

A photograph of a man and a young boy standing in front of a yellow and red Stearman biplane. The man, on the right, has grey hair and is wearing a blue The North Face jacket and khaki pants. The boy, on the left, has brown hair and is wearing a red zip-up jacket and khaki pants. They are both smiling. The biplane's yellow fuselage and red tail are visible in the background.

Stearman 444 Returns Home

By John Parish, Jr.



PHOTO BY BOB BURNS

John III, Charlotte & John Parish, Jr.



Ben Redman of RARE Aircraft (responsible for the restoration), John III, John, Jr. & Charles Parish

W670 kept roaring along without hesitation. Gradually, we were approaching the hill country of Middle Tennessee. To that point, John and I had hardly seen a cloud. As the cloud deck built up, we worked our way down to 1,200 feet just west of Shelbyville. I believe the old biplane knew where it was as it bit into the cool fall air tracking for home. Shortly after 11:00am, we were over the skies of Tullahoma for the first time in 23 years. We made several low passes and finally touched down.

John and I parked 444 in front of my dad's hangar, pulled off our cloth caps, and hopped down from the big yellow wing. We were immediately greeted by my mother, Charles, and the Redman clan. I gave my mother a big hug as she had a huge smile on her face. It was very humbling to finally bring 444 back to THA. What an experience to travel cross country in an old biplane with my son.

On Sunday, Charles flew it. We headed west over Tullahoma to circle an old friend, Don Parker. Hopefully he had a chance to see us before peeling off. Just before my return flight back to 1H0, I finally had the opportunity to give my mother a ride in 444. We made a few passes around the airport. I asked if she wanted to fly. She replied, "No, I don't need to. I am simply enjoying the ride." I believe her statement captured our family's love of this magnificent airplane. ✈

For many years I pushed airplanes in and out of my dad's hangar while the Yellow Peril sat in the very back corner basically unnoticed. It was kind of sad. It sat there unable to grace the skies over Middle Tennessee following Robert's unsuccessful attempt to fly it to the West Coast in the summer of 1989. The engine just wouldn't cooperate as he got no further than West Tennessee. That was the last time it had flown. Of course, the subject came up between my brothers and me to restore it. Usually, it was just small talk, but it never went any further than that. That's where this great comeback story begins.

Stearman (444) N44JP came off the assembly line on March 31, 1941. As many Stearmans experienced, it was put in military storage until it was commissioned to Ottumwa, IA as an A75N1 Navy trainer in October 1943. I know very little about its history from then until the mid 1960's as there are no logbooks to account for its journey. My dad, John Parish, Sr., was on a business trip to Kingston, Jamaica in late 60's when he spotted this dilapidated basket case sitting on the tarmac of the Kingston Airport. He spent several months locating the owner to find out more about it. After extensive negotiation with the Jamaican government and \$700 lighter in his wallet, 444 was on its way to a new home in Tennessee. From Montego Bay on the other side of the island, it was crated into a container originally intended for Worth softballs which were manufactured at the Worth plant on the outskirts of town. That Christmas, my mother, Charlotte, became the proud, new owner of a basket case Stearman. I was one year old.

The infamous Tullahoma Bunch jumped on the project from the day it arrived. It was in pretty bad shape after sitting for several years in the salty Caribbean air. Bobby Graves, Gene Hood, Richard Blazer, and a whole host of others in Tullahoma immediately stripped it down and started piecing it back together. They did nearly all of the restoration, other than the wings which were completely rebuilt by the Youkins. By May 1974, 444 was back in the air over the hills of Tennessee. My mother and Bobby Graves flew it to Galesburg, IL to the Second Annual Stearman Fly-In on its first long cross country that year.

Throughout the 1970's, 444 attended many antique aviation events both big and small – Oshkosh, Ottumwa, Galesburg, Tullahoma Happenings, Gainesville, GA, and Camden, SC – just to name a few. Charles and Robert got their licenses in the early 80's, and the tours continued. If you go back through old documentaries of Oshkosh events, you will find an interview of Charles and Robert, 20 and 18 at the time, by Gene Chase, who was extremely impressed with their handling of the big biplane in a 25 knot crosswind just ahead of a thunderstorm. Unfortunately, I did not fly it before it was grounded in 1989.

Fast-forward to 2008. I made the decision to start the restoration on 444. As quickly as it began, the project stalled due to the economy. It sat in an old tin hangar at Parish Aerodrome with the tail section removed, hanging in a purgatory state of complete uncertainty. During Beech Party 2010, I had shown a few people the Stearman and asked about who could do 220

Continental engine overhauls and potential restoration options. I had no real intentions of starting back into it anytime soon.

I was hanging out on the flight line at Beech Party waiting for the next arrival when Rand Siegfried grabbed me by the arm. He said, "Let's go flying." His dad "Old Bob," as everyone knows him, had flown his Stearman down from the Chicago area. I hopped in the front and Rand hopped in the back. I assumed it would be an ordinary go-around-the-patch flight. Instead, Rand gave the controls over to me from start up to shut down. We did slow flight, stalls, power off landings, wheel landings, and the whole nine yards. I had a blast. Later that day, I made my mind up to complete the restoration. 444 needed to fly again.

That December, my brother, Charles, loaded the Stearman into a container headed for Fairbault, MN to the Redman's at Rare Aircraft. Following a few basic principles of quality, authenticity, timing, and a budget, the Redman's got started. Their team went through 444 with a fine tooth comb finding only a few minor issues. Needless to say, I was very pleased with their progress and workmanship. After eight months in their shop, it was back in the air on August 24, 2011. Ben flew it to the Stearman Fly-in in Galesburg, IL where he met up with his dad, Roy, his brother, Jeremy, and his wife Karen. I knew 444 was now part of their family as well upon witnessing their genuine attachment to 444. After prying the stick out of Ben's hand, Charles and I set off for St. Louis on September 11th, exactly 10 years after he and I had been grounded there on "9/11/2001." Charles summed up our return flight quite well: "Life gives you little gifts from time to time, and that flight over the Midwest countryside with my brother was one of them."

It is now October 18, 2012. My son, John III, and I got up early to beat strong winds that were predicted throughout our route. Both of us layered up from head to toe as it was 42 degrees when we lifted off at 7:05am from Creve Coeur, MO (1H0) as the sun was coming over the horizon. Our target was Murray, KY just south of Paducah. As we climbed out over the city, we could see for miles. The Arch looked great sparkling in the early morning sun. The wind whistled through the flying wires as we were humming along at 120 knots ground speed, obviously a pretty nice tailwind. I keyed the mic to check on John. He quickly responded that the view was great. By 9:00am, we landed in Murray and parked at the pumps to make a quick turn for our next leg. As we were preparing to depart again, I noticed a lady walking toward a King Air 300. She looked over at us with a big smile on her face as if she would prefer to climb in the Stearman rather than the King Air. I asked the FBO manager who she was. He replied, "That's the governor's wife."

We were back in the air by 9:45am climbing out to 1,900 feet crossing over Kentucky Lake. The fall colors were incredible from that vantage point. I had never really noticed how wooded West Tennessee is until then, flying along at low altitude and 90 mph. I was also a little apprehensive in a 1941 open cockpit biplane with few options. Like music to my ears, the Continental