

STEPHEN COONTS

AN AERIAL ODYSSEY
ACROSS AMERICA



THE
CANNIBAL
QUEEN

THE CANNIBAL QUEEN

*An Aerial Odyssey
Across America*



POCKET BOOKS

New York London Toronto Sydney Tokyo Singapore



POCKET BOOKS, a division of Simon & Schuster Inc.
1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020

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For information address Pocket Books, 1230 Avenue
of the Americas, New York, NY 10020

Coonts, Stephen, 1946—

The Cannibal Queen : an aerial odyssey across America / Stephen Coonts.
p. cm.

ISBN 0-671-74884-X

1. United States—Description and travel—1981— 2. Air travel—United States.
3. Coonts, Stephen, 1946— —Journeys—United States.—I. Title.
E169.04.C67 1992
917.304928—dc20

92-4167
CIP

First Pocket Books hardcover printing June 1992

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Printed in the U.S.A.

THE
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QUEEN

Books by Stephen Coonts

Flight of the Intruder*

Final Flight

The Minotaur

Under Siege*

The Cannibal Queen*

*Published by POCKET BOOKS

STEPHEN COONTS

For Rachael, Lara and David

PART ONE

Oh, that I had wings like a dove,
for then would I fly away,
and be at rest.

Psalms 55:6

1

ALL REALLY GREAT FLYING ADVENTURES BEGIN AT DAWN—THE dawn patrol, takeoff from Roosevelt Field for the flight across the Atlantic to Paris, launch at first light for a strike on Rabaul, and so on. Unfortunately this adventure was scheduled to begin at noon. It actually got under way at 1:35 P.M. on a clear, sunny Saturday afternoon in June, late, as most things in my life are.

That was what my watch read when I took a deep breath and looked at the top of my son's head in the front cockpit of the Stearman. Our few bags, a laptop computer and a camera bag were stuffed into the luggage bay aft of the rear seat. The coffee-pot at home was off.

For the next three months I would be flying this 1942 Stearman open-cockpit biplane around the United States. I had shamelessly maneuvered my publisher into buying a book about this adventure, and now it was time. Time to fly.

David, age fourteen, had agreed to accompany me for the first two weeks, as far as Disney World in Orlando. He had never been there so he agreed to go with the pilgrim's enthusiasm.

The plane was fueled, I had checked everything personally, sectional charts were ready at hand, the sky looked good, my ex-wife, Nancy, and our two daughters were on hand to wish

the adventurers a safe journey, the usual photos had been snapped, I had signed a new will at my lawyer's three days previous . . . What else?

John Weisbart, the guy who taught me how to fly the Stearman, is also on hand. "You checked everything?" he calls.

"Yeah."

"The oil dipstick cap?" David asks.

"Yep. Even that." I had forgotten to reinstall it on one previous flight with David. Oil sloshed all over the left side of the plane on landing.

"Clear," I call, flip on the master switch and engage the starter. The long prop swings. Six blades, then the mag switch to both. The big radial engine coughs out a gray cloud of oil, then catches with a throaty rumble.

With oil pressure up and the mixture knob and throttle retarded to idle, I reach for my helmet and headset and pull them on. As I am fumbling with the chin strap David's mother, Nancy, runs over to the side of the plane, kisses her fingers, then touches her fingers to my lips. It is a wonderful gesture.

With waves to everyone, we taxi out. After a few minutes of warming the engine and running it up, we taxi onto the runway and add power. The engine responds willingly. As I lift the tail off the runway I glance at the gauges—23 inches of manifold pressure and 2,250 RPM, which represents full power at 5,300 feet above sea level, the field elevation here in Boulder, Colorado.

I pull her nose off at 65 miles per hour and we are flying. She accelerates to 75 and I ease the stick back to hold that airspeed. Up we go at about 300 feet per minute.

