Remembering Dean

WARBIRD PILOT DOUG GOSS REFLECTS ON AN   
 IMPORTANT INFLUENCE IN HIS AVIATION LIFE   
 BY DOUG GOSS

The first time I saw Dean Ortner fly was in the early summer of 1966 at the Beaver County Airport in west central Pennsylvania. I had been learning to fly at nearby Tasa Field in Zelienople as a member of the Condor Aero Club and had flown a club Cessna 150 to my first-ever airshow with another member pilot, ED Mitchell.

Dean was flying his P-51D on this particular day and the sight and sound of that great fighter was one I would never forget. The clear skies of early morning were becoming overcast when it became Dean’s turn to fly and a large part of his routine was done in IFR conditions. As Dean entered the vertical to execute his loops and Cuban 8s, the Mustang would enter the gray cloud cover and disappear for several seconds only to reappear perfectly aligned with the show centerline.

I don’t know what the FAA thought about the Dean’s IFR aerobatics, but I was impressed and forever hooked on air shows and high-performance WW2 aircraft — soon to be known as “WARBIRDS.”

It was during mid-summer of 1967 that I saw Dean fly again in western Pennsylvania. Dean’s hometown and base of operations were located in nearby Wakeman, Ohio where he and his brother Andy ran Ortner Air Service, an on-demand air freight and charter service (see Tom Friedman’s two-part “The Flying Ortner Brothers” in the April and May 2002 issues of Air Classics). Since Dean was so close, it was only natural that he was booked a second time at the Beaver County Air Show. Dean was a listed headliner and was scheduled to fly a couple of times, first doing a comedy Cub routine followed by aerobatics in his AT-6.

As my dad and I watched from the show sideline that hot and muggy summer day, we heard the unmistakable sound of a round engine as Dean crossed mid-field for his approach to Beaver County. After a squeaker landing, Dean and his wife Lois deplaned and walked up the show line right where we were standing. I called out to him and the following conversation we initiated began a 6-yr friendship as we discussed the T-6G my dad and I had purchased just the month before.

I was about 4-months from earning m private license and knew nothing about flying a tailwheel airplane let alone a 600-horse T-6. Dean graciously answered all my naïve questions as my dad photographed us in front of Bevo Howard’s Jungmeister biplane.

With the heat of the day building, the airshow began and the various acts flew their routines and returned to parking Other than Bevo Howard, Cole Palen and the CAF’s P-38 (N25Y), I’m not sure who all performed before Dean began his comedy Cub act. Dean’s routine involved the usual loops and rolls plus a low-level spin that he initiated under 500-ft AGL. One turn into the low –level spin and he knew he was in trouble. The density altitude that day was probably over 4000 ft and as Dean began his recovery, the Cub stalled and pancaked into the ground collapsing the wings and breaking the engine from its mounts.

I was standing on a small hill by some T-hangars and snapped a picture just as the Cub hit the ground in a cloud of dust. Dean survived the crash, but was badly injured and immediately taken to a nearby hospital for treatment. Needless to say, the like-new borrowed Cub was virtually destroyed and, for obvious reasons. Dean did not fly his T-6 that day. It would be a couple of years before I would see Dean fly his T-6 again.

Several months later in the early fall, my college roommate and I took a road trip to western Ohio and stopped by the Ortner Airport in Wakeman to check out the field and see what airplanes were on hand. The airport was awash in round engine aircraft. Beech 18s were everywhere, a Navy Corsair was behind the main hangar, and two BT-13s were in the grass along with Dean’s T-6 and a wingless T-6F. Elsewhere on the airport were a DC-3 and a couple of C-46s on the main ramp having some engine work done.

I had Dean’s street address so we stopped by before continuing our road trip. We found Dean and his wife sitting on the front porch where he was recovering from his Cub accident. He was totally encased in a sleeveless body cast and was trying to reach an unreachable itch with an unbent clothes hanger. When I asked him what happened at Beaver County he flatly said, “I just plain screwed up.”

