

Cloud Dancer

By Jack Cox

AROUND THE FIRST of next year a movie will be released that will rate a "must see" for EAAers, their families and friends. To be called "Cloud Dancer", the film will be about competition aerobatics, EAA/IAC style. To insure absolute authenticity, former U. S. National Aerobatic Champion Tom Poberezny was engaged as the film's Technical Advisor and crowd scenes were shot at actual air shows in the Phoenix area. EAA caps and jackets reportedly will be much in evidence throughout the movie.

Written, directed and produced by Barry Brown, **Cloud Dancer** stars David Carradine, Jennifer O'Neill and Joseph Bottoms. The story line centers around Brad

Randolph (Carradine), the world's aerobatic champion who, in his early 40's, finds himself being challenged by the two inevitable forces with which every hero or public figure must ultimately come to grips — advancing age's toll upon his ability to continue to meet the physical demands of his profession, competition aerobatics, and a youthful competitor. Intertwined is a love story that both complicates and sustains Randolph's efforts to stay on top of the aerobatic heap. A bad guy is thrown in to polarize the forces of conflict and to provide a little intrigue.

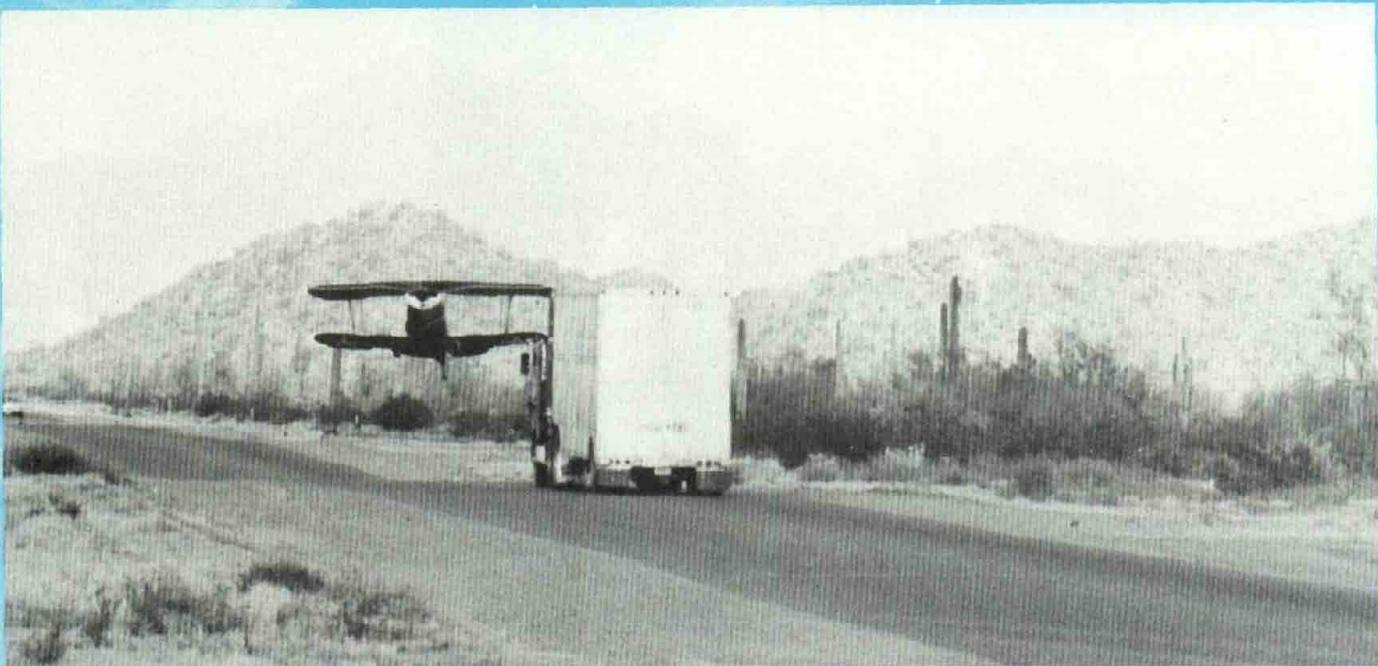
Jennifer O'Neill is the love interest and Joseph Bottoms provides the youthful competition.

