

# Faster and Louder

**Kreisha Ballantyne** persuaded airshowman and warbird exponent Paul Bennet to sit still long enough for an interview. **Kathy Mexted** wrote up the story on one of Australia's air show stalwarts.

If you don't go near another computer for the whole week, just log onto Paul Bennet's website and have a look at the short clip on his home page. It involves a low-flying Pitts and a high flying motorbike.

Flying was not a new idea to the young Paul Bennet who's father had a private licence and who's grandfather flew Tiger Moths in WWII.

"My grandfather died young, but I've still got his pilot's licence. Dad used to take us away for flying holidays in privately hired aircraft from Manning River Aero Club. I grew up at Old Bar, midway between Newcastle and Coffs Harbour on the NSW coast," Paul says.

"It was naturally assumed I'd learn to fly, and at around 16 to 18, I knew I'd love to, but it always seemed so out of reach due to the family's financial position, so I concentrated on flying models with Dad."

When his good friend Scott Robinson, also a modeler, took Paul for a ride in his Pitts, Scott packed a couple of toilet rolls into Paul's hands. The ensuing performance cutting the toilet rolls and trying to make the 21-year-old passenger sick, did nothing to ease his desire to

fly. The next day Paul was at Royal Newcastle Aero Club enquiring about flying lessons.

"From being a qualified boat builder and shipwright, I'd moved into making granite bench tops. I made some good money doing that, and then went to Luskintyre building Tiger Moth wings. Because of my skills, I was a fast worker. I can't even remember how many Tiger wings I built. There were heaps, but there wasn't enough money in all that so I moved to Newcastle.

"I'd won the Australian sailing championship in Taree and ended up in 16- and then 18-footers. That was when I was getting going on the flying. At the time, I was top of my game and sponsored with sailing, but at the bottom and beginning with aviation."

## Beginning aros

Paul gained his GFPT in a C152 and his PPL in a C182 at Warnervale. That first ride with Scott had cemented Paul's desire to pursue aerobatics and being at Luskintyre meant he could drop tools and go flying with a fellow aerobatic student when the time was right. Phil Unicomb was the instructor in an S2a.

"I'm described as cautiously adventurous," says Paul. "I don't take

stupid risks. I'm competitive and 'out there' and will try new things, but I like to be in control. I don't persist with things I'm not good at."

With an aerobatic rating, the goal is to compete. You start with rolls and once they're mastered you follow with loops, half cubans, wingovers, rolls-off-the-top, spins and snap rolls. You do each figure one at a time.

As an instructor, Paul likes to teach each manoeuvre separately, and doesn't like writing out an aerobatic rating unless the student can spin, because if the manoeuvre goes wrong, they've got to be able to get out of the spin in order to recover.

"I think it should be absolutely compulsory for instructors to teach spinning as part of the PPL syllabus. The trouble is that many instructors fear spinning and that fear is transmitted to the students. There's nothing unsafe about any of that stuff. The first thing you should do in a new aeroplane is practice stalls. It's something that is misconceived by 90% of pilots," he says.

"Warbird pilots will tell you the same about a Wirraway. The most beautiful handling aircraft in the world won't do anything untoward unless you're out of balance. I think if you look at those scared instructors,

scared of spins and stalls, they tend to look down on aerobatics as though it is wrong. "Aerobatics inspire a lot of people, but we've come across a few old pilots who think aros put too much stress on the airframe.

"There are people you wouldn't expect that absolutely hate spinning but sometimes they've become so good at knowing how to stay out of it, they don't get close to it. Some of the country's best warbird pilots refuse to spin, and while I can't say that's wrong, I can't agree with it. In their minds, they'll never get to the point of spinning, but in my case, I feel the same about the Trojan. It'd take a lot to recover it. When you're on top of an aeroplane though, it won't get away on you like it will when you are less experienced."

## Flying is the Pitts

Most of Paul's flying has been in the Pitts. He used it for his tailwheel endorsement and before he even got his PPL, he had won his first aerobatic competition, flying on a GFPT. He couldn't fly to the comp; he could only fly when he got there, so he went to Parkes and had to do three circuits with Phil Unicomb, his instructor. At least now with an RPL – Paul says – a pilot can sign a Maintenance Release. You just can't take the aeroplane outside the training area.

"I've got an instructor rating on a PPL

Up they go: the Paul Bennet team consisting of three variants of the Pitts biplane.