As time went on I became more comfortable in the T-6G (N7197) and eventually soled it after 9-hr of dual from former Air America pilot Bill Andresevic. The memorable solo came on 22 January 1969 at the Dubois-Jefferson County airport near Dubois, Pennsylvania. My logbook shows 1.8-hr in the solo column.

In the summer of 1970, a group of airport fliers decided an airshows was needed to increase aviation awareness at the Dubois Airport. As the designated chair person for the event, I suggested that Dean Ortner be contacted to perform the bulk of the aerobatics. I figured Dean could use my Texan for his T-6 aerobatics and borrow a local J-3 for his Cub routine. For the main event, Dean would be flying his newly-acquired Chance Vought F4U-7 Corsair that he picked up in a trade with the Marine Aviation Museum at Quantico, Virginia. Dean swapped them a well-used FG-ID (N1978M) which was a model the Marines would have flown in their WW2 air battles.

Since Dean was going to be the sole performer for our small first-ever show, we billed him as “The one-man airshow” and proceeded to print our fliers this way. My dad printed up several hundred posters and I even appeared on a local AM radio show to hype the upcoming event. For financial backing, we were being supported by the local Falls Creek Fire Department. If my memory serves me correctly, Dean’s bill for the full day of flying was a whopping &700 plus a fuel top off for the Corsair at .35 a gallon.

The morning of the show, 20 September 1970, dawned bright and clear and Dean radioed Dubois FSS about 0930 that Corsair 33714 was about 30 to the west inbound forlanding. My dad and I scrambled for the T-6 and flew westbound to Brookville, Pennsylvania, to meet up with the inbound Dash 7. My dad had his camera and shot some great photos of Dean and the Corsair as he tucked in on my right wing as we flew over the neighboring small towns prior to landing.

I headed into land first with Dean in hot pursuit. Just as my left wheel was ready to touch down in a nasty cross wind, Dean flew over the top doing about 275-kts. The results were a controlled crash in the T-6, but I sure enjoyed the buzz job.

The show went off without a hitch, The weather was perfect and the fireman actually made a few bucks and were anxious to do it again some time in the future. I must say, thins were so much simpler in the 1970s.

Over the course of the next 2-yrs, I saw Dean perform several more times with his T-6 and Corsair. One more show was flown at Beaver County Airport and two others were at his home airport in Wakeman. At the Beaver County show, Dean pulled me aside before his corsair routine and asked me, “What’s that thing sound like?” I thought for a moment and, using he only analogy I could come up with, replied, “It sounds like a single-engine DC-6.” Dean seemed satisfied with my answer and smiled as he readied himself for the upcoming flight. With the few minutes we had left, we also discussed his upcoming appearance back in Dubois for our second annual show.

The great weather we enjoyed with our fist show was not going to be the story for the 1971 event. The show was scheduled for mid-September and foul weather had engulfed the area for several weeks with low ceilings and occasional rain showers. Dean snuck in on Friday afternoon, but several of the other show planes were weathered out. Saturday morning was not any better and the show was called for weather just before noon and rescheduled for the following weekend. Later that afternoon, Dean headed back to Wakeman in my T-6 rather than endure the expense of flying the Corsair three extra hours. That’s the way things were done in the 1970s and, as I mentioned earlier, everything was so much simpler.

This show never did come about and foul weather was the primary reason. The following weekend was no better than the first and the event was again cancelled. Dean flew in the following week with the T-6 and picked up his Corsair for the return flight to Ohio. I joined him briefly in the T-6 and we beat up the Dubois Airport with strafing runs after which he passed me on the right out of an aileron roll and headed home.

Since the Falls Creek Fireman were not out any expense for the rained-out show, we all agreed we would try again the following May and hope for better weather conditions.

