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MULTITASKING
FLYING ADVENTURES
IN THE SPORTSMAN 2+2





Aaron's first flight as a kid was in a Stearman, so it seemed only natural for him to get one of his own.

SOUTHERN COMFORT

PHOTOS & STORY BY JIM BUSHA

The right wing of the Super Decathlon is canted straight down toward the blanket of red and yellow trees that covers the mountains like a carpet.

The lower wing pivots on a point as the upper wing slashes through the cool, drizzling air, scribing a white, vapor-trail line of the tight 180-degree turn to final.

As I sit in the back seat ignoring the jagged mountain walls on either side of me, I watch as the nose of the plane searches for the end of the runway a quarter mile away. I know full well that if the engine decides to up and quit now, there will be no soft landing to follow. None of this concerns me, though, as I laugh out loud listening to the pilot in front of me describe himself in simple detail with a distinct Southern drawl.

He calls himself "airplane stupid," but don't let that observation fool you. It has no direct bearing on his intelligence or capabilities as a pilot. Oh, sure, he may be a country music star with multiple hit CDs and top 10 hits, but to him the music he makes is secondary to the notes his airplanes sing when he flies them. He houses and maintains what he calls "junk airplanes" next to a 2,000-foot grass runway, cleverly hidden in a lush green Tennessee valley. The condition of his aircraft is far from junk status, as they match the tranquil beauty of their

surroundings.

All of this is a well-deserved reward for a hard-working, ex-bulldozing, patriotic country boy who plays honky-tonk for a living. He proudly confesses that when he stands on stage in front of thousands of cheering fans, he always looks up when an airplane flies overhead. His adoring fans and

blessed gift of vocal talent are the two things that keep this good ol' boy singing, but even a superstar has to take a break now and then. So when Aaron Tippin (EAA 427112) comes home to relax between shows, he acts no different than you and I would as he puts his flight suit on, one leg at a time.

Some may argue, but most will agree that Aaron's course and direction as a pilot was mapped out for him long before he wore three-quarter pants. Actually, he wore diapers the first time he was tossed into a cockpit. When Aaron was born in the late

1950s, his father, Willis Tippin, was instructing Air Force cadets in the fine art of keeping the landing gear side down and the canopy side up as he plowed through the Georgia skies in USAF T-28s, AT-6s, and T-37s.

"I remember seeing a photo of myself sitting in a T-37 wearing my dad's flight helmet with a paci-

Oh, sure, he may be a country music star with multiple hit CDs and top 10 hits, but to him the music he makes is secondary to the notes his airplanes sing when he flies them.



fier in my mouth," says Aaron. "I guess my destiny as a pilot was already forged."

Growing up in South Carolina, Aaron soon learned that flying airplanes was in his bloodline. Along with his dad, two of his uncles were aviators, and it was just a natural progression of life for Aaron to follow. More simply put, it was the Tippin thing to do.

"I was the child that was airplane nuts like him," remembers Aaron. "He was my aviation mentor and I grew up wanting to be just like my dad."

Aaron will never forget his first airplane ride with his dad. "In the early 1960s, my dad did some crop dusting on the side, and he had a lot of time in the 450-hp Stearman. A friend of the family had an old Stearman, so my dad threw me in the front cockpit and my head was just above the canopy rail and I could barely see out of it. The plane was so loud and it was such a cool ride," Aaron says. He knew right then and there that he, too, would fly some day.

In the 1970s, when Aaron was well into his teenage years, he naturally worked for his father, who ran an FBO called Greenville Air at the Greenville, South Carolina, airport. As a ramp rat, Aaron fueled airplanes and cleaned windshields better than anybody you ever met. This was also where Aaron fell in love. He did not focus on girls, though; instead, he lusted after old, round-engine air-

planes.

"I remember the first time I laid eyes on a Cessna 195 that stopped for fuel," Aaron says. "I remember thinking out loud 'what in the halo is that?' She was B-E-A-utiful!" Aaron's eyes began to wander in other directions, too, when he met an old-timer at the airport with a Thorpe T-18. The man told Aaron he had built it himself and was taking it to the EAA Convention up in Oshkosh.

"I remember guys at the airport always talking about the EAA and a plane called the EAA Biplane, along with other experimental types," Aaron says. "I always wondered what the darned EAA was until someone told me it was an organization for guys to build their own airplanes. That was the spark I needed and I wanted to get in on that."

But first he had to learn to fly, and he had to do it the Tippin way. At the ripe old age of 16, Aaron cut his teeth in a Citabria and received all of his flight training in tailwheel airplanes.

"My dad would not stand for me to learn to fly in a nosewheel airplane," Aaron says. As a matter of fact, Aaron's dad had some very stringent requirements that Aaron had to abide by if he wanted to earn his certificate.

"No ifs, ands or buts, I had to fly for at least one hour every day after school because that was the Tippin rule,"

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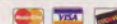
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After buying the Cub, Aaron's next music-financed airplane was a Stearman, kept in pristine condition at Soggy Bottom, his private airstrip in Tennessee.

