



JEFF SKILES

COMMENTARY / CONTRAILS



Brady Lane, EAA multimedia journalist, and Jeff Skiles fly in EAA's CUBy.

CUBy

BY JEFF SKILES

ONE OF THE ROLES THAT I SERVE around EAA is as a flight instructor in EAA's employee flying club. It's not a paid position by any means; at least it's not for me because I don't charge anybody. I like flight instructing because I like to fly. Even when I instruct I come back feeling as if I was flying because mentally, I was. Flight instructing is even better, though, because the student hopefully learns something and I get more time to check out the scenery. Everybody wins.

THE INIMITABLE CUBy

By far the largest part of my instructional practice is checking people out in the CUBy. This is largely because I am the only tail wheel instructor willing to do the job. EAA's CUBy is an interesting aircraft. It's a heavy homebuilt Cub that was graciously built and donated to EAA by Mr. Mario Brugioni. I know this because his name along with some limited vital statistics about the CUBy are etched on a plaque on the floor between my legs.

The CUBy was built in 1983, serial No. 303, and has a thundering Continental 65-hp four-banger, 762-pound empty weight, and 1,340-pound gross weight. It's all on the plaque. No other guidance seems to be necessary.

I have never had the opportunity to fly an actual Piper Cub. Hard to imagine I know. Champs, Luscombes, Pacers, Clippers, Cessna 140s, sure. A Cub—never! People wax nostalgic over anything to do with the little yellow J-3 Cub. I admit that the yellow paint and the lightning bolt make a jaunty combination. I don't know who they think they are fooling with the lightning bolt however. Trying to make a

Cub look fast is a pointless exercise. No one's buying it.

There are of course innumerable Cub clones on the market from diminutive LSA to large engine, big tire brutes. If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, Mr. Piper must be flattered indeed. For me though, this lonesome CUBy is my sole experience with the marque.

The CUBy eschews the standard Cub yellow and instead sports a burnt orange livery. The burnt orange is a good choice. A Cub fly-in can sometimes resemble a full field of dandelions on a spring day. A few welcome rebels in the crowd provide refreshing contrast. I'm glad to see the CUBy strikes its own course.

THE CONTORTIONIST

I think that I may be the only instructor willing to fly the CUBy because I'm the only one able to squeeze into it. Entry

I have never had the opportunity to fly an actual Piper Cub. Hard to imagine I know. Champs, Luscombes, Pacers, Clippers, Cessna 140s, sure. A Cub—never!

into the front seat requires gymnastic ability beyond the capability of most. It begins by balancing precariously with one foot on the tire (pray the plane doesn't roll forward while attempting this feat). Then grasp the structural tubing and swing your left foot in. Now hanging half in and half out you are committed as you support your weight by dangling from the steel tube structure over your head and balancing on your tippy-toe on the unstable tire. Now you swing your right foot in around the door

frame before lowering your seat down to the cushion.

The preceding narrative makes it sound far easier than it is. Best have someone hold your coffee while performing this maneuver or you might very well be wearing it. The entire affair is best done in one fluid motion. Hesitation at any point can lead to disaster. Much like raising the manual gear on an old Mooney M20C, there's no stopping half way. You Mooney owners out there know what I'm talking about.

We won't even talk about getting out of the CUBy. There's nothing good to be gained by such thinking.

I'm only 6 feet tall, at least that's what I tell people. Probably more like 5 feet 11 inches on a good day, but still, I only barely fit in the CUBy. To be honest most 54-year-old men wouldn't be limber enough to get into the front seat of the CUBy, but I still have the heart, and tendons, of a



32 years ago I bought a different Sport/Utility plane, flew it for 12 years and made seven trips from Salt Lake to Alaska and Western Canada. I enjoyed them all, but improvements were needed for this type of flying: longer range, more speed, and greater space. I wanted these upgrades without sacrificing slow flight, short takeoffs/landings, carrying capacity, toughness, reliability, and simplicity. The Husky with its 180 hp, 52-gallon fuel capacity, over one-ton gross weight, and two-inch wider cabin provided the solution. I have been rewarded time and again in my Husky during the 7 additional trips above the Arctic Circle, and countless around the desert southwest with my sons and brave wife. Bill Browning

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20-year-old. I wouldn't mind it, though, if Mr. Piper had the same foresight as the designers of the comfortable Aeronca Champ. The Champ might have an ugly duckling stance, but its wide cockpit is more suited to increasingly broad American backsides.

LET'S GO FLY

Like all Cub-like craft the CUBy must be soloed from the rear seat. This poses a problem for starting the engine from back there, however. The starter T-handle is on the forward panel, as in forward of the forward passenger seat. If you have a passenger you both get intimately acquainted during the starting procedure.

To compound this difficulty, the CUBy also has heel brakes. Whoever thought heel brakes were a good idea anyway? Unless you're a giraffe it's impossible to hold the brakes and pull the starter at the same time. You stretch forward pulling yourself out of the seat to grab the starter handle, and while the prop ticks over you must gun the throttle a bit until the engine catches in a loping rumble. Now you throw yourself back into the seat and get on the brakes. Make sure to leave a little ramp space ahead of you for this exercise; you will inevitably roll forward a few feet in its accomplishment.

