



Neil Dunstan: Another Sort of "Boat"

I have always had a penchant for boys toys, hence my love of boats, however I also like to know what is around in other areas such as planes, cars, defence machinery and ships, etc.

I always watch "Top Gear" on the television and also scientific programs that show space exploration and such.

Last year I travelled up to Townsville to visit my daughter and just by coincidence, the trip also coincided with the Air Show that was being put on.

I had a great time sitting on the beach front watching all the planes putting on their Show out over the water towards Magnetic Island, with plenty of old vintage planes chugging by and the modern jets of the Australian Air Force, but the highlight was the Thunderbirds , the U.S. aerobatic team flying their F-15 "Fighting Falcons".

One gets to be a bit blasé about the Yanks going on about their armed forces, but I can



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honestly say that the Thunderbirds were breathtaking, and this is not just an expression, as I found myself gasping for breath it was so exciting. The following day, the defence base at Garbutt was opened for the public and I got to see all the planes, helicopters and tanks, etc, including the giant Starlifter freight planes that transported all the equipment to Australia for the Yanks. This was a great day out for a technophile like me.

You may ask: *What has all this to do with boating and fishing?* Well, when I

went back to Townsville at Xmas to spend the holidays with our daughter, she had arranged for me to have a very exciting experience acknowledging my penchant for the previously mentioned toys.

I had just parted with my superb Barcrusher 530c (*Pedro-2*) which I sold to a fellow Barcrusher fan in Brisbane and was feeling a little lost as *Pedro-2* had given me and my mate John lots of great trips and heaps of fish, so the Xmas break looked like being nice, but not an adventure. However, I had not reckoned on my scheming daughter and her

mother.

Unbeknownst to me, they had hired the "*Red Baron*", a sea plane that operates out of Townsville Marina, for a Xmas present jaunt around Townsville.

As we had the whole plane to ourselves and my wife would not go in it for love nor money, I invited my old fishing mate from Mackay who has retired to a retirement home in Townsville to come for a ride with me.

Old Joe was a pilot during the Second World War, and flew Tiger Moths, but as he is in his middle eighties I thought he may have been a bit reluctant - but he couldn't wait to have a go.

We duly arrived down at the marina in the morning and checked in after reading the information sheet supplied.

The plane is a Gruman biplane with an eight hundred horsepower radial engine mounted in front of the passengers - similar to the ones that powered the old DC3





cargo planes and has two passenger seats up forward with the pilots position astern of the passenger compartment. It has an open cockpit and the passengers are protected by a small windscreen in front, but when I stuck my head up above the windscreen at 140 knots I got hit by a blast of air that was quite stunning.

She is mounted on two large floats by a series of alloy braces and sits quite high above the water but I must admit that it all looked a bit flimsy to me.

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We taxied slowly out of the marina at the regulation four knots, as the craft is registered as a boat when on the water, so it has to abide with the same rules as us boaters.

Once we got outside the marina we headed north about a hundred metres out from the Strand and I had a look at the weather conditions which were a north easterly breeze around twenty knots and scattered showers with a cloud ceiling at only a couple of thousand feet.

This was not the best I thought as there was a swell about a metre with a fair side chop but the pilot must have thought it was ok and he opened her up.

I can tell you that this was the first time I had been in a watercraft doing over fifty knots through quite a decent sea and it was pretty hair raising as the supports for the floats didn't look all that strong, but as we picked up speed the plane took a lot of the weight off the floats and got lift from the wings. It took quite a while before the plane actually took off and the pilot explained over the com. system that the wind was a bit side on and he had to give it a bit extra to get up to take off speed, but eventually we were away.

What a great way to check out the reefs around Magnetic Island. We flew

north towards Rat Island and then east over to Magnetic and around all the headlands and bays to get a really good view of all beaches, boats fishing and the occasional bikini clad sunbather.

On the way back to the mainland the pilot asked us if we wanted to do a few aerobatics and Joe said let her rip so after a few wing overs, a couple of really steep dives and a few other fancy moves we were really enjoying ourselves, so I took a quick peek at Joe and he was grinning fit to bust. Eventually we arrived back at the Strand to line up for the landing after half an hour or so of flying. We came down at the southern end of the Strand, taxied around the corner back into the Marina and the pilot did a remarkable job of coming alongside the pontoon considering that it was quite windy and the plane had a hell of a lot of windage. We got out and Joe had a smile on his face a mile wide, as it was the first time he had been flying in an open cockpit plane since the war, and he had a great time.

Well, I did begin this article by saying that it was an unusual boat and I guess it was taking a bit of license to compare it to a boat, but my goodness, it was the 'boat' trip of lifetime.

- Neil Dunstan.
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