FLYING MEETS REAL LIFE

When he turned 17, it was time for Aaron to take his checkride. Because he was a Tippin, he knew he would have to achieve it the old-fashioned way. When he showed up for his checkride in a Citabria, Aaron met his flight examiner—and found out he was a good friend of his dad's. Somehow Aaron knew he was in for the ride of his life, and he was right. The examiner put him through the wringer.

"I had to perform precision spins and a whole plateful of other nonstandard tasks because nothing else would do for junior, making sure I was run through the toughest checkride ever given to mankind!" Aaron says. He passed, though, and began to focus on the next life goal: flying for a major airline.

Most days found Aaron building flight time in various airplanes, but when the weather turned sour, Aaron would pick his guitar and sing bluegrass with some of the local boys. He also picked up another vocation that went hand in hand with his aviation career path.

"I was always fascinated with machinery and wanted to learn what made airplanes fly. So naturally (and Tippin-like) I got my A&P rating," Aaron says.

With enough hours in his logbook and almost every rating to boot, Aaron began to study for this airline transport pilot certificate. Trouble was, he was still on the short side of the age 23 requirement, so he had to wait it out while the hands of time slowly ticked by. But Aaron was not one to become disappointed easily.

"While I waited to take my ATP checkride, I continued aerobatic training with my dad," he says. "My goal was to fly for the airlines during the week and go fly air shows on the weekends." Finally, the time arrived when all the planets lined up in their proper orbits and it looked like Aaron was set for a long, successful career in aviation. Then an eclipse—called the energy crisis—darkened his horizon.

Aaron soon realized that his lifelong dream of flying with the airlines had vaporized before his eyes. The airlines were furloughing pilots left and right and Aaron knew he had a possum's chance crossing a busy highway of getting hired. No one could blame this kid who had his head in the clouds and wore aviation oil as cologne for getting disappointed or depressed.

"I was upset and I walked away from aviation with the attitude, 'Well, this was fun, but I don't give a darn if I ever get into the cockpit of another airplane as long as I live,'" Aaron says. "Boy, was I wrong."

Soon after his departure from aviation, Aaron was running a bulldozer by day and singing country music in some local clubs at night. But within a few months of giving up flying, he began to notice he was looking skyward every time an airplane flew overhead. "I realized I wasn't over flying, and knew I would never be over it," he says.

Aaron says. Kind of makes you want to shed a tear for the poor kid, doesn't it?

Aaron's flight training had some unique elements. His dad would throw him for a loop, a roll, a spin, and whatever else he could conjure up as he taught his son the finer points of precision aerobatic flying in a Great Lakes biplane.

"My father owned several airplanes but the coolest was the Great Lakes. It wasn't brand new but it was close and daddy that sucker was nothing but fun!" remembers Aaron.



Of the 1941 Stearman, Aaron says, 'I love the feel and smell of the Stearman, especially when that engine exhaust blows in my face.'

Like a lost soul mate, gone but not forgotten, Aaron knew he was addicted to airplanes and aviation.

He also realized that operating construction equipment would not financially support his flying habit. He longed to get back into an airplane, even a cheap one. So he polished his guitar and auditioned on some local

talent shows. He never made it to the top spot on the show, but one of the judges pulled him aside, praised his talent, and told him to seek his fortune in the land where country music is king: Nashville. Aaron's background as a pilot paid high dividends as he concentrated on his music career with the same loyalty and devotion he had

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The Super Decathlon is a favorite of the kids, who like to do "Wiffie Dinkles" with dad.

given to flying.

Aaron looped around Nashville for several years, but finally his music struck the right chord and he was rewarded with a couple of hit records. Now, some folks in Aaron's situation might have spent their money on fancy cars, houses, clothes, or jewelry. Aaron Tippin is not like most folks.

"I got me a copy of *Trade-a-Plane* and went looking for an airplane!" Aaron says. Flipping through the yellow pages, something stirred his memory when he got to the Piper section. "I saw J-3 Cub and my brain was flooded with the memory of flying one with my dad back in South Carolina. I bought one and will never be without a Cub. If you're a pilot and don't own one, it's like walking around

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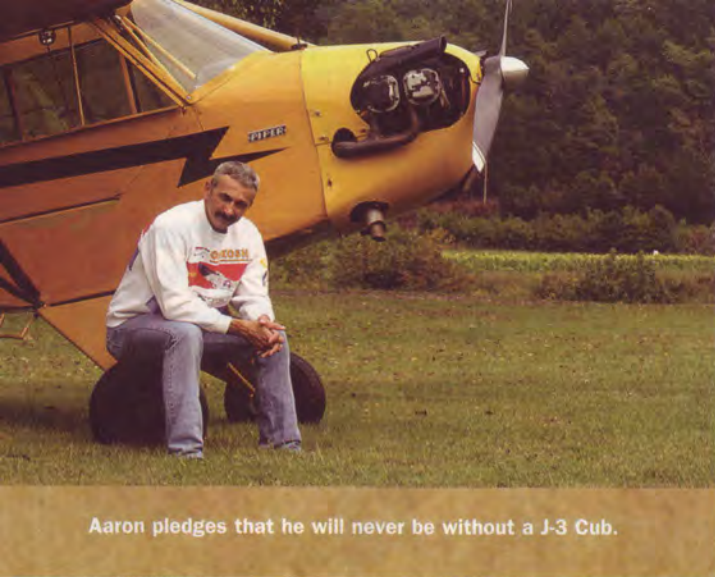
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Aaron pledges that he will never be without a J-3 Cub.

an aviator, so I go by the darn checklist." He also set about filling in a couple other lists: what airplanes to buy next and where to park them.

