

The scrapes of Sperou

You don't get to be one of Australia's best aerobatic pilots without pushing a few envelopes. Chris Sperou has had his fair share of scares, as he told Phil Hosking.

One of Australia's most celebrated aerobatics pilots, Chris Sperou has 13 national aerobatic championships under his flight suit. He has also contested World Championships in countries including: Austria, England, France, Hungary, USA and the Ukraine. As recently as October 2013, his contribution to Australian aviation was recognised in London by the Guild of Air Pilots and Air Navigators.

Chris is a very down to earth character and very easy to get to know. He's always keen to share a story and the odd aerobatic tip. It could be said that he is a bit of a loner, and not overly keen on public speaking. On the flip side, once he straps himself into his

Pitts S-1-11B Super Stinker he is at one. He takes to the skies inverted or the right way up and consistently leaves the spectators in awe.

Chris was born on Christmas Day 1938, and he grew up in Thevenard, near Ceduna, SA. During his school days he discovered the seeds of his passion for aviation. During the post war period there were a lot of military aircraft staging through Ceduna airport.

"We'd assemble near the bike sheds and I'd get at the end of the line," he recalls. "We'd start to march off and I'd duck behind the shed as the rest of the class marched off to singing class. I'd grab my bike and ride out to the airfield"

After completing school, Chris joined his father fishing for a few years before trying a stint as a refrigerator mechanic. The family moved to Adelaide in 1956 and Chris started flying lessons in a Chipmunk with the Royal Aero Club of South Australia (RACSA) at Parafield Airport.

Shortly after getting his licence, he started aerobatics training but never completed the endorsement. From that stage on he was self taught. After developing his aerobatic skills, he was approached to become a member of the aero club's formation aerobatic team.

The RACSA formation aerobatic team flew Victa Air Tourer 100s. Chris was endorsed and his main role became the wing man. He flew mainly in the starboard echelon position, and was the instigator of all the aerobatic manoeuvres.

"The Victa's weren't very fast, but were very responsive and a good platform for formation flying," Chris points out. The team won the Australian formation title about seven times.

In 1968, Chris flew a Victa in the Royal Federation of Aero Clubs National Championships, at Griffith and again the following year at Goulburn. Despite the challenging conditions, Chris brought home the title both times.

In the late 60s he started flying the Fuji 200-180 Aero Subaru and competed against a Pitts Special, winning that title also. By this stage the late Ted Acres and Chris were the leading aerobatics pilots in South Australia.



SDIVE

Chris Sperou
departs Rowland
Flat in his
distinctive Pitts
Super Stinker.

OPPOSITE PAGE:
Chris keeps his eye
on the ground as the
Pitts goes through a
vertical spin.



He even picked out where he would crash: south of runway 21.

The Aerobat

On one occasion in 1971, Chris was to carry out a demonstration at Parafield in Rossair's Cessna aerobat. In the 70s it was not permitted to fly below 3000 ft. Chris took off and reached altitude before starting his routine. He came off the vertical with the stick back, and the aircraft entered an unexpected flat spin.

Chris didn't know what to make of this and had never experienced it before. The aircraft continued spinning flat and whatever he tried there was no response from the elevators. The rudder had no effect either. Chris continued to lose altitude flat spinning downwards. Chris thought "Mum, I'm going to die!" He even picked out where he would crash: south of runway 21.

Chris thought he'd never get out of it, then recalled a conversation he'd had with Matt Mallory, former

Spiritfire pilot and CFI, who had told him "If you ever have to get out of a flat spin, rock the aeroplane as much as you can; power up, power down ... rock it."

Chris loosened his seatbelt, frantically rocked himself in his seat, throttled up and down. Eventually the Aerobat kicked its tail up, the nose dropped into a normal spin and he pulled it out at 1700 feet and landed safely. What condition his undergarments were in is up for speculation.

The cause of the flat spin was attributed to a change in the centre of gravity. Rossair was amidst a HF radio modification. It was incomplete, but the HF radio power pack was installed in the tail boom, shifting the centre of gravity. The HF controller head wasn't installed on the instrument panel, so Chris was oblivious to the mod when he took the controls.

As a result of Chris' stern discussion with the Civil Aviation Authority, the Cessna Aerobat was never to be fitted out with HF radios for aerobatics.