We turn downwind and sail along parallel to the runway at 800 feet above the ground. Now the base leg, throttle back like we were going to land, then final but offset right. I level off a hundred feet above the ground and shove the throttle forward to the stop. Nancy and the girls are waving as we swoop overhead with the engine roaring mightily. I love that song.

We head east. First stop will be St. Francis, Kansas, the ninth annual Stearman fly-in, which by happy chance is this weekend, the second weekend in June. Level at cruising power at 7,500 feet and properly trimmed, David wants to fly her. I turn

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the stick over to him and search the sky for other traffic as I try to put it all into perspective.

"We're on our way," I tell him.

He soon gives the plane back to me. I gently waggle the stick and rudder and think of all the scheming and errands and planning that went into this aerial odyssey. This will be three months of flying around the country, three months of writing about it. The product will be my fifth book, and probably the most difficult one of the bunch. The flying will be the easy part.

Dave and I talk nervously on the intercom about this and that, pointing out landmarks, other airplanes, just talking. Finally we calm down and watch the land roll by beneath us.

The engine is humming perfectly. I sit drinking in the yellow wings against the blue sky and green land.

The plane's a big yellow Stearman open-cockpit biplane, a primary flight trainer built in the summer of 1942 by Boeing in Wichita, Kansas, for the Royal Canadian Air Force, one of three hundred built that summer for the Canadians under Lend-Lease. Like most Stearmans, when delivered this bird wore a 220-horsepower Continental engine, a big round radial.

The Canadians returned their Stearmans to the U.S. Army that fall. Apparently the rigors of open-cockpit flying in the Canadian winter were more than dedicated flight instructors and students could endure, even for king and country. So this beauty served out the remainder of the war in American colors.

After the war she was sold as surplus for \$500 and acquired civil registration number N58700. Two owners later she was flying in Washington state for the Atomic Energy Commission. Why the AEC needed a Stearman is a mystery that will probably never be solved.

After that second tour of government service this plane was once again declared surplus and joined thousands of her sisters flying the American plains as a crop duster, then a sprayer as chemical technology changed. There she flew for over thirty years as the decades rolled by, the 1950s, the '60s, the '70s, and into the '80s.

Ready for the scrap yard in 1987, N58700 was purchased by Robert Henley, an airplane enthusiast from Denver, and restored by his father, Skid Henley, in McAlester, Oklahoma.

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Skid installed a 300-horsepower Lycoming R-680 engine in the old girl, one that still wears a plate that notes that the U.S. government accepted delivery of this engine on August 2, 1942. So engine and plane are of equivalent age.

Restoring N58700 was obviously a labor of love. Skid gave her new threads of Stits fabric and painted her yellow. He added a gorgeous brown accent stripe that circles the lip of the cowling—he installed a cowling because he liked the look of it—and runs the length of the fuselage on both sides. The workmanship is superb throughout.

In May 1990 the thought occurred to Robert Henley that he had too many toys. The fact that he is a family man may have been a factor. Temporarily insane with this delusion, he showed me his Stearman. It was lust at first sight.

She was sitting primly in a tee-hangar at Front Range Airport, east of Denver. Standing in the sun and looking into the darkness of the hangar, you saw the yellow and the wings and the gleaming metal prop.

We rolled her out into the sun as Robert's wife, Ann, told me how they had worked all morning washing and waxing.

The sunlight on that yellow fabric was physically and emotionally overpowering, so brilliant, so bright, so beautiful. I stood there awed as a gentle breeze played across her and stirred the ailerons. She was big, yellow all over and greasy and oily in all the right places. She reeked of those wondrous smells that promise flight.

Stroking that taut yellow fabric, caressing the voluptuous, sensuous curves, sitting in the cockpit and staring at the motionless instruments and wagging the stick of laminated hickory as I ran my fingers along the throttle and mixture and propeller control levers, I fell madly in love.

