

THE STEARMAN N2S *

Once upon a time, in a land called Kansas, ... Lloyd Stearman built biplanes. By 1927, the company bearing his name had acquired a reputation for tough equipment, resulting in the airmail companies purchasing his aircraft, including the barrel-chested M-2 "Speedmails," each equipped with a Pratt & Whitney engine developing a stunning 525 horsepower. That series was thereafter referred to as the Bull Stearman ...

Two months before the great depression began, Stearman shrewdly sold his company to the vast United Aircraft conglomerate. There, mergers spawned anti-trust litigation, which began spin-offs, leading to Boeing's acquisition of Stearman Aircraft. By then, [Lloyd] Stearman had repositioned to California where he became the president of Lockheed Aircraft, yet his surname would remain indelibly attached to a hugely successful military trainer created more than a year after he left the wide skies of Kansas.

In late 1933, word came from on high that the Army and Navy would look favorably upon a new primary trainer for their aviation cadets. In a mere 60 days, engineers at Boeing completely reworked a previous attempt at a military trainer, ... to create a strikingly clean, straight-legged biplane. Capable of withstanding a whopping 10 Gs, the model 70 was subjected to Navy testing in early 1934.

The model 70 was upgraded and both the Navy and army bought many of them, with some 8,585 eventually being built. In 1941, a naming competition caused the hopelessly incongruous sobriquet of "Kaydet" to be applied to the incredibly robust airframe. Fortunately, the name never stuck, and to this day the Boeing models 70, 73, 75, and 76 are known with deep affection simply as "Stearmans." [in 1945-1946, at NAAS Rodd Field, a satellite of NAS Corpus Christi, TX, they were more simply called "Yellowbirds."]

Thousands of World War II military pilots trained in Stearmans. They praised its friendly manners when aloft but uttered dark imprecations against its behavior when the tall, skinny landing gear was in contact with the ground, especially in the presence of a crosswind. [Sometimes a landing would result in a "ground loop," where directional control of the aircraft would be lost, and the outboard wing tip would contact the ground. This might result in no damage other than a grass-stain on the under-wing fabric, but if the fabric was torn, a square fabric patch was glued on with aircraft dope, and the machine was up and flyable. Many a cadet would notice this on his preflight check.]

Following World War II, Stearmans were sold as surplus ... to the great joy and profit of the cropdusting community.

[In 1946-1947, Navy cadets went through "Selective Flight Training"—N2S-3s with 220hp Continental engines, and "Primary Flight Training"—N2S-5s with 225hp Lycoming engines.

[The Stearman was phased out of Primary flight training in early 1946 with the successful Project X-ray, where the cadets trained in the N2S in "A-Stage," then in SNJs; and Project Yoke, where SNJs were flown in all stages. After these projects were completed, N2Ss were no longer used in Navy flight training, all Primary and Basic training was done in SNJs.]



* Rick Durden, "Showstopper," *AOPA Pilot*, August 2008.