**“I think it should be absolutely compulsory for instructors to teach spinning”**



## TOP TO BOTTOM:

Paul's air show contribution of both aerobatics and warbirds has been the highlight of many events around Australia.

Paul's Wolf Pitts stunned the crowd at Avalon this year, and rightly takes pride of place in the team hangar.



NADENE BALLANTYNE

DARREN MOTTRAM

## "I'm competitive and 'out there' and will try new things, but I like to be in control."

because of the Part 61. I'm a qualified instructor on every type that I fly, such as tailwheel, constant speed retractable, constant speed, aerobatic, inverted spin recovery."

He can also instruct on the warbirds that he's rated on. He's not interested in ab initio training however; just in passing on his knowledge of advanced flying.

"I wouldn't say I'm as natural a pilot as some other people are. I understand the engine and its needs and if I figure out the best way of doing something, I can tell Phil and he'll figure it out with me talking to him on the radio.

"Glenn Collins is somewhere in

between us. He picks things up pretty naturally, especially the formation aerobatics. Between the three of us we work at different ends of the scale, but as a group we're amongst the most experienced aerobatic pilots around.

"In Unlimited Category, for the first flight of a comp, everyone flies the same sequence. There's another you can design yourself from an encyclopedia of figures. When you compare all our sequences, they'll be totally different but they all add up to the same degree of difficulty. My style is different to Glenn's. Most people will know I'm coming because I'll always be faster and louder," says Paul.

## Motivation

Paul's motivation is his incessant need to keep busy. It would be an understatement to say that he doesn't like sitting still. There is always more practice to be done.

"You never have the perfect flight.

You can land and say it's one of the best flights I've ever had, but we will always critique and go over every flight we do. I'm pretty hard on myself. I talk with Glenn Graham and Glenn Collins all the time and I want them to tell me if what I've just done is no good. At least every week or two I still go and fly a comp sequence to keep the precision going – even if I'm not competing.

"If I go practising out at Kurri Kurri, which you can hear from here but you can't see, I might come back and do some four-point rolls and a vertical or something like that, just two minutes worth, so Glenn can watch it and then we'll talk about it.

"In the sky, I can't always feel whether it's wrong or right, and so I need the person on the ground to tell me what the problem is. I can fix Glenn's routine instantly from the ground. He's not quite so good at doing it for me. Just before Avalon I had to get Phil and Glenn to come and watch my routine and they worked out where I was going wrong.

"It's a great set-up between the three of us. It's not a one man

deal. I think you need a team to do aerobatics at the higher levels. In fact, I don't know how you can do it if you don't have a team and all talking the same language. I share all my knowledge with Glenn and it doesn't matter who wins at a competition as long as I come first," he says laughing. "It's just rude to beat the boss!"

Paul staunchly confirms the Wolf Pitts as the best aerobatic aircraft in the world. He bought his from America. It was an experimental factory build, built by Steve Wolf, who Paul claims to be a very good, expensive, craftsman, builder and pilot who has been instructing all his life. Paul has flown the Extra, Giles, Edge 540 and all the Pitts' except the S1-11. Of the 20 or so S1-11's in the world, there is only one in Australia; the Super Stinker that belongs to South Australian pilot Chris Sperou.

## Biplane vs monoplane

Why would Paul want a biplane instead of a monoplane? Because his biplane is a real show plane. And in a monoplane, there is a huge amount of weight required for the spar to strengthen the single wing, whereas a biplane uses the wing wires for strength.

"The Pitts tailplane is huge for the size of the aeroplane. It's got an aerofoil tailplane instead of a tubular one and is really light. When we take the bottom wing off I can pick that up in one hand, however the wing of an Edge 540 or MXS takes about half a dozen people to carry it."

Paul believes that Rob Holland, World Freestyle Champion, would be the most innovative aerobatic pilot producing new figures. "He's got a very rearward centre of gravity. It's not a safe plane and you don't want to let your mates fly it, because they'll end up finding it difficult to get out of a spin. In



KREISHA BALLANTYNE

ABOVE: Paul Bennet with the "best aerobatic aircraft in the world": the Wolf Pitts.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Bennet watches as the folding wings on his Grumman Avenger click into place.

biplanes you cop a drag penalty and the drag penalty compresses the sequence into a small area."