The engine . . . ah, that big, round nine-cylinder radial is a work of art, its crankcase a battleship gray, the perfect background to display that engine placard that so proudly proclaims "1942." Not a fleck of rust anywhere. A film of oil on the push-rod bushings and on the bottom of the cowling. That morning thirteen months ago I reached in and got some on my fingers and felt that feeling of good, clean oil against precision-machined steel.

Staring into the shadows of that engine at the massive

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machined parts, so clean, so ready, you knew. As you rubbed your oily fingers together you knew how that big radial would sound when it coughed into life. You knew how she would stumble and shudder and spray oil everywhere as white smoke belched from her stack and the gleaming, polished prop spun into a blur. You knew how the cough would subside into a throbbing growl that would echo off the hangars and drift away over the prairie.

I stared at my reflection in the mirror-smooth propeller hub. My hairline is receding and the years have etched lines into my face. Over my shoulder hung the sun's fireball, too bright to look at, shining down from a deep, deep blue sky.

"How much you want for her?" I asked Henley.

He told me.

"Worth every penny," I admitted, and bought that big yellow Stearman before he had time to change his mind.

John Weisbart taught me to fly her that summer. John has over a thousand hours in tail-wheel airplanes and took some refresher lessons in the Stearman from Henley, who is also a flight instructor. Then he began the frustrating job of transitioning a pilot with 2,500 hours in tricycle-gear planes into the most unforgiving tail-wheel airplane extant.

"She'll ground-loop on you at the drop of a hat," he told me, for the first of a hundred times. "When you flare to land you have to really work the rudder to hold her straight, keep the upwind wing down with aileron, hold the tail wheel on the ground with back stick. Fly her until you shut the engine down."

I nodded, pretending to understand.

"I'm telling you, Steve—she's so big, with her center of gravity so far aft, she'll take a bite out of your ass if you let her."

Sure, John. Sure.

I found out what he was talking about one afternoon in October. I was flying with my secretary's husband and paying more attention to other aircraft in the pattern than I was to flying my own plane, and just as I touched down the four-knot crosswind from the right weathercocked the Stearman. In the blink of an eye the left wingtip kissed the asphalt. Now, too late, I got busy with the rudder and stick. No ground loop, thank heavens, but a tattered wingtip and left aileron. I was a sadder and wiser

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man, especially when I got the bill. A little bit of fabric, glue and paint and the labor to properly install it set me back \$320. Not a fortune, but *Aaagh!*

That incident was still in my future as John Weisbart began to initiate me into the mysteries of the Stearman. He decided that I should begin my lessons in the front cockpit while he monitored the proceedings in the rear one. Even I knew this was not the way it was done. "The instructor sits in front, John, and the student sits in back. I'm the student."

"I know that, but I'll feel a lot more comfortable with you up there and me back here. Trust me."

John was rapidly developing his own love affair with my new flame. Like a jealous teenager, I found this difficult to endure. Especially after five or six flights when I began to think I was getting the hang of this tail-wheel stuff. "Hey, John. Why don't you let me try it from back there?"

"Ahh, Steve, ol' buddy, it'd be a crime against nature to ding this Stearman. She's a beaut!" He glanced at the seductive wings, the glistening yellow paint, the shiny prop waiting to turn, then cast a vastly experienced eye upon me. "A couple more with you up front; then we'll see."

I finally got him in the front seat by embarrassing him in front of the mechanic, Steve Hall, who wandered out of the hangar one morning to watch us strap in. "Gonna have to put a stick of dynamite under John to get him out of that rear cockpit," I told Steve, with John listening.

"I feel more comfortable in back," John explained.

"Umm," Steve Hall said, ever the diplomat.

"Well, I guess maybe it's time." John looked me over for telltale signs of hangover or decrepitude. Seemingly satisfied, he sighed. "Okay, okay. I'll sit in the front."

He slowly climbed up onto the wing and made his way forward as I wondered if I was up to flying this yellow bird from the aft office, the captain's seat. Now I wished I hadn't been so hasty. I strapped in and sat there staring at the switches while John talked me through an engine start. With my stomach fluttering we taxied out, S-turning as usual, but from back here I could see better around the fuselage and engine.