The 1972 show was scheduled for 28 May and Dean was, of course, invited back as the headliner to fly his Corsair routine. Other show participants included john Van Andel flying a bomb and strafing run routine with his Goodyear Corsair and Waco UPF-7 aerobatics flown by John King out of New Jersey. Gary McCann of Stratford, Ontario, Canada, would return with his Harvard Mk. 4 and Tom Gerth would bring Dean’s newly-purchased SNJ-5 (N1042C).

CAVU skies prevailed for the show and the winds were light and variable for a welcome change. Dean flew a nice routine in his new SNJ and I had to laugh when he had me check out the smoke oil link in the rear cockpit. Dean was the aster of using using duct tap. His oil tank was made up of a big pressurized oxygen tank that was secured in the back seat using yards of the green tape. While Dean was preparing for his routine he was hoping and praying the Feds would stay away from his plane and not notice the nonstandard installation.

As the featured headliner, Dean finished up the show with his Corsair act. Taxing out to Runway 7 at Dubois, we all waited in anticipation for the start of his routine. With his run-up complete, we watched Dean take the active and pour the coal to the Corsair’s big R-2800. With the gear in the wells, Dean did a beautiful aileron roll at show center just before the trouble began.

As he rolled wings level in a slight nose down attitude, smoke began pouring from the engine. Dean reacted immediately and pulled the nose into a right hand climbing turn and put the gear handle down and began his left base turn for Runway 25. With his engine failing by the second, we watched as the tail wheel came out followed by the right main with the left main hanging up, Dean fired his nitrogen bottle — forcing the reluctant gear into the locked position.

Now on short final, we all could hear the death rattle of Dean’s engine. Smoke was still pouring from the engine, and it was evident to most that it was starving for oil.

Over the runway in a three-point attitude, Dean cut the power and dropped the Corsair onto the runway smoking a tire as he applied the brakes. As the Corsair slowed the big prop came to a sudden stop as the oil-starved engine finally gave out.

Many of us who were involved with the show ran out to runway and helped push the heavy plane to the ramp as a Dejected Dean stayed in the cockpit and mentally went over the past few moments. Dean was understandably frustrated, but surprisingly cool following his near disaster.

With the excitement over and no way home, we loaded Dean’s gear into my T-6 and headed west to Wakemam. In the back of the T-6, Dean was alone with his thoughts as he watched the western Pennsylvania countryside slide past the wings.

When we landed at Ortner Field, Dean thanked me for all my help, topped the T-6 off with gas and remarked that he should have pre-oiled the Corsair’s engine before he flew it to Dubois.

Several weeks later, a discovery would be made that had nothing to do with pre-oiling the engine.

Back home and at work at the Dubois Airport, I began removing some of the engine cowling from the Corsair’s engine, storing the parts in the nearby fire and crash building. Dean and me move the plane closer to the main parking lot and to an area of the ramp that was more open and less congested. This would be the Corsair’ s home for the next several months as work would soon begin to change the Pratt & Whitney engine.

One night while I was working at the airport, Dean called and said he was sending me a check for $3600 which would cover the cost of an engine that was being trucked in. The cost of shipping would also be covered b the check.

In early September, work began in earnest to get the Corsair back in the air. Dean and mechanic Jerry Knight would fly in for the weekend and begin wrenching on the plane early each Saturday morning. The weather this particular fall was cold and raining and the outside work was pure misery.

As work progressed on the Corsair, one of the linemen, Jack Snyder, made an interesting discovery. A small hose that ran from the prop back into the engine cowling had a 2-in split between the double adel clamps and had caused the failure of the big radial and the momentary creation of the awesome smoke system.

In late October, work was finally nearing completion on the engine change. Many problems were encountered as the replacement engine, a-34W was considerably different than the failed-18W that came off. Many hoses were inches too short and an adaptor box was handcrafted to position the carburetor properly. Engine run-ups were complete, cowl flaps adjusted and the plane sat ready for Dean to fly home.

Dean flew in the last week of October and made a thorough pre-flight and run-up. As we sat in the coffee shop before the flight, I made a special request of Dean. I said, “If and when the Corsair is safely back in the air and all the adjustments made, could sit on your lap or you sit on mine and we go around the patch just once?”

