

# Wing and a Prayer

Fly-In

5-28-09

First time in biplane will be reporter's last

By **DONNA JONES**  
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

WATSONVILLE — I forgot to close my eyes.

That's what I planned to do Thursday if the aerobatic flight in a 1943 Boeing Stearman biplane got too scary.

But when the two-seater, open-cockpit plane plummeted toward the Pajaro Valley 3,000 feet below,

pure panic pushed my eyes wide open.

"Wasn't that fun?" Red Baron pilot Travis Aukes asked as he pulled the plane level after the hammerhead maneuver.

I just hoped my hand wasn't shaking too much as I flipped a thumbs-up. After all, I was a professional on assignment.

**Let me assure you, in hindsight, flying upside down at 140 mph is nothing like ballet.**

A Sentinel reporter and photographer were invited to preview the performances by the Red Baron Pizza Squadron in advance of the Watsonville Fly-In and Air Show, which takes off today and runs through Sunday.

The Red Baron two-ship team is one of several aerobatic acts. The show also features displays of vintage aircraft, a NASA exhibit accompanied by shuttle astronauts Stephen Robinson and Dan Bursch, Friday night fireworks and more.

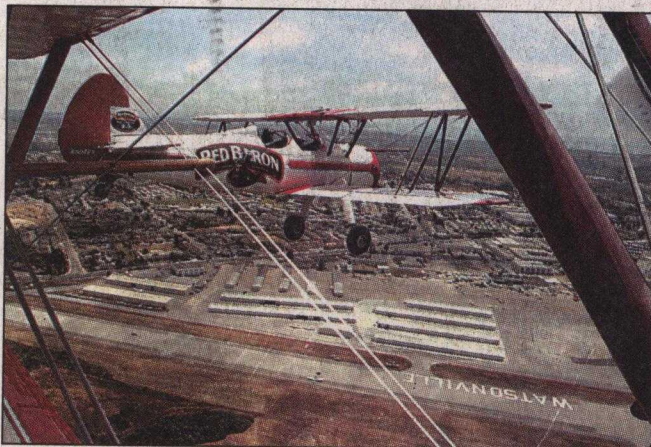
Truthfully, I was a little nervous when I arrived at Watsonville Municipal Airport for the ride, and before walking over to the plane I asked Red Baron spokeswoman Jill Winkels if the stunts would be similar to a roller coaster ride. No, she said. It feels slower, more like ballet.

Let me assure you, in hindsight, flying upside down at 140 mph is nothing like ballet.

But Aukes was reassuring as he strapped me into seat belt and parachute. A pilot for 22 years, he's been flying for Red Baron for the past 12. During that time, he's taken 9,000 passengers aloft, and



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel photos  
A Red Baron squadron pilot, above, screams toward earth with Sentinel reporter Donna Jones aboard. Below, the planes check out Watsonville Municipal Airport.



## If You Go

**WHAT:** Watsonville Fly-In and Air Show.  
**WHEN:** Noon to 10 p.m. today, 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. Saturday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday.  
**WHERE:** Watsonville Municipal Airport.  
**TICKETS:** \$10 per day general, \$8 seniors and military, \$5 children ages 6-12. \$5 parking.  
**DETAILS:** 763-4058 or [www.watsonvilleflyin.org](http://www.watsonvilleflyin.org).

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*'I'm giving people a taste of what barnstorming was all about.'*

TRAVIS AUKES, RED BARON PILOT

## Fly-In

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hasn't lost one, he said.

Still, the brisk instructions on what to do in an emergency — flip the seat-belt lever, unsnap the chin strap and yank off the leather flight cap; jump out of the plane, and pull the parachute handle once clear — did little to calm my nerves.

I doubted I'd remember what to do in the event of trouble.

(Later, back at the office, photographer Shmuel Thaler, who rode in the second plane, said my fears weren't misplaced. "Anytime they give you a parachute, it's dangerous," he said.)

But it was too late to back out as Aukes started the engine and rolled toward the runway.