As his career became established, Aaron went looking for a piece of land on which to build his ideal setting with his wife, Thea, and their two boys, Teddy and Thomas. He knew he would always have airplanes in his future, so he was very picky when it came down to his final selection, searching for enough flat land to pluck an airplane in and out of. He found what he was looking for in east-central Tennessee.

"I have a private 2,000-foot grass strip we call Soggy Bottom (2TN8), because my goal in aviation is to own no airplane that can't get in and out of this strip," Aaron says. Soon he picked up a 1941 Stearman as a bunkmate for his Cub. "I love the feel and smell of the Stearman, especially when that engine exhaust blows in my face," Aaron muses.

Aaron still likes to dabble in aerobatics, too, performing loops, rolls, and other maneuvers. So to scratch that itch he bought himself a 2005 Super Decathlon. Both of Aaron's boys seem to love that plane as much as he does. "My boys really love a maneuver we call Wiffie Dinkles. I just fly along and push the nose over and pull it back and then push it back over the top and it gives them a zero-g effect. They would rather do that all day long than

without your pants on. You just look kinda foolish."

As Aaron's career in the music world took off, so too did his airplane collection. But he was not interested in go-fast jets or twin-engine kerosene burners to get him from concert to concert. Ironically, Aaron's choice of transportation there was the decked-out bus he and his band called home as they traveled from venue to venue.

"The time I spend on the bus with the rest of the performers is very valuable. We are all one team, so as a team, we debrief what went wrong and what went right after each show," Aaron says. "It's all procedure to me. Hey, I'm

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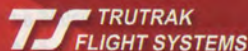
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Aaron on his kids and flying: 'I hope they will at least let me hold the stick once in a while when I get old.'

to loop or roll it," Aaron says. "I am amazed that the simplest maneuver gives my boys the greatest thrill and smiles. It reminds me of when I flew with my dad."

Even with his busy concert schedule, Aaron still manages to fly about once a week. When he arrives home and gets off the bus, he heads straight to the hangar and pulls out all of his airplanes, taking each one up, stretching their wings and warming the engine oil. For Aaron, that's a therapeutic contrast from his professional life.

As Aaron's career blossomed, there seemed to be a lot more people with their hands on his life. Even though he is the guy on center stage, it does not mean he is in charge of what goes on. Sometimes that's good and sometimes it's not, and that's why he loves to fly.

"With an airplane, when I push the throttle forward, I am directly responsible for every decision I make and I cherish the feeling of that. There is nothing I love to do more than to fly here in Tennessee, down the long hollows, over big green pastures and around the mountains soaking it all in," Aaron says. Unfortunately, Aaron's favorite copilot and guiding light won't get to enjoy the same sights.

"My father passed away in April of 2005 and he enjoyed flying right up until his death. I hope I can have that kind of luck, too, as I train two pilots (my sons) to carry on the Tippin tradition," he says. "I also hope they will at least let me hold the stick once in awhile when I get old."

Aaron has some other ideas swirling in his head for the future, including restoring the Cub, building an environmentally controlled hangar, and building a kit aircraft with his sons. "That's the whole reason I joined EAA," he says. "I want to put an airplane together someday, taking it from plans to laying my hands on it as I create a flying machine."

He has a little problem standing in his way, though. He just can't decide what airplane to build. "I am constantly looking at them and find myself saying, 'Oh, that would look nice; hey, that one looks good, too! My, did you see that all-metal one?' It's enough to make my head spin," Aaron says.

But there will be no spinning today as Aaron three-points the Decathlon on his home turf. It coasts to a stop as we taxi up an incline back to the hangar. The propeller slowly ticks over one last time as Aaron pulls the mixture back. The engine begins to ping and clang in harmony as the cylinders cool. Aaron unbuckles his harness and turns to me, pointing to the mountains in the distance that surround his valley home. He tells me, "If you look around, all you see is high mountaintops and low valleys. It kind of reminds me of all my ups and downs in life as a

"There is nothing I love to do more than to fly here in Tennessee, down the long hollows, over big green pastures and around the mountains soaking it all in."



pilot and musician. But as I grow older, all I see now are the high points: my family, flying and playing honky-tonk."

I smile and nod to him and he knows I see them, too. Must be that Tippin thing rubbing off on me! 