The one magnificent feature Piper has over all its competitors is a side

door that can be left open while you fly. There is nothing quite like a summer's eve with the door open, the wind in your face, smelling the fresh cut grass mixed with hot engine oil, and seeing the rich tapestry of the landscape unfolding below.

In the CUBy you know what it's like to be alive. You feel the slipstream rushing by in a truly visceral way. Well, "rushing" may be an overstatement, but it still transmits the essence of flight. In a good slip to landing you can even feel the air pounding the side of your cheek.

At one time it was believed that pilots needed an open cockpit to properly fly an airplane, to sense their surroundings, to feel the sky. Now we hermetically seal ourselves in hard shells made of aluminum or composites. An aircraft becomes merely an egg propelled through the heavens before re-entry to earth. Where's the romance in that? The CUBy is a throwback. Flying with the door open is life itself.

Where the CUBy does seem to be lacking is around the pattern. Those 65 horses banging away just don't have the oomph to propel it through the air. Achieving pattern altitude is something that can only be dreamed of on a hot day. Conversely, when you pull the power back the CUBy veritably falls out of the sky. I tell students that you can't be too close to the runway. With a forward slip into even



PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRADY LANE

a medium wind the CUBy can descend almost vertically.

I don't know if it is the open door or the proximity to the tires, but you can forget about making one of those roll-it-on landings. Every return to earth seems like a calamity of squealing tires and wandering direction. The best arrival that you seem to be able to command is a gentle plop onto the runway. Often after a particularly egregious attack on the pavement my charges ask me what they did wrong.

"Nothing really, that's just the way of the CUBy."

I've never made a grease job landing in the CUBy; neither has anyone else. But that's not to say it isn't a forgiving airplane. It can be half-way to the weeds with a first-time taildragger pilot, and I can easily recover it to centerline. Maybe just like all good tailwheel airplanes, it really deserves to be flown off the soft expanse of a grass runway.

The CUBy is not a cross-country cruiser. I even schedule extra time for a trip to the practice area west of town. On the journey out I'll have plenty of opportunity to find what makes a student tick. On the way back I'll generally discover his or her lifelong plans as well. I remember reading Rinker Buck's book *Flight of Passage* about him and his brother flying a Cub across America in only a week. That Cub must have had rocket propulsion because in such time I don't know that the CUBy could reach the state line.

But maybe I'm just asking too much of the CUBy. After all you shouldn't ask a thoroughbred to pull like a draft horse. The CUBy is good at what it does in life, and that's putting a smile on the face of those who are fortunate enough to fly it.

FLYING WITH BRADY

Brady Lane and I often get up with the sun and take the CUBy out along the shores of Lake Winnebago. We fly around looking at the lake homes while solving the world's problems. Fortunately the world has a lot of problems because our early morning flights are cathartic for us both. Somehow the day is a whole lot brighter after those CUBy excursions.

I have traveled a lot with Brady, and he makes a fine companion—always upbeat, ever considerate, and he perpetually sees the joy in

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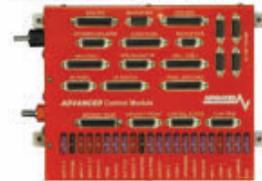


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life. He's one of those people who attract others as if he were magnetized. Just being Brady's friend has led to some great opportunities. For instance, I owe the fact that I'm a pilot of the Commemorative Air Force's B-29 to Brady. The CAF wanted one of Brady's excellent video productions done about *FIFI*. They thought offering to train me as a subject would be a suitable enticement. I guess I'm just a FOB (Friend of Brady), and I'm happy to be one.

Believe it or not, Oshkosh is a pretty sleepy place for 51 weeks of the year. My most recent flight with the CUBy and Brady was only the Thursday before AirVenture. The very next day the AirVenture NOTAM implementing the famous Fisk arrival would go into effect and thousands of aircraft would converge on this spot. But at 6:30 in the morning on Thursday, it was still serene. The only activity on the field was Frank Knapp practicing his STOL flights in

I would think if the ant-like people below could ever experience the joy of these extraordinary flights in the CUBy, we would all be pilots.

Lil' Cub. Frank has won his category at the Valdez STOL competition two years in a row. As we turned out over the airport headed for the shore we could see *Lil' Cub* just levitating down the long Runway 36 centerline. A seagull couldn't stay in the air at that speed.

Occasionally Brady tells me to grab the controls while he snaps shots with his camera as some particularly enchanting vista presents itself. He's an artist with a camera, and artists are like that. He'll prattle on about photography stuff like tonal quality or depth of field. It means

nothing to me, but I'm happy to fly while he pursues his passion.

Sometimes we try a few landings on our return trying to outdo each other, but mostly we just like to fly around and talk. The verdant greens of the land below captured in the early morning light make our early flights all the more enjoyable. I would think if the ant-like people below could ever experience the joy of these extraordinary flights in the CUBy, we would all be pilots.

Maybe the CUBy is the perfect vehicle to shake off the early morning dew and experience the majesty of flight, a portal of transformation, a conveyance of enchantment. Thank you Mr. Mario Brugioni, you did well and your creation has gone a long way to brighten the lives of two humble pilots after all these years. *EAA*

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