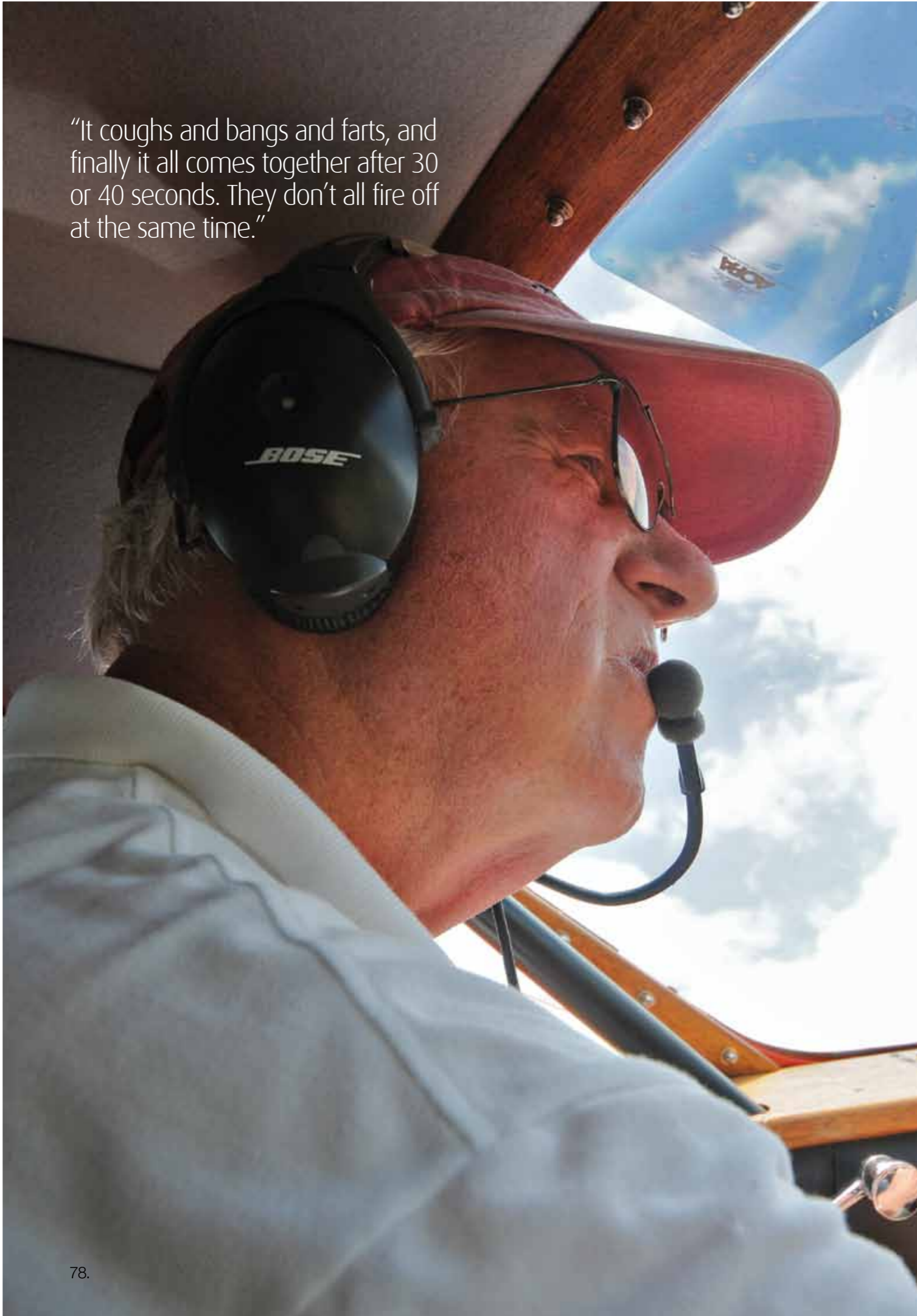


FLIGHT PATH

Words and photos by **Eli Solomon**

Biff Windsock is a 75-year old former fighter pilot flying a 67-year old bi-plane around the world. Eli Solomon meets up with man and machine on an airfield in Perak.

"It coughs and bangs and farts, and finally it all comes together after 30 or 40 seconds. They don't all fire off at the same time."



Let's get a couple of things straight. It took me five hours to make it up to Slim River at Bernam from Singapore and I got there at 7am. And his real name isn't Biff Windssock.

Bill Charney, a former commercial pilot, knows his rudder from his elbow. Some of us collect race cars and some spend years rebuilding their classic cars, but there can't be many who do the same with airplanes, and a lot fewer who dabble in the vintage variety. Bill is one of them. His wings is a 1943 Beechcraft Staggerwing with a supercharged Pratt and Whitney radial engine and custom interior that hints of 1950s Bentley Continental. No wonder they called it the "LearJet" in its day.

Following our visit to the Bernam River Airfield, we had the opportunity of entertaining Bill in Singapore. Over dinner, we were duly engaged as he recounted his experiences of his goal to fly solo around the world.

The story really begins from New Zealand in a little town called Mandeville in Gore where the Croydon Aircraft Company is located. Bill bought his plane in the United States in 1994 and flew it around the country for seven years before finally shipping it to New Zealand for total

restoration. It would be a five-year project to restore the Staggerwing, three of which were spent flying above the long white cloud fine tuning the aircraft.

For Bill, this soft-spoken man and kid at heart from Reno, Nevada, aviation satiates his wanderlust. The motivation of his round-the-world journey is several-fold. "I would always end up in Mandeville to do work on [the plane]...There's a little café in Gore called the Table Talk Café. It's...the largest café in town and has the best blueberry muffins..." With a grin, Bill cheerfully reveals he means to uncover the best blueberry muffin in the world.