The European Expedition

In 1972 a group of pilots including Chris contested the world titles in Europe. Funds were raised to go to England and hire an aircraft. They found a two seat Zlin 526 Trainer Master, but the hiring fees were astronomical. It would have been cheaper to purchase the aircraft, but it was simply beyond their budget.

The Air Attaché in Paris located a Zlin near Belvès in the south of France, so Chris and Ted caught a train down and met Evon Feliot, who allowed them to fly the Zlin and offered instruction for the aircraft. The aircraft had a limited G-force

rating and there were alarms for exceeding them. This Zlin's inverted capabilities provided a new experience for Chris. It was to be his first sustained inverted flight.

The chances of winning the world championships in Salon de Provence were short lived as the French Ministry of Aviation grounded all Zlins because a similar aircraft had a wing failure. Regardless, they all went to the championships, and met Professor Art Scholl (*Top Gun* was dedicated to Art). Art had a two-seater Pitts, in which he removed the front seat to lighten it up for the championships. Chris was invited to fly it, and this was the start of his love affair with the Pitts; he was hooked.

Aside from the Pitts, Chris also flew an Akrostar, and the single seater Zlin. The boys learnt a lot whilst in the UK and France. They returned to Adelaide and shared their stories amongst RACSA members.



VIA CHRIS SPEROU



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ABOVE: Chris pre-flights a De Havilland Chipmunk at Parafield in 1956.

TOP LEFT: "Look what you've done to my runway!" Guido Zuccoli's Pitts after Chris' Darwin adventure.

TOP RIGHT: Chris rolls his Pitts around Warren Stewart's Beech 33 Debonair.



In 1976, a good friend of Chris', Max Mewert and Dr. Jim Richards purchased a two-seater Pitts. Ossie Ozgood assembled it in Darwin and Chris flew it back to Pallamana, Murray Bridge. Chris taught Max how to fly it whilst he started practicing unlimited type manoeuvres, all self-taught. "I just about blew my brains out a couple of times, but I built up a G-tolerance over time," Chris recalls.

Sperou also became good friends with Maurice Ryan, an accountant for Williams General Aviation (WGA) who used to fly Kittyhawks during the war. Chris was introduced to Jim Polson, the then owner of WGA. Jim asked Chris "What sort of aeroplane do you need to win a world title?" Chris responded "A single-seater Pitts." Polson, through his company, purchased a Pitts S-1S (VH-TIT) and sent it to Germany for the world titles.

Chris and his colleagues returned to Europe to compete in the world titles. As it turned out the aircraft was assembled in Trausdorf, Austria. Chris test flew the Pitts after re-assembly. The airfield was situated close to the heavily-guarded Hungarian border and the Austrians warned that a couple of gliders had drifted over the border and been chased by fighters.

The day came for them to cross the borders of Hungary and head to Kiev, Ukraine, where the world championships were held. Guido Zuccoli and Chris drew straws over who would fly the Pitts. Chris lost. There were two Pitts Specials that were going to make the journey, flown by Pam Lock from New Zealand and Guido.

The Russians provided a map to all pilots who were granted permission to fly into Hungarian airspace. On the side of that map, were the words "Any aircraft straying from this zone will be fired upon without warning." Once at Budapest the Hungarians would then lead the team to Kiev.

Chris boarded a Cessna 172 with an Austrian pilot who led them all to the border. Chris and the Austrian pilot waved the two Pitts across and away they went. The Austrian pilot decided to follow them for a while, but Sperou warned him that only two aircraft were expected to cross the border.

"Ah it'll be right," the pilot said. "What if they shoot a missile at us?" Chris asked.

"They wouldn't fire a missile at a little tin can," the pilot responded. So they flew in a little, and then a call came over the radio "expedite, expedite, there's a high-speed aircraft coming towards you, you have crossed the border." The Hungarian military warned them they had infringed on the border. Just as they were to cross back into Austria: "this bloody Mig-15 fighter swooshes past!" The fighter had taken a mere three minutes to get to them; it was obviously sitting there waiting.

It was a close encounter with the Hungarian military.

Zuccoli's Pitts

The late Guido Zuccoli and Chris developed a good friendship. In June 1976, Chris was offered the opportunity to fly in Guido's new Pitts S-1S in Darwin, NT. Given his love



DANIEL TANNER

a Mayday call to the tower and told them the situation. They responded with "What are your intentions?"