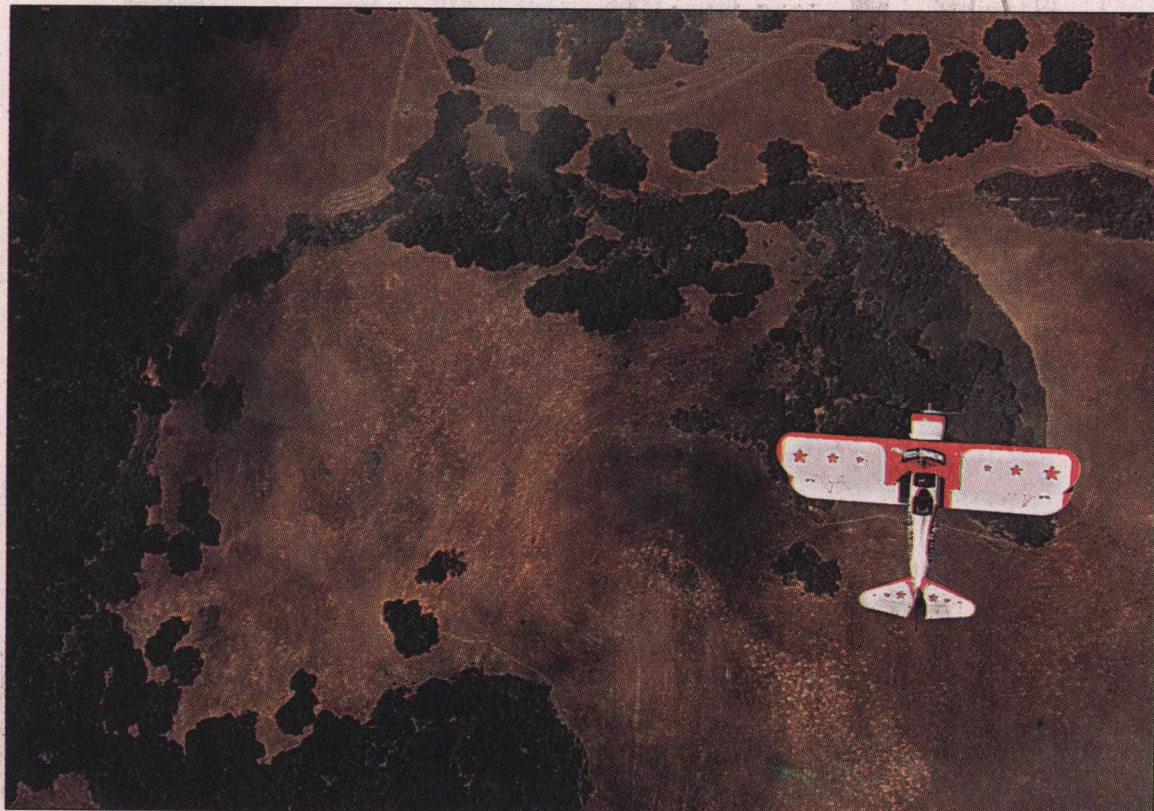
During World War II, the Boeing Stearman was used to train pilots. My father, a Navy pilot and instructor during the war, spent about 2,000 hours in a Stearman, learning to fly and then teaching others.

They also were a favorite for crop-dusting.

Aukes recalled the pioneer days of aviation to explain his love for what he called "the ultimate job." Then, pilots traveled around the country, landing in fields to thrill folk with a close-up look and, for those who could afford it, a ride in a plane.

"I'm giving people a taste of what barnstorming was all about," he said.

My sample started out bouncy as we headed west over Highway 1, then circled south of the city. Sitting in the front seat, the wind rushed past my face, making the flight seem like a motorcycle ride with a view.



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

A Red Baron pilot flies above the hills near Watsonville on Thursday. The Barons will be at this weekend's Watsonville Fly-in and Air Show, which starts today,

And the view: Rectangles in hues of green, yellow and brown crisscrossed with narrow bands of roads, clusters of homes, lakes the size of puddles and patches of shiny white greenhouses.

Heading east toward the hills, Aukes and Todd Schaufenbuel, who was flying the second Red Baron plane carrying Thaler, did a loop — end over end — in formation. That was OK, even sort of fun, but the

sightseeing was over.

The slow roll came next, a dizzying side-over-side move. Then the barrel roll, a combination of the previous two maneuvers that sent the ground scurrying sideways and up and down. I white-knuckled the two thin metal bars on either side of the seat through the hammerhead, a rush straight up into the sky before a pivot plunged us back toward the ground.

"I wouldn't mind going along for that kind of ride," my 83-year-old father said when I called him after the flight. He said he learned the maneuvers for use in dogfights during the war.

Well, Dad, next time my editor sends me out on a death-defying flying assignment, I'll give you a call.

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