On a more reserved note, riveted on one side of the small cabin of Bill's airplane is a little plaque, a copy of the bracelet prisoners of war were made to wear. It's in memory of one of his roommates who didn't return during a tour when Bill was serving in the US Air Force flying F100 Super Sabres at Phu Cat during the Vietnam War. He wants to return to "give a couple of kids from the community an 'eagle ride' in the Staggerwing, and kinda close a chapter." We sense the serious undertone that is part of his mission.

Why the Staggerwing? "I fell in love with it when I was about 8 years old. I saw one...and I just couldn't get over





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of the runway...There could be a 30 knot crosswind at one end of the runway and a 30 knot crosswind at the other end except that it's at opposition...I chose a good day and there was only 15 knots of wind.”

Bill's been pleasantly heartened by the enthusiastic welcome he's had along the way. Recounting his reception in Perth, “The day that I arrived at the airfield, my host had created a bit of a party. There were about 20 planes. I landed, tumbled out of the airplane, the first person who rushed up to me was a lady who loved Staggerwings. Got her in the airplane...Lo and behold she and her husband now own a Staggerwing. Like me, she loves the art deco lines of the Staggerwing.”

From Port Headland in Western Australia, Bill's flight path took him nonstop 740 nautical miles to Denpasar, Bali. “Crazy,” he says, “...but very easy flying.” En route to Jakarta, he had to fly over a smoking volcano. “Luckily it was dampened by the rain that was around.” Of course, he prefers flying in good weather. “I already have thousands of hours in bad weather. I don't want one more.”

One of the strong points of the Staggerwing is its 985 cubic inch (16,100 cc) R-985 radial engine. “I've often told people that one third of the pleasure of owning that aeroplane is the starting of the engine, to have all nine cylinders come together is a real symphony. It coughs and bangs and farts, and finally it all comes together after 30 or 40 seconds. They don't all fire off at the same time.” With a standard float-type carburettor, Bill tells us he doesn't “...stay upside down very long.”

While the Staggerwing is almost true to it's original design, Bill has chosen to reconfigure his whole instrument panel so that he could obtain certification to fly it in “instrument conditions.” The six basic aviation instruments are always in the same position in any American aircraft so, “...your mind doesn't have to relearn the systems.”

The Staggerwing has idiosyncrasies. “Novice pilots who had too much money would buy a Staggerwing and didn't have

any tail-wheel experience and would go fly a Staggerwing and very often...they'd go over on their back.” And the brake system is poorly designed. “It doesn't have a great deal of rudder, so it's a poor crosswind airplane...You can handle more cross-winds on grass...”

Bill's attention to quality workmanship is evident. One of the reasons he's chosen to restore his aircraft in New Zealand with Croydon Aircraft Company is because her owner is a master builder of vintage airplanes. Anyone who takes the trouble of going to British Columbia every three or four years to source the wood by choosing the trees knows exactly what he's doing. It told Bill a great deal about “the tenacity of the company in creating perfection.” He adds, “And here we are.”

How does he select which airfield to land at? “You talk to people...There are numerous sources...but mainly through talking with other pilots. There's a wonderful website called Earthrounders.com, created by a Frenchman living in Australia. He made it a mission to fly around the world in a light aircraft. He found there was limited information so he built this website...for people who are silly enough to want to fly around the world.” With a chuckle he adds, “All race drivers are frustrated fighter pilots and all fighter pilots are frustrated race drivers. We all want to go racing cars.”

What happens after Malaysia? It's back to Reno to earn his keep for his next leg while our friend Suren at Bernam River Airfield maintains the Staggerwing. Bill aims to be back in September for the next leg - Thailand, Cambodia to visit Angkor Wat and then into Vietnam and Laos. He flew a lot of missions into Laos and wants to revisit. Then it'll be across India, the middle-east and into Cyprus. The whole adventure could take up to four years and that “depends on whether I fall in love along the way”.

So what is a 75-year old doing flying solo around the world? He draws a deep breath first. “There's no age limit...I get really annoyed with people who think that just because you're 75 you shouldn't be flying anymore. Who are you to determine if I am fit to fly or not? The only reason I won't be fit to fly is if I don't pass my physical. I drink lots of beer and eat lots of desert and blue berry muffins when I can.” We applaud in agreement.

As we polish off desert, Bill tells us that he used to actively race vintage cars years ago. “If I had ever grown up I was going to be a race driver. Now my mission is to have fun with the Staggerwing,...share it with people.” ◀



the art deco lines. Fifty years after...I could finally afford one.” He found one in Tucson, Arizona. “There are about fifty still flying and most would be in the US. Four or five in Australia...” It is doubtlessly an exclusive club of classic airplane owners.

His journey to Bernam River Airfield has taken him from Mandeville via Australia (Norfolk Island, Lord Howe Island, Coolangatta in the Gold Coast, Tasmania, the Nullarbor Plain, Perth), Bali and Jakarta. No speed trial here, he has set a leisurely pace for himself and his wings.

“I haven't really been in any hairy situations,” he muses. “I guess I was most apprehensive about landing at Lord Howe because it's very famous for its crosswinds. The airport is on a little isthmus. The isthmus is only 2,000 feet across so they angled the runway to make it a 3,000 foot runway for small airliners...Problem is there are two big hills and it's a tiny little island.” Bill adds, “The Staggerwing is not one to handle strong crosswinds. There's a windsock on each end