





Danny Clisham & His Cub

HONORING HAROLD KRIER

BY MARK PHELPS



Harold Krier taxiing his Super Chipmunk during an air show in Fairview, Oklahoma, in 1970.

A VETERAN AIRLINE PILOT IN HIS “DAY JOB,” ELITE AIR SHOW ANNOUNCER DANNY CLISHAM REFLECTED, “I’VE ALWAYS SEEN THE WORLD FROM 30,000 FEET. ALL MY LIFE, I’VE BEEN GOING HIGH AND FAST.” OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS, THOUGH, IT BECAME CLEAR TO HIM THAT IT WAS TIME FOR A CHANGE OF PERSPECTIVE. HE SHIFTED HIS SIGHTS TO LOW AND SLOW. AND IN A WAY, IT WAS A RETURN TO HIS YOUTH, WHEN HE WAS ENAMORED OF AIR SHOW PERFORMERS SUCH AS BEVO HOWARD, CHARLIE HILLARD, AND HAROLD KRIER.

“WHEN I WAS GROWING up, guys were using hot-rod Taylorcrafts and Cubs in air shows,” he said. “And they all had ‘air show’ paint jobs. For instance, Harold Krier’s first air show airplane was a Cub.”

There’s not much in general aviation that Danny hasn’t seen. And his choice for a “low and slow” airplane, and its paint scheme, reflects his long history as an air show announcer and a fan of air show performers. For decades, he’s watched the greatest pilots and airplanes from his unique perspective behind the





TOP: The Harold Krier paint scheme was a natural for Danny to choose. LEFT: Danny's Legend Cub has the iconic clamshell doors of the original, but on both sides for what he describes as an open-cockpit feel. ABOVE: The panel is uncomplicated, just like the low and slow flying it evokes. MIDDLE: But the upholstery carries a personalized splash of Danny's Hollywood image.

microphone. He's also studied the histories of their airplanes and gotten to know the pilots in a personal way that few others can claim. Harold Krier is one of his favorites.

Born in 1922 in Olpe, Kansas, Harold served as a flight engineer during World War II. After his discharge, he earned his airframe and engine (A&E) technician's certificate and learned to fly. He and his instructor, Jack Stephens, founded the airport in Ashland, Kansas, that now bears his name. Harold built up his clip-wing Cub and taught himself aerobatics from a surplus Air Corps primary flying manual. He started his air show career in that airplane. It was his Great Lakes Special, however, that made him famous as an air show performer; many credit Harold with reviving the sport of aerobatics in the United States during the 1950s and early '60s. Harold was killed spin testing an experimental airplane in July 1971, but his legend lives on among aerobatic air show performers.

Danny's personal Cub memories go back to his beginnings as a pilot. "As a teenager, I bought a Cub for \$900, then found an instructor to teach me to fly it.

I soloed at 17. Sold it for \$1,000,” he said, shaking his head with regret.

For Danny, the paint scheme on Harold’s Cub was the best of any air show airplane at the time, or since. He said, “The attention to detail was amazing for an air show airplane. It had a starburst scheme on the top, but a checkerboard pattern on the bottoms of the wings, horizontal stabilizer, and landing gear so the crowd could easily tell when it was inverted. Up close, you saw the red and blue were separated by a streak of white, which made it stand out. Very labor-intensive. It’s a time-consuming scheme to apply, but his clip-wing Cub—and the Great Lakes Special and the Chipmunk after it—really stood out. It was a real razzmatazz paint scheme, but done in a very tasteful way.”

Most Cub fans know that “clip-wing” is a slightly deceptive term, implying that the wings are shortened from the tips inward. Not so. Actually, the wings are shortened by removing 40-1/2 inches from the root of each one. The Reed version of the clip-wing Cub included doubling the number of ribs in the remaining wingspan, adding a vertical steel channel

stiffer on the outer strut fittings (because of the changed angle of how the strut meets the shorter wing), and cutting a notch in the lower clamshell door to accommodate the altered strut configuration.

Danny had owned a Reed clip-wing Cub that he bought from air show pilot Warren Pietsch. But as with any old airplane, aging issues began to creep in at annual inspection time. He said, “The wood bows were cracking, and water would accumulate in the thin chromoly tubes, leading to corrosion problems.” Danny knew these were not insurmountable squawks, but he also knew that he wanted to fly more than he wanted to spend time on maintenance. “I really wanted an airplane with all-new components, so I visited the folks at American Legend in Sulphur Springs, Texas.”

