

Watsonville Fly-In is old home week for show veteran

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STAFF WRITER

FOR JIM CHEATHAM, an exhibition helicopter pilot, this weekend's appearance at the West Coast Antique Fly-In and Air Show in Watsonville is a homecoming to the place where his entertainment career was launched.

Cheatham, whose small Robinson R-22 is the only chopper listed on the air show program, is returning for his third consecutive year of airborne demonstrations.

Visitors will see how an eggbeater lands when it has lost an engine, what can be picked up with the cargo hook attached to the aircraft's underbelly and how the whirring, lightweight, two-seater matches up in a drag race with an antique airplane. For the heat, Cheatham expects to reach speeds of 115 mph over

the quarter-mile course.

Cheatham, who flew helicopters during a tour of duty in Vietnam and owns Verticare Helicopters in Salinas, first participated in the Fly-In as a last-minute replacement in 1991.

Following his act, before he even alighted from the cabin, two people invited him to sign up for other shows. After his Watsonville debut, Cheatham traveled to Malaysia for an exhibition. He now performs in about 20 shows a year.

This year, for the sake of glitz, Cheatham's chopper will expel streams of smoke.

"It'll leave a trail — that makes it a lot more spectacular," he said.

Three years ago, Cheatham taught Clint Eastwood how to fly. Eastwood relies on his French-made, six-seater to get him back and forth between Burbank and his Northern California ranch.

Yesterday morning, Cheatham's white, 1,570-pound chopper shared exhibition space on the runway of a hangar at Watsonville Airport with about seven antique airplanes that will participate in the annual Memorial Day weekend show.

On the tarmac, pilots mingled with the press and took photographers up for aerial shots.

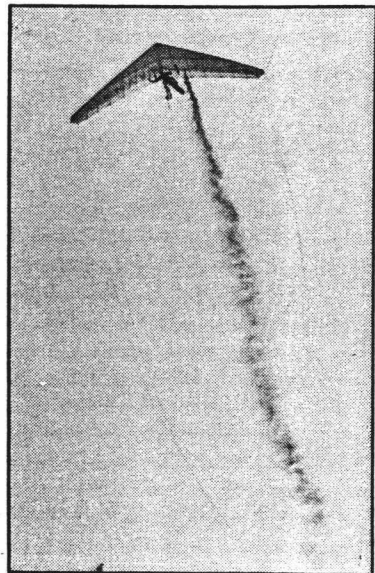
Display models included a yellow Steerman, a basic trainer with an open cockpit popular during World War II, and the Raven, a high-horsepower, lightweight "one-of-a-kind" aircraft designed for "agrobatics," a demonstration of crop-dusting maneuvers combined with aerobatics and flown in relation to ribbons that are suppose to simulate power lines.

The Raven, which is owned by Wayne Handley, of Greenfield, is painted red with a black raven



Photos by Kurt Ellison

Jim Cheatham, above, pilots his Verticare Robinson R-22 helicopter at Watsonville Airport yesterday. At left, Dan Buchanan, of Pacifica, lifts off in his hang-glider from the back of a pickup motoring along the runway.



Dan Buchanan practices his hang-glider act for the Fly-In's opening ceremonies.

painted on the wings and cockpit.

It is among the 10 aircraft listed on the show bill. Performances will take place tomorrow and Sunday at 1 p.m. Activities both days will begin

with a 6 a.m. breakfast prepared by the Pajaro Valley Lions club. Displays can be viewed at 7 a.m.

Bob DeVries, a Fly-In organizer, is excited about tracking down a P-47 Thunderbolt fighter plane for

the show. The plane was flown on the side of the United States by a Mexican squadron during World War II, he said. Any pilots located could visit the show as dignitaries, DeVries said.

"They did air-to-air combat —

dogfighting," DeVries said. The Fly-In opened its 29th annual season at the airport yesterday afternoon. General admission is \$8 Saturday and Sunday. More information is available by calling 496-9559.