

Barnstormer

Flying is his life

By JOE MARTUCCI

Bob Cey's instructions were difficult to hear over the din of the 125 horsepower engine. He advised the passenger, seated in front of him, to strap on his seat belt and not to touch the throttle or brakes. Cey adjusted his goggles, taxied the plane into position and let out the throttle until the plane lurched into the air. A few moments later, Cey and his passenger were 500 feet above the Oakland-Orion airport.

A smile crossed Cey's face as the wind rushed past the plane. He was having the time of his life. In the distance, the sun glinted on the Pontiac Silverdome. The Renaissance Center was shrouded in haze.

Cey, a Bloomfield Hills resident, has been flying since he was 13 and has been making a living at it for the past 15 years. But the plane he piloted Friday represents a life-long ambition.

It's a 1929 Great Lakes biplane and there are only two others of its kind still intact in the country. One of them is in a museum.

"It showed up in a small advertisement. I had always wanted one. I just never knew there was one around," he explained.

Cey and his partner in ABC Flight Service Inc., Mahlon Benson, purchased the biplane last week for "just under \$30,000." The trip back from Florida, where the plane was bought, required six legs. The biplane can only be landed at small airstrips, since it has no radio and cannot be cleared for landing.

"When you fly one of these home from somewhere, you really get to see the country. When we left Ohio for the last leg, 30 farmers came out to watch it take off," Cey said.

Despite the lack of a radio and sophisticated navigation equipment, Cey said he didn't have any trouble guiding the open-cockpit biplane back from Florida.

"You navigate by compass heading, railroad tracks, expressways and just visually."

The vintage biplane won't be making anymore long distance trips, however, because Cey plans to use it for precision aerobatics and in air shows.

"This is something I've wanted to do all my life. I figure I was born maybe 20 years too late. A lot of the fun and nostalgia has gone out of flying. Back in the 30s and 40s you could

go barnstorming and land in fields."

The plane was modified for air show flying by one of its previous owners. Except for needing a little touch up paint, it's in mint condition and, according to Cey, is built like a tank.

"I'm the fifth or sixth owner. These planes were built in Cleveland in the late '20s and early '30s and then the company went out of business."

"They produced about 400 planes. About 30 of them are in pieces all over the country. At this point, only two are still flying."

TRACING THE biplane's history, Cey said it was used in two flight schools in California from 1930-1941. It then sat in a barn until 1956, when it was purchased and restored to original condition by a senior captain for American Airlines.

The captain, Don Taylor, modified it for air show flying.

"The engines are almost not available, but most of the parts are still quite plentiful. You've got to fiddle with it daily. We have a mechanic, but I do most of the day-to-day kinds of things."

In order to perform in air shows, Cey will have to be certified by the Federal Aviation Administration. Cey did some limited aerobatic flying about 10 years ago. Now that he's got "one of the top five air show planes in the country," he can hardly wait to get back into it.

"There are about 25 great air show pilots in the country. Most of them do it as a second thing. You can do well enough financially to at least support your hobby."

After taking 1500 hours of instructions, Cey will have to fly for the FAA in order to be certified for air shows. For the first season or two, he'll be restricted to flying 200-500 feet.

CEY IS A purist. He doesn't even seem to mind the arduous task of twirling the propeller in order to start the engine.

"People just don't realize what it's like. We came home 1,000 or 1,200 miles (from Florida) with no navigation equipment and no radio. It was just like they did it in the old days."

Despite the inherent thrill of an open-air cockpit, the thought of piloting a plane that was in use shortly after Charles Lindbergh's historic trans-Atlantic flight would be enough to frighten most people.



Goggles and cap firmly in place, Bob Cey pilots his vintage biplane after takeoff from Oakland-Orion Airport. The biplane, one of only three of its kind still in existence, cost \$900 when built in 1929. (Staff photos by Stephen Cantrell)

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