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DANNY AND AIR SHOW ANNOUNCING

EAA AirVenture Oshkosh 2012 will mark the 37th year that Danny Clisham has been a member of the air show announcing team at Oshkosh, and he’s looking forward to the event with great enthusiasm.

Danny’s interest in aviation began during his childhood, and he credits his uncle, Jim Mynning, a pilot, for convincing Danny’s parents to allow him to get involved with air show announcing. In the early 1960s when he picked up a microphone for the first time, most air show performers just announced for one another.

Danny’s “break” came at an air show in West Virginia in 1965 when a local television station’s “color” announcer didn’t know how to describe the air show routines. “I hopped up behind him on the hay wagon and whispered in his ear that I’d describe the maneuvers in his ear and he could repeat that to the crowd. Instead, he handed me the microphone, and the last thing I saw was the bottoms of his shoes as he raced away.”

But Danny, who’d attended air shows throughout his life, thought there was a way to “elevate the [air show] industry and get the respect it was due.” A longtime fan of Hollywood show business and announcers like Ed McMahon and Dick Clark, Danny felt the air show community would be enhanced if the announcers looked the part. “I thought that dressing like a celebrity just made the whole program more Hollywood.” So, the signature Danny Clisham suit was born...and the now famous boutonniere. That came from Jackie Gleason. “He looked like he cared about his audience. It was just a class act. If it worked for him, maybe it could work for me.”

Forty-seven years later, that boutonniere is still working for Danny, and air show crowds around the world are more informed and gain more enjoyment from air shows because of the work Danny has accomplished.



When it came to deciding on a paint scheme, there was no hesitation.

BEST CUB AIR SHOW ROUTINE?

Danny didn't hesitate a second when asked what's the best air show routine in a Piper Cub he's ever seen. "John MacGuire from Fort Worth, Texas. He flies a Cub with air show history dating back to Bevo Howard in the 1930s." The Cub's ownership log is impeccable, having also been stewarded by the late Charlie Hillard. Charlie sold it to Bob Copeland who, in turn, sold it to John MacGuire. Bob had installed a 180-hp Lycoming engine—more than twice the horsepower of Danny's Legend Cub—which gives the show Cub standout performance. But John installed an even more interesting modification. Following an accident in a Pitts Special (caused by a fire extinguisher jamming the controls), John was paralyzed from the waist down, so he flies his impressive air show routine with hand controls. Danny said, "He does the best power maneuvers I've ever seen in that aircraft."



Danny didn't go alone. He said, "I walked through the factory with six friends—aircraft restorers I know and trust. They agreed it's a good design." The Legend Cub isn't a clip-wing, and for Danny that's just fine. He also said, "In my experience, it seemed like a standard Cub was always 'just short' in range, and the Legend has two wing tanks to address that." And it has double the number of clamshell doors as a J-3 Cub—one on each side, for what Danny described as "a real open-cockpit feel."

When it came to deciding on a paint scheme, there was no hesitation. The Harold Krier air show scheme was Danny's favorite, hands down, so that's how his Legend Cub is painted.

For the powerplant of the Legend Cub, Danny decided to use the 85-hp Continental engine from his Reed Cub. Not exactly overpowered, but that's fine with Danny, too. He added, "I have a Pitts S-1 that satisfies my aerobatic cravings—strictly sport maneuvers, mind you. And I have a Swearingen SX300, a comfortable cross-country airplane and a real speed demon. In my Legend Cub, I was looking for something else." That "something else" has nothing to do with speed or aerobatic agility. He said, "Some people ask me, 'How fast is it?'"

and I smile and answer, 'It's not.'"

Given his preference for the Cub's relaxed pace, Danny chose an interesting tail number—N990DC. Using his initials is no surprise, but the "990" is his tribute to the Convair 990 he used to fly for the airlines. "Other than Concorde, it was the fastest commercial jet airliner, at Mach 0.912," he said. He also noted, ruefully, that it represents one of the greatest commercial losses for any manufacturer.

Danny said his Cub "will be outside anytime the weather is good and I'm around. And whoever is there will be asked if they want a ride." He particularly relishes the thought of introducing passengers, especially other pilots, to the joys of flying the Cub over the Irish Hills west of his home in Ann Arbor, Michigan. But don't offer to help put the Cub away. Danny said he'll reserve the last flight of the day as a solo.

"Just before the sun is headed down below the horizon, I like to take a solitude ride. That's just pure joy in an airplane." *EAA*

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