"I'll fly over Fanny Bay and jump from the aircraft," he replied as it was normal to wear a parachute in those days. Out over the bay, Chris started thinking: "Hang on, bloody hell, sharks, box jelly fish? No, I'm not going to jump into that. What can I do?"

He still had the cable in his hand, attempting to maintain control, but it kept slipping. There was significant slack, so he wrapped it around his arm for more grip. It worked; he was able to apply some pressure on the rudder and maintain acceptable control.

He would have to land with the cable around his right arm, left foot on rudder pedal, and his left arm juggling between stick and throttle.

It looked as if he'd landed perfectly; however, as the aircraft slowed the rudder authority was reduced. The Pitts swung left, and then entered a ground loop. The right wing dug into the runway, then the nose dived into the bitumen. The aircraft finally came to a halt ending up on its nose. The authorities of the airport came racing out, and all they could say was "Look at what you have done to my runway!" In response Chris politely told him what he could do with his runway.

Investigations determined that the ferrule swage crimps used on the rudder cable were crimped too lightly for the cable gauge, and eventually the cable worked loose and let go.

affair with the Pitts, he gladly took up the opportunity.

Chris had obtained clearance to fly over the shared RAAF/civil airport. One of his manoeuvres was to execute a vertical flick followed by a negative flick roll on a vertical down line, which meant Chris had to kick in hard right rudder and punch the stick forward. However, applying pressure to the right rudder, his foot and the pedal went straight through the firewall and jammed. The rudder cable detached from the pedal and started to snake back through the cockpit.

Spinning out of control, he eventually got out of it and for some reason, instinctively grabbed the cable before it snaked back entirely into the fuselage, without it he wouldn't have rudder control or brakes. Sprou made



VIA CHRIS SPROU

ABOVE: Chris in London for his GAPAN presentation with Apollo 13 commander Jim Lovell (left) and Judge Tudor Owen (right).

TOP: Pitts S1-S VH-TIT, now in the hands of Martin Morgan.

OPPOSITE PAGE: The formation of RACSA Victa Airtourer 100s near Salisbury, SA.

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Tassie Turn Over

Skyrace Tasmania was a combined pylon race and air show. In 1996 Chris and Warren Stewart flew down to Launceston en-route to the event, but the weather delayed their arrival.

To extend the range of the Pitts Special (VH-CEX) a ferry tank was installed. The hoses fed into the cockpit to a fuel selector. Under schedule pressure the pair hastily removed the ferry system and installed a blanking cap near the selector. During this procedure the event coordinator approached and said "Look you're on Chris, you're on!" Chris inadvertently left the cap on the pilot's seat.

His first manoeuvre was to take-off and roll inverted. As he did this the cap fell into the top of the canopy.

"I'd better grab that otherwise it could get jammed in the controls," he thought. He took his hand off the throttle whilst inverted 25 feet above the deck to retrieve the cap. Inadvertently, the throttle backed

off and the aircraft began to drop. Soon thereafter, Chris heard the top of the tail dragging on the ground, and knowing there was no chance of a go-around, he throttled back, shut the fuel off and waited for the aircraft to stop.

Fortunately the top wing and tail prevented any damage to the canopy and pilot. Once the aircraft stopped, he slid the canopy back, and released his harness.

"By the time that I had removed myself from the aircraft, Warren was almost at the aircraft after a short run," he recalled.

Chris brushed-off the situation and wanted to continue his demonstration in one of his old Pitts Specials, VH-TIT. Conveniently, it was sold to a pilot in Tasmania and was also at the event. After getting the all clear, he returned to complete his routine as planned. The moral of this story is to avoid, where possible, interrupting an aerobatics pilot's train of thought pre-flight.

VIA CHRIS SPEROU



Chris Sperou will no doubt continue doing what he loves, and provide many a spectator with the "wow" factor. When asked what will encourage him to hang up his wings, he responded "I am sure my mind will tell me. If I suddenly have to think what inputs are required to perform a manoeuvre, then I will know I have to give up aerobatics.

"There is no time to think on what inputs are required during a display because everything happens so quickly and one's reflexes must immediately react as the vision of a following manoeuvre flashes through one's mind.

"If I ever experience a hesitation of that sort, then I will know the time has come."



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