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show performers was the outlandish ego one would expect. Yes, there was a definite self-awareness and intense self-confidence, but there was no "Hey, look at me and what I do!"

If you encounter a group of these pilots, several things will jump out immediately; the first is an extremely high level of humor. Another is an unusual respect—maybe even love—for one another. As you move up the ladder toward the superstars, there is little professional competition between them, as there is at the lower levels. They have arrived. They are good. And everyone knows and acknowledges that. There is, however, a strong level of support that, on occasion, can appear to be criticism.

We spoke with Montaine Mallet and Daniel Heligoin, who have been performing together as the French Connection for 28 years, a formation-team record; Patty Wagstaff, the reigning queen of airshow performers, who reflected on her years and how she got where she is; Sean D. Tucker (he seldom leaves out the "D"), the airshow king, who spoke articulately of the danger (and who was the only one to do so) and the challenges; and Wayne Handley, who spoke of the passion that drew him in and the reason he retired after an almost fatal accident.

These conversations, combined with many others we've had with performers of similar stature, left us with lasting impressions of the breed of airshow pilots who occupy the higher rungs of the airshow ladder. First, they are of above-average intelligence and are generally quite articulate (although a few need to be pushed to articulate). Within the group, they vary wildly in personalities, from the quiet-on-the-ground, wild-in-the-air Jimmy Franklin and his jet-powered biplane to the open, gregarious nature of Sean Tucker. From the Patty Wagstaff who is quiet and nearly shy out of her element to the Patty Wagstaff who is confidence personified when in her world. At the same time, they show a dedication to their craft and a professionalism that totally contradicts the daredevil image many have of such pilots. Sean Tucker probably said it best: "I've absolutely made up my mind that I'm not going to die in an airplane, and everything I do is aimed at achieving that goal."

Airshow performances, as opposed to aerobatic competitions, exist for one reason: to entertain. And there is no doubt the performers know that and respond to it. Patty Wagstaff said, "Even in the days when I was practicing mostly for competition flying, when I'd look down and see a car parked by the practice area, watching me, my flying got better. I don't care if it's 10 people or a million, it makes a difference. Although you're constantly flogging yourself to improve, knowing that you're working for an audience simply makes you work harder."

In general, one item totally absent from any of the dozens of conversations with air-

Patty Wagstaff

"I seem to need the intensity and the focus this kind of thing forces on you. Yes, there's the danger, but that's really just a by-product of an activity that gives you no choice but to focus. If the result of losing that focus wasn't death, I'm not sure I would have been so attracted to it."

Wagstaff can be a contradictory personality. Many of her early years—before she discovered aviation—were spent in a series of wild adventures worldwide. The lifestyle and character she sketches in her reminiscences are those of someone who is permanently attached to impermanence. Change is her credo. "Someone said airshow pilots all suffer from ADD, and I think they're right.

"I was," she says, "someone constantly in search of something I could grab hold of. But the focus never lasted. Then I discovered flying. Much more important, I was introduced to aerobatics very early, and I knew instantly this was it. It wasn't a gradual thing. It just reached up and grabbed me, and I was gone! Aerobatics absolutely changed my life and made me into a different person. Mostly, anyway.

PHOTO BY BUDD DAVISSON

"Airshows added yet another element to the flying, and that was the crowd. In competition aerobatics, you're working your butt off to show how good you are to a judge who may or may not be worthy of that title. When you're working an audience, however, you want them to have

Montaine said, "In some ways, we are one another's best friend and biggest critic. If we see something that worries us in the other airshow act, we sit down and talk about it. The really good pilots take that kind of criticism very well. Those who aren't so good, or who are trying to work their way up, sometimes don't take it so well."

But why do they do it? What attracts them to a world that is only one step up from vaudeville, in that they're always on the road (the most dangerous part of an airshow is often simply trying to get there on time)? What attracts them to a vocation that is financially insecure and that has instant death as a traveling companion?

Airshow pilots have been with us since shortly after mankind took its first wobbly steps into the air. It was Lincoln Beachey, however, who made aerobatics both an art form and a salable commodity. Every airshow performer since has built on that foundation to thrill audiences. Exactly why they do it is a total mystery to the audience; they probably don't think much about the performers' motives. But every airshow audience should know that what they are watching is a melding of man (or woman) and machine, and the glue that holds them together includes passion, discipline and the desire to make others happy. Besides, none of them could envision themselves doing anything else.

a good time. You're entertaining them, which demands another level of aerobatic understanding because what you learn as a competition pilot can be terminally boring to a non-aviation audience. So, you start to think what will get their attention and make them remember your performance. They may not be capable of judging your ability, but they know what they like, and usually, that is the result of high skills applied in an entertaining manner.

"As I flew more and more airshows, I began to realize something was happening to the crowd that was more than pure entertainment. Certainly some of my proudest moments are when a father brings his 10-year-old daughter up to me—and it's usually fathers, by the way—and he says, 'I wanted her to shake your hand just to show her that she can do anything, if she sets her mind to it.' That's one of the many reasons I really enjoy what I do.

"When I first started this, I was just sort of a hippy-dippy chick that flew. Now, I'm not sure. Just knowing that some 10-year-olds are watching and what I do may have some effect on their lives has matured me. But just a little," and she flashes that million-dollar smile.