Movie-goers will, of course, instantly recognize the plot. You saw it a hundred times in the glory days of the old Westerns . . . the aging sheriff with a reputation as a



(Photo by Stephen Smith)

How's this for an action scene! That's Jimmy Leeward trying to shoot down Charlie Hillard in a Piper Arrow. Dynamite charges simulate 50 cal. bursts on the ground. You'll have to wait to see **Cloud Dancer** to learn what this is all about!



(Photo by Stephen Smith)

Wonder if this "near miss" got reported to NASA? Tom Poberezny pops up and over a truck in one of *Cloud Dancer's* wilder scenes. Actually, it's even wilder than you realize. Look closely and you will see a person standing on the right lower wing!

fast gun, fighting to keep his job from a sharp young deputy as he battles both the bad guys and his girl who wants him to turn in his badge and accept the job as foreman at the Bar X. *Cloud Dancer* has its hero strapping on a Pitts instead of a six gun . . . should be great stuff for those of us who grew up (and old) with John Wayne.

The real stars of this show, at least for EAAers, may well be the aerobatic sequences. You will never have seen anything like them. *Cloud Dancer* was made technically possible by the invention by director Barry Brown of a lightweight 12g movie camera. Previously, cameras could keep functioning up to only about 3gs . . . not nearly enough for actual competition maneuvers. Brown who almost coincidentally has an aeronautical engineering degree from MIT . . . since he never used it — went into film making instead . . . built his camera and ordered two special Pitts from the factory for use in *Cloud Dancer*, a S-2A and a S-1S. Each had camera mounts built right into the primary structure as they went down the production line — a tripod mount on the top wing, another on the handhold on the top wing (of the S2), wing mounts, side fuselage mounts, a tail mount and one between the cockpits of the S-2 for **very** close close-ups of the rear seat occupant.

As a result, it was possible for the first time to film from the plane itself a full, world class competition sequence . . . from the pilot's eye level and from a camera staring him in the face as the g forces distort his features. Tom Poberezny flew the aerobatic maneuvers, mostly from the front seat of the S-2 with Carradine actually riding in the rear! Not a pilot before the film was started, Carradine won Tom's admiration for not only fighting off air sickness initially but toughing it out and ultimately becoming a rather proficient pilot himself. In some of the outside maneuvers, Tom dived to as much as 185 mph before pushing out, up and around. The g forces are bad enough on the pilot, but for a passenger it is something right out of the Spanish Inquisition.

And Carradine wasn't the only star to show some fortitude. Actor Bottoms became so enthused with sport aviation that he learned to fly during the filming and in fact soloed **on location** in a Decathlon. He later took up soaring and joined the Phoenix Aerobatic Club. One movie sequence depicted the hero Randolph (Carradine) giving his girl, Helen (O'Neill), her first aerobatic ride. Ms. O'Neill was strapped into the Pitts and Tom took



(Photo Courtesy Cloud Dancer)

Preparing for a "crash" scene. That's Philippe Van Pelt of the EAA Air Museum sitting on the stabilizer of the "Pitts" . . . and that's the only clue you get regarding the plane until the movie is released.

her up and put her through the wringer, as called for in the script. The kicker was that this **really was** Jennifer O'Neill's first aerobatic ride! The expressions on her face you'll see in the movie are the real thing. This sort of realism is what will set *Cloud Dancer* apart from most Hollywood aviation pot boilers with their obviously and often crudely faked aerial scenes. With a couple of notable exceptions, what you will see on the screen is the real, gut wrenching, sight blurring thing.

The crowd scenes were filmed at three different air shows held in the Phoenix area, location for *Cloud Dancer*. The "First Annual Arizona Festival of Flight" (honoring the 75th Anniversary of powered flight) sponsored by the Arizona Jaycees, the Desert Sportsman Pilots Association, U. S. Navy Recruiting Command and Ramada Inns consisted of a show at Falcon Field on April 2, another at Chandler, Arizona on April 5 and the grand finale at Deer Valley Airport on April 8 and 9. *Cloud Dancer* was not only filmed using these shows as a backdrop, the filming actually became a part of them, being included in the pre-show publicity and in the show



(Photo Courtesy Cloud Dancer)
 Tom Poberezny instructs David Carradine before shooting a runway scene. Carradine learned to taxi the Pitts and to do some aerobatic maneuvers during the course of the filming, but did not solo.

programs. Thousands undoubtedly showed up just for the opportunity of glimpsing one of the stars.