## Frame of mind

The Wolf Pitts is very unstable and difficult to fly well; it has finger-tip control and deserves a lot of respect.

"The Wolf Pitts behaves totally different to all other Pitts Specials I have flown. Some of this is to do

with the rearward CoG and the very large control surfaces and large travel on the surfaces.

"It's not a machine for low-timers.

"I was flying along and yawing at a certain speed and about to attempt a new manoeuvre called an 'Endotumble'.

"I said, 'right, I want to make it go end over end this way', so I'll fly along and yaw left, use forward stick, make it go down, stand back up, then fly away. "So the first few of those, I ended up spinning it. They were incredibly violent and a couple went inverted, which is easy to come out of in the Wolf.

"Then I got one on a different angle and got it in an upright spin to the left. It was no trouble because we are always above 4000 feet."

On this particular day however, Paul was in the wrong frame of mind after a stressful morning. He conducted a pre-flight on the plane and went flying while talking to Glenn on the radio. He went a whole revolution more than he'd planned – which was a big issue for him because if he'd been at 500 ft AGL, he wouldn't have hit the ground but he'd

have used up all his safety margin. Of course he'd not have been trying something like that at 500 ft, but by doing that extra revolution certainly got his attention. "I didn't spin and recover the way I should have."

Mental preparation is the hardest thing to manage and is the most important part of the whole air show business. It's difficult to come back from the wrong frame of mind and one of the key factors is the need to arrive one day before the show.

"The most stressful part for me is taking seven aircraft and having to manage other pilots, and there's always weather issues to deal with. You don't get paid unless you get there so there's already pressure on. You can't push that 'get there-it's' too far."

## Air shows

"What we're really trying to do is bring air shows back in Australia. If you look at the States, there's always an air show and somewhere to fly. I think the regulations here have slowed people down," Bennet stresses.



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“Those from years ago who wanted to put on an airshow, I think would now believe there’s too many rules regarding insurance, approvals and such. They see it as all too hard. We’ve got the experience however, and there’s no doubt that it’s easier for us to manage an airshow, given our experience.”

For a one-off air show committee there are the tasks of satisfying the requirements of CASA. They ask for approval from the airport owner and operator, paperwork for pilot’s licences, medicals, formation and aerobatic endorsements, approval for display sequences and then each aeroplane needs to provide a Certificate of Airworthiness, Certificate of Registration, Operating limitations, and a risk assessment of how the event will run.

“As an example, they require one risk assessment from me as to how I’m going to perform in the Wolf Pitts as a solo, another one as to how I’ll perform as the Sky Aces, another one for the Avenger etcetera and an overall assessment,” says Paul.



STEVE HITCHEN

“I had a professional risk assessor help initially and we use that as a template that we adjust for specific venues. Our paperwork is very good and streamlined now and CASA have indicated that they wish everyone could emulate our paperwork.”

Paul would love to have an air show every weekend in which his team would participate alongside groups such as the RAAF Roulettes.

“Reputation is everything in this industry. We know who is in it and who is experienced and we’d love to be able to help towns to bring back air shows.”

## The future

So, is there anything else that Paul Bennet would like to fly that he hasn’t done yet? The answer is swift.

“I’d love to own a Spitfire and a V12 Yak III. Everything else I have has a round engine. I wouldn’t mind a straight engine. The Yak III is a poor man’s Spitfire ... and they go like the clappers!”


There are three-metre 150 cc powered model aeroplanes that can hover. And that’s what the aerobatic pilots would all like to be able to do in a real one.

“I don’t think we’re that far off as there are new superior diesel engines that might be a chance. Six hundred horsepower will be great, and have heaps of power. The future is about looking at models and transitioning a lot of that cool stuff to the real thing.

“Sean Tucker, Skip Stewart, Rob Holland and myself can perform the Forward Flipping manoeuvre. Everyone will be trying to do it shortly.

“We’ve invented a few moves that hadn’t really been reproduced, but they’re probably aircraft-specific. I’m always trying new things and I always take inspiration from others. I see it from the outside, and then I figure out how to do it better. Sometimes I draw them up – sometimes on the wall in the shower. You don’t stop thinking about it. It’s very hard to totally think about it, even when you go on holidays.

“You need to be reasonably fit to compete in aerobatics, and match fitness is the best. You need to keep flying. I don’t sit still for very long.

“Perhaps this interview is the longest I’ve sat still. Ever.” 



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