Once in the air I discovered the rear cockpit is more wind-blown than the front. Here you are completely behind the wings

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and farther from the center of gravity, so any movement of the aircraft in pitch feels more pronounced. The look is different too. Although it is more difficult to see straight forward—especially with John's head in the way—the view to the sides is better when you flare. I decided it is also easier to detect any lateral movement of the nose in the landing flare, movement that you must use rudder to counter—the nose must go straight regardless of the crosswind.

Eventually John let me take her around the patch by myself, and one gorgeous, windless Colorado morning he signed me off as safe for solo. I haven't felt such a sense of accomplishment since my first solo in a U.S. Navy T-34 at Saufley Field in 1968.

And John told me again, "You've got to fly this thing every second in the landing pattern or she'll bite you on the ass."

In October I found out how right he was. Which is why I named the old gal *Cannibal Queen* and had a woman of appropriate demeanor and endowments painted on the right side, right above her name.

Today, thirteen months after I bought the Queen, David and I are aloft and on our way. I watch the engine instruments and refer to the sectional chart occasionally. We are flying true east, right down a section line over high plains still green from a wet spring. We have talked ourselves out and David is looking around, watching occasional puffy clouds floating over our heads. Then he looks out the right side of the plane awhile, then the left.

The first hour has barely passed when he announces, "I'm bored."

I sit silently pondering the amusement quotient of fourteen-year-olds. Was I like that when I was fourteen? My God, was it really thirty years ago?

More cumulo-puffballs are building in a layer above us. David is still reclining his head to watch them pass overhead. With St. Francis in sight dead ahead, I start to climb. At 8,200 feet we are even with the bottoms.

"You're not going to go through those, are you?" the bored one asks with a tinge of concern in his voice.

"Just between," I assure him.

Up another hundred feet and we slice through a narrow canyon between two puffballs. Damp gray wisps of nothingness off

each wing. Then we are through and the small town of St. Francis, Kansas, lies before us.

I cut the power and let the Stearman descend as I call on the radio. No one answers on Unicom, 122.8. I listen. The altimeter setting would be nice, but I really want to know the wind. I learn from the radio calls that another Stearman is in the landing pattern. Finally I figure out he is using the grass runway that parallels runway 13, the only paved runway. I cross above the field and turn left downwind, only to be cut out of the pattern by a Cessna 182. Around again, only this time on base leg the sky is full of parachutists. I veer off to the right and add power for another trip around the circuit. Now the Unicom guy gets on the radio—wind about 20 knots from 120 degrees—the wind socks are standing straight out.

This time I plant the Queen in a mediocre three-point landing that the grass actually makes look good. Grass is like that. It is so forgiving that most tail-dragger pilots prefer it. On asphalt the large main tires of the Stearman stick and track without any sideways give, yet on grass both tires can slip sideways while the aircraft remains pointed straight. And sod has more give, more absorbency than asphalt. Occasionally after a too-enthusiastic arrival on asphalt or concrete the bird will return to the air with an unsightly and embarrassing bounce, propelled aloft in spite of the pilot's wishes by the action of the shock absorbers in the landing gear struts. Grass absorbs some of this shock absorber thrust, so the plane seems more willing to stay planted.

There are nine other Stearmans in St. Francis and the *Cannibal Queen* makes ten. A new record for the fly-in, we are told by the official greeter as he fills out my name and address. He takes a photo of David and me and points out a place to tie down the Queen.

With three grass runways, St. Francis is one of the finest fields in the country for tail-wheel airplanes. And the place is jumping. Ten Stearmans, all painted brightly with whatever color scheme struck the owner's fancy, another fifteen or twenty light planes, skydivers, three or four balloons, and a crowd of a hundred or so local spectators still lingering after a long day in the early summer sun. When you are tired of watching the noisy biplanes or scanning the sky for parachutes you can