Tom Poberezny had the responsibility of arranging for use of local airports, obtaining FAA waivers, etc. He was particularly gratified by the cooperation of Phoenix area EAAers and IAC members when their assistance was needed — usually on very short notice. Further, the Phoenix office of FAA bent over backwards to help keep **Cloud Dancer** on schedule. ATC and FSDO 62 personnel were most understanding of the unique problems and requirements of the movie company.



(Photo Courtesy Cloud Dancer)
 A desert crash scene. The really sharp airplane identifiers among our readers will spot something amiss with this "Pitts". After the movie is released, we will have a follow-up article that will reveal all.



(Photo Courtesy Cloud Dancer)
 With actor David Carradine in the cockpit, Director Barry Brown and Technical Advisor Tom Poberezny, right, ponder camera angles, etc., for a crash scene.

A number of names familiar to EAAers had something to do with the filming of **Cloud Dancer** — Charlie Hillard and Jimmy Leeward along with Tom do all the flying in scenes you will see actors playing when you see the movie, and Gene Soucy, Bill Barber, Leo Loudenlager and Walt Tubb appear as themselves in air show scenes. To avoid giving away the plot, we won't go into detail on Jimmy Leeward's role . . . except to say he is the one flying the P-51 in some scenes you won't forget for a while. You've seen the Mustang in *SPORT AVIATION* and at Oshkosh.



(Photo Courtesy Cloud Dancer)

Cloud Dancers — Joseph Bottoms and Sharon Poberezny, foreground, with David Carradine, Jennifer O'Neill and Tom Poberezny behind the Pitts.

Tom Poberezny's wife, Sharon, was a stand-in for Jennifer O'Neill in a number of scenes, including the aerobatic routines. This was not pre-planned, rather, Sharon's resemblance to Ms. O'Neill was recognized on location by the director, so she was called on to do various scenes.

As previously noted, **Cloud Dancer** was filmed in the Phoenix area. The crew lived on location in the desert much of the time and Tom, Charlie Hillard and Jimmy Leeward had to fly the two Pitts, a Cherokee Arrow and Mustang from a narrow, bumpy stretch of two lane highway. It got rather hairy at times, according to Tom, and, again, the scenes you will see in the movie are the real thing.

Tom Poberezny has been a part of **Cloud Dancer** right from the beginning. He met Barry Brown in England in 1970 during the World Aerobatic Championships. Barry got the idea for the plot there and a few years later came to Milwaukee with a script for Tom to read. (It was called "Flyer" in those days.) Barry did not have financing at that time so a few more years passed as he developed his 12g camera and hustled for financial backing. He kept in touch with Tom all the while and finally in October of 1977 called to say the movie was "go".

The two met shortly afterward in Chicago where Tom read the latest version of the script . . . now dubbed **Cloud Dancer** . . . and plans were made to start filming in late February. Tom would take a leave of absence from his work as Executive Vice President of EAA and would spend much of the spring of 1978 on location in Arizona.

Barry Brown, incidentally, comes by his involvement in the entertainment industry naturally. His father is Hi Brown, director of such legendary radio shows as Inner Sanctum, The Shadow and CBS Mystery Theatre.

Cloud Dancer is being touted as the first movie on contemporary flying since "Strategic Air Command" in 1955. More recent ones have been period pieces set in the 20s and 30s. **Cloud Dancer** will give the general public its first look at sport aviation of the 1970s . . . specifically, modern competition aerobatics. Hopefully, it will serve to create an awareness and appreciation of a new strata of sports heroes — the competition aerobatic pilot.

The film should also make the public aware that a great number of people today use airplanes for sporting and recreational purposes . . . and that will inevitably lead them to EAA's door.