Without blinking Dean said, “I’ll do you one better than that.” I couldn’t believe what I had just heard, but as I said earlier, things were much simpler back then.

The plane was topped with fuel and Dean and I shook hands as he climbed into the cockpit for the flight home. Taking off on Runway 25, Dean made a left hand climbing turn to circle the airport before heading west. As he came back over the ramp and terminal I gave him a big wave as he rocked the wings and climbed for altitude. The new engine sounded great and the Corsair looked beautiful in the air.

Sadly, this was to be the last time I would see Dean alive.

A few weeks later in early November, I had had enough of the Dubois scene and packed my bags and headed west to greener pasture in Denver. I had already moved the T-6 to nearby Franklin Airport to be watched over by good friend Ron Harvey. With a U-Haul trailer in tow, another friend, Gary Gray, and myself headed for 1-80 and the Rocky Mountains.

It was the middle of June 1973, and I was working at Stapleton Airport in Denver for Braniff International Airways when I received a letter with a Wakeman postmark. It was a short note from Dean’s wife Lois and it sadly stated that Dean had been killed in the SNJ at the Shelby, Ohio, airshow and she did not know the cause. She ended the note by thanking ma for all the help I gave Dean back in Dubois.

This was a sad day for me, but it was not to be the last. Over the course of the next 35-yrs I would loose numerous friends and acquaintances in Warbird accidents for one reason or another. Dean just happened to be the first.

A few weeks later I received another letter from Ohio. This one was from John Regan and he had previously owned the SNJ in which Dean had died. John had first-hand knowledge of Dean’s accident and related that Dean had not felt well the day of the airshow. Dean was suffering from the flu and could not find a replacement pilot to fill in for him and proceeded to do the show anyway. In Dean’s mind, the show must go on!

In the middle of his routine he attempted a double snap roll that was only completed 3/4th of the way through leaving the heavy SNJ inverted and only several hundred feet over the runway.

Dean’s only recourse was to complete the split-S and try to recover. Without enough altitude the plane hit the runway in a flat attitude and Dean died in the accident. As a result of the effects of the flu, Dean’s timing and judgment were off and were the primary cause of the accident. John Regan said that if he would have had a few more feet of altitude he could have completed the maneuver.

It was not until the fall of 1991 that I was able to get some closure on the loss of Dean. While en route to Pennsylvania for my Folk’s 50th wedding anniversary, I stopped at Wakeman to see how time had changed things over the past 18-yrs.

The Ortner Airport was as I remembered, but was quiet and virtually deserted. The Beech 18s and C-46s were long gone and the only plane on the airport was a wingless Convair 440. Heading east out of town, I easily found the Wakeman cemetery and the Ortner family plot.

Dean and his brother Andy were buried a few feet apart with similar stones marking their graves. Andy had died 2-yrs after Dean in a Twin Beech that reportedly lost fabric from the elevator during a landing.

After a couple of moments of quiet reflection I headed eastbound towards Pennsylvania with a hundred thoughts racing through my mind. Dean had been a good friend and mentor and graciously took time to help and inspire a novice low-time T-6 pilot. In today’s world of fat wallets, huge egos and limited skill, Dean was a cut above all the rest for his day. I still miss his broad smile and firm handshake even after some 34-yrs.

Unlike Dean, the big Corsair survives to the present day. Shortly after Dean flew it home it was up for sale and was purchased by John Schafhausen from Idaho and flown in the TV series Black Sheep Squadron. Schafhausen eventually sold the plane to Blaine Fowler of Canada where it was flown under the name of Alberta Blue. The last time I saw the Corsair advertised for sale the asking price was nearly a million bucks. That was a far cry from Dean’s initial asking price of $26K in 1974.

Thanks to TV returns of Black sheep Squadron I can still see the big Corsair in the air and remember my friend Dean Ortner and think of the many “What ifs” it brings to mind.

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