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FEATURED

Stearman's pizzaz charms airshow pilot

Winona Whitaker Jul 25, 2018



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OTTUMWA — Growing up in an airport exposed Susan Dacy to many types of people and to many types of planes, but it was the Stearman biplane that stole her heart.

“I’ve been performing in airshows for over 20 years,” said Dacy Wednesday. She flew a smaller, Great Lakes biplane for a while, but “I was hoping for something a little bigger. [Something with] a little more pizzazz.”

That pizzazz came in the form of a 450-horsepower Super Stearman that Dacy calls Big Red. The two will perform during Fly Ottumwa Aug. 24-26 at Ottumwa Regional Airport.

Stearmans are familiar to Ottumwa history buffs; Navy pilots learned to fly Stearman planes at Ottumwa's Naval Air Station in the 1940s.

Dacy grew up in Harvard, Illinois, a small town near the Wisconsin border. "I grew up on a little airport ... that my father had started," Dacy said. "My parents raised five kids running an airport."

Born in 1915, Dacy's father grew up with the novelty of flight. "As a kid, he was fascinated by barnstormers," Dacy said. In the 1930s he bought land and started an airport.

"He actually did have a Piper Club," Dacy said, but following the attack on Pearl Harbor the government curtailed civilian flying, and John sold his plane. He was drafted, became an aircraft mechanic and served as a crew chief on a B24.

Following the war, John expanded the airport at Harvard. "In 10 or 15 years the airport was pretty much self-sustaining," Dacy said.

Dacy Airport has been serving the Harvard, Illinois, community for more than 70 years, its website says.

"He was a people person," Dacy said of her father. "He liked to fly, [but] he loved working on airplanes, and he loved people. On weekends he'd socialize."

Dacy grew up visiting with people who flew into and out of Dacy Airport. She realized that pursuing commercial flying would allow her to make a living in aviation.

"I learned how to fly in a Pipe Cub when I was 16," Dacy said. At 17, she passed the test to receive her private pilot license, but she needed to accumulate flight hours to pursue a career in aviation.

Dacy attended Southern Illinois University where, in addition to flying, she learned aviation mechanics. "I knew I always wanted to work on my own plane to some degree."

After receiving her aviation degree, Dacy found a job flying what was called canceled check flights.

“You actually had to carry the physical checks.” People who have grown up with digital information don’t understand that, Dacy said. Canceled checks had to be delivered to the appropriate banks in a timely manner. “I would do a run each night.”

Dacy flew for a company based in Jackson, Mississippi. “I had the airplane all pre-flighted, [and] they would load this stuff, and I would have to head up to Memphis to drop those checks off.”

She’d fly a few hundred pounds of checks from town to town. “Along the way I would stop in Granada, Mississippi, and pick up film.” That’s another service that’s outdated as a result of digital technology, Dacy noted.

“I did that for quite some time and built up some flying hours.”

Dacy later worked for a regional commuter airline before taking a job with American Airlines. “The commercial flying that I’ve done has allowed me also to pursue ... the airshow flying.”

Dacy is based at Chicago’s O’Hare International Airport and flies Boeing 777s internationally. She’s flying to London this week.

During the summer she performs in 10-12 air shows. “I try to adjust my schedule, and I choose my vacation time. I do keep in the Midwest, so I’m not travelling coast to coast.

“I love airshows. They remind me of a county fair. As much as I love doing the flying portion of the air shows, I love talking to other people and learning their stories,” Dacy said.

Dacy’s excited to come to Ottumwa. “That’s a very big airshow.”

Ottumwa is a good venue, she said. She’s always associated it with antique aviation. In addition to the NAS, Wapello County is home to the Antique Airplane Association and Airpower Museum.

“Iowa is proud of its airports and aviation. Iowa has always had a very fond spot in my heart.”

Dacy’s airshow reflects her love of early flight. “I base my act on the romance and the olden days of aviation when it was new,” Dacy said. “Old-fashioned barnstorming moves.”

She performs barrel rolls, slow rolls, Cuban eights, loops and hammerhead turns. “All of this is outlined with the airshow-friendly smoke that we use. [It] has a nice white outline.”

Dacy is one of many new acts coming to Fly Ottumwa this year. She's sponsored by Christner Contracting.

Reporter Winona Whitaker can be contacted at wwhitaker@ottumwacourier.com and followed on Twitter [@courierwinona](https://twitter.com/courierwinona).



Battle Creek Field of Flight Air Show & Balloon Festival 2016 - Susan Dacy and "Big Red"

Jul 25, 2018

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