleagues at the Biplane Rides Over Philadelphia company offer flights to the public.

“There are only about a thousand planes like this left in the work,” said Lonergan. “Most of those belong to private collectors. Only a handful of these planes are used to give rides. That's a shame. It's too cool an experience not to share.”

With a smile, he led me toward the *Queen* and said, “Let's fly!”

FLOATING ON AIR

The Lycoming engine coughed to life, turning the propeller into a blur. Soon, the *Queen* was racing down the runway. Lonergan pulled back on the stick, and we left the world slowly, noisily climbing toward 1,500 feet and making our way toward Center City and the incredible, unique view.

“Our cruising speed will be about eighty-six miles per hour,” Lonergan said through the headset. “So you can really enjoy the sights.”

He was right. On this particular flight package, know and the *Spirit of '76*, the *Queen* passed over several Philadelphia-area landmarks, including the Ben Franklin Bridge, the Battleship New Jersey, the skyscrapers of Center City, the Philadelphia Museum of Art and Boathouse Row.

But don't be fooled by the simplicity of their name. Biplane Rides over Philadelphia offers numerous flight packages, including romantic sunrise and sunset flights, even marriage-proposal flights. The company also offers packages that take in the beautiful countryside and farmland that can be found in Bucks County or the long stretches of sand and surf along the Jersey Shore.

“We do a lot of couples. Flying like this – wind in your face, not peeking out from behind a little window – is romantic,” Lonergan said when asked what kind of person is their “typical” customer.

“But a lot of men receive it as gifts. It’s something they’ve always wanted to do, and their wives or children arrange it for them. With your sweetheart or with a buddy, it’s more fun to do with somebody.”

Although Lonergan will share his passion – and plane – with anybody, he does have two favorite types of customers: the World War II pilots who actually learned to fly Stearmans in the Army Corps and children.

IT’S A TIME MACHINE

“With the old pilots, I’m just honored to give them their youth back, just for a little while,” he said. “Sometimes, when we’re in the air, I give them the stick. These are guys who haven’t flown in decades, but once they grab that stick it’s like they never crawled out of the cockpit.”

And the kids?

“With kids, it’s just the wonder in their eyes,” Lonergan said. I was that kid (once), riding my bike to the airport to watch planes take off and land, so I love to take kids up (and) talk to them about flight. That’s the fun part.

“The other part is exposing them to the historical side of flight, of planes like this. It make a difference when you can see a plane like this, touch it (and) see it work instead of (just observing it hanging) from the ceiling in a museum.”

Lonergan brought the Cannibal Queen back to earth with another gentle landing, and we taxied back to the jet center.

“I tell you,” Lonergan said when the propeller stopped spinning, “when I dream, this is the plane I dream about. I’m a lucky guy to do when I love and to be able to share that, but I wouldn’t be able to do it without some great people like my wife or the *Queen’s* mechanic, Joe Schepis.”

Then he commented on the look on my face – a look he calls the “Stearman smile” that all his passengers come out of the cockpit wearing.

“Never had a passenger yet that didn’t have that grin on their face!” he said.

Lee, an airport attendant, brought the fuel truck over so Lonergan could top off the *Queen’s* tank. “Man, I love this plane,” the attendant said as we walked around the old biplane together, checking out every little detail, including the leopard print bikini-clad woman brandishing a bone in her hand that is painted on the nose.

“How could you not?” I said, pint to a jet landing on the runway. “That is transportation. The *Queen* is flying.”

For more information on the Cannibal Queen, flight packages and prices, visit www.biplaneridesoverphiladelphia.com or call 1-800-247-2371.