

# GRASSHOPPERS AND FLITFIRES

*The early liaison airplanes are being saved/Gordon Baxter*



DOWN IN sunny San Antonio, Texas, there is a man who has all the liaison airplanes flown during World War II. Bill Stratton is his name, and the Alamo Liaison Group is the hearty band of enthusiasts that Stratton is associated with in collecting, restoring and flying these light airplanes that did so much in every theater of the war.

In addition to the ALG, there is also the International Bird Dog Association based in Albuquerque, New Mexico. It's a like-minded organization, though not as centralized. Phil Phillips sends out a newsletter to owners of the L-19 Bird Dog, the military spotter Cessna with a high wing and tandem seating for two.

There have been two books published on the limitless courage of pilots flying light airplanes in war. The first, *Alone and Unarmed*, is by Ernest Kowalik, of Nederland, Texas (Carlton Press, New York, New York; published in 1968; hardcover, 317 pages and probably out of print). Kowalik writes a first-hand account of his adventures.

The second book, which is more recent, was written by Hardy Cannon and Stratton. Titled *Box Seat Over Hell* (139 pages, illustrated paperback; Morton Printing, 1985), it's still available from the ALG, which is

based on a sandy strip south of San Antonio called Cannon Field. The contents live up to such a melodramatic title.

The book is a collection of first-person accounts from the pilots who flew liaison airplanes in every theater of World War II. Liaison pilots were the only pilots to fly out the war as enlisted men, although various officers also flew the "grasshoppers," as they were called.

There are accounts of light airplanes, with rockets rigged to their struts, knocking out tanks. Not one U.S. liaison airplane was shot down by enemy aircraft, although they were shot at often enough. One Messerschmitt pilot, giving up on trying to hit his slow, jinking target, just flew by and clipped off the wing of the light aircraft.

Several accounts exist of liaison aircraft downing enemy fighters. Capt. V.J. McGrath, a Royal artillery spotter assigned to the 5th Army, lured a Bf-109 into a twisting box canyon. The resulting wall crash of the German fighter was just what McGrath had expected.

In the closing months of the war an L-4 Cub attacked an unarmed German Fieseler Storch observation airplane. The Cub crew downed the Storch with lucky shots from their .45-caliber pistols, landed nearby and captured the German pilot and the observer.

But the real business of the liaisons was artillery spotting. So swift and deadly was the rainfall of shells they could call down on enemy positions that German ground troops were rewarded with a 15-day leave if they could bring one down.

In the Asian theater a Japanese prisoner said that more fear was generated by the Cubs than by any other enemy aircraft, because the sighting of one preceded heavy artillery bombardment.

As the war progressed and the short-field utility of the light airplanes became more widely known to field commanders—who at first objected to their presence—the light

airplanes were used for ambulance service.

To carry a full-size litter, the B model of the Stinson L-5 was modified with hatches opening into the rear fuselage. Later, the little airplanes became indispensable to field officers, who pressed them into service to get to battlefield locations, and right now.

Then, as now, the nonflying public tended to call all the little high-wing, two-seaters "Cubs" (even though some forgotten PR man gave each liaison airplane a chest-thumping name). One good reason: during the war there were more Piper Cubs than any of the others.

James C. Fahey, in his book, *U.S. Army Aircraft, 1908-1946*, lists 57 airplanes that had an L designation. Some of the changes represented only a different engine of the same horsepower. The ALG makes no attempt to deal with the proliferation of model designations and modifications, nor with such one-of-a-kind experiments as the Ryan L-10 or Bellanca L-11.

The surprising fact is that the air force of the Army had 14,003 little airplanes in combat all over the world. Our allies didn't hesitate to get into the liaison act either. The French flew theirs across the Channel to England at the fall of France. The British fondly called their liaison airplanes "flitfires."

The Piper, Taylorcraft, Aeronca and Interstate would be 100-yard look-alikes to the untrained eye. All were powered by a 65-hp Continental, Lycoming or Franklin engine (except the L-6 Interstate, a latecomer with a 115-hp Franklin).

All had a span of around 35 feet, weighed about the same, flew about the same, landed at 30 to 40 knots. All were civilian adaptations of existing aircraft, except the Interstate L-6, which was a wartime design and was kept stateside for pilot training only.

The Stinson L-1 and L-5 were the largest. With a span of 42 feet and a 290-hp Lycoming radial with constant-speed prop, the L-1 was a pre-

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war design of Stinson's. Hardly a light airplane, it weighed 3,130 pounds empty.

It was a true STOL, with fully slotted leading edges, large flaps and drooped ailerons. The big L-1 almost seemed to hover at its touchdown speed of 30 knots, slower than all the other liaisons.

Load hauling in the roomy cabin seemed to be limited only by what the landing gear could stand. The gear was a weak point in the design of the L-1, and with its greater weight the big monoplane did not hop and skip over ground irregularities as the lighter liaisons did, but collapsed its landing gear.

First in use as a liaison, the L-1 stayed on the longest, being adopted in postwar days by the National Fish and Game Commission. The folks at Cannon Field believe theirs is the last L-1 flying.

The other Stinson, the L-5, was also heavier and faster than the other liaisons. Based on the Stinson Voyager, given a hardy 190-hp Lycoming, slotted leading edges, flaps and drooped ailerons, the L-5 was and is an outstanding airplane.

The Army bought more than 4,000 of the Stinsons, and used them in all theaters of World War II and as late as the Korean War. Today surplus L-5s are still at work in the back countries of the world. And their 677-pound legal load is probably the most abused figure since the load limit of the DC-3.

In the postwar years there was a rush for the surplus airplanes, then all but the Interstate and L-1 went back into long, happy lives. The Piper was still the J-3 Cub, the Aeronca evolved into the Citabria and the Taylorcraft went back to side-by-side seating.

How remarkable was this wartime interlude of young men and American light airplanes. How fine it is that there is an International Bird Dog Society, and that men like Bill Stratton and his associates at ALG have preserved the airplanes and their olive-drab paint and white stars. □