

SHOOT FOR THE SKY

AFTER 35 YEARS FLYING HIGH, AVIATION PHOTOGRAPHER PHIL MAKANNA SHOWS NO SIGNS OF COMING DOWN. WITH TWO NEW CALENDARS AND A BOOK ON THE HORIZON, HE SPEAKS TO JORDAN BUTTERS ABOUT THE GLORY DAYS OF AVIATION AND THE DREAM OF FLIGHT [▶](#)





"I PRACTISE A very limited kind of photography. It's a very small space I work in – not much more than a foot in front of my nose. There's no room for error, very little comfort and a large dose of fear. It requires a lot of skill and planning, as well as a certain amount of luck."

San Francisco-based professional aviation photographer Phil Makanna is a long-standing master of his craft. As a young boy his fascination with model aeroplanes was no different from many of his peers at that time. However, it wasn't until his mother handed him his first camera – a Nikkormat 35mm – in the late 1960s that his long-term love affair with aviation really took flight.

"All of a sudden there I was with a camera in hand and the desire to take pictures of something, anything. These beautiful craft were in front of me so that's what I shot. In the mid-1970s I paid a visit to New York to try to get a contract for a book based on circus photography, which I had been shooting seriously. When everyone saw my aeroplane photographs they liked them more. That's how the first *Ghosts* book came about. There have now been 34 calendars, five books and another one coming shortly. The circus book is still on hold 40 years later!"

Phil's unfaltering dedication to his art is admirable, and *Ghosts* has become his life's work. "Every calendar is my annual exhibition. I'll attend 10-12 shoots per year; the rest of the time is spent in the darkroom curating the collection for the next year's exhibition. I exhibit 24 images per year across the two calendars – *Ghosts: The Great War* concentrates on aviation in World War I and *Ghosts: A Time Remembered* focuses on World War II.

"These classic planes interest me; they come from a time when there was a romantic dream behind flight. These are the planes that I grew up with and the ones that I used to build in miniature scale down in the basement. These are

the planes that I used to dream about flying as a boy – I try to render these dreams in my photographs," says Phil.

Shooting air-to-air brings with it its own technical challenges and complications, but getting up there isn't always as straightforward as you might think. "Every flight is complex and difficult to pull off," explains Phil. "The engines have to start and run – that's the first challenge. These engines are 70 years old, at least. In the cases of some of the early World War I planes they can be up to 100 years old! Fuel is wickedly expensive, too – even the small planes can burn up to a hundred gallons per hour! Then there are the conditions – not only am I looking for the right light to shoot in but it has to be safe to fly."

"When we do get up there, there's a lot of trust between everyone involved. I work with pilots that I know and trust. Everything is based on hand signals and eye contact – no radios are involved, as most of these craft don't have them in the name of authenticity."

Phil's craft of choice depends on the aeroplane that he's photographing, as he explains, "World War I craft usually fly at around 70-80mph, so I'll use a small, high-wing Cessna. We take the passenger door off and I'll be harnessed in and hang out to get the shot. World War II airplanes on the other hand will fly at around 200mph, but a WWII fighter will be more comfortable at around 250mph – that's faster than a Cessna can go, so I usually shoot WWII craft from a North American AT-6 or a B25. I sit in the back and shoot with the glass canopy removed. It gets windy, noisy and cold up there and the slipstream is constantly trying to rip the camera out of my hands but I always get rid of the glass – it's got to be clear between camera and subject."

Perusing the *Ghosts* calendars you quickly notice that, alongside the technical ability to be able to capture these



Above: Both 2014 *Ghosts* calendars are currently available to buy.

- 1) The Sopwith Camel, a British WWI single-seat fighter plane photographed over New Zealand.
- 2) A WWI Pfalz D.III is chased down by a Royal Aircraft Factory SE5a.
- 3) North American P-51C-10 Mustang bears down over Southern California.
- 4) Three stunning German Fokker Dr.I Dreideckers fly in formation.

“I’LL USE A HIGH-WING CESSNA. WE TAKE THE PASSENGER DOOR OFF AND I’LL BE HARNESSSED IN AND HANG OUT TO GET THE SHOT”

stunning craft in flight, Makanna has a great eye for detail and background elements that really bring his images to life. "Not only is the craft itself important but also the structure of the image is vital. Land is very important in my photographs, too – I photograph the land as much as I do the aeroplane. England is always very identifiable from the air, with lots of little wiggling lines that define the fields and roads. Texas on the other hand has very few identifiable features, so I tend to shoot over the water when I'm there. New Zealand is almost always beautiful, with its glorious hillside vistas and amazing skies. There's the human element, too – these machines are nothing without the pilots that command them. When we're up there and in position we are looking right at each other. It's a very tight focus between the two of us, an intimate moment."

Despite having used film for the majority of his career, making the relatively recent jump to digital has helped Phil hone his craft. "Back in 2007 I thought that nothing could exceed the quality of shooting on Fuji Velvia slide film. Somehow I was proven wrong. I now use a pair of Nikon D4s – one with a 24-120mm f/4 and the other with a 70-300mm f/4.5-5.6. The focusing and metering systems and the quality of the digital files nowadays is so beyond what we had in film. I can't really imagine any reason to shoot film professionally now."

As we speak, Phil is finishing off his sixth *Ghosts* book, "It's about the restoration of a Blériot, built in 1909. It was built by two boys in Denver, flew for the first and last time in 1911 and sat in various barns around the world since. It's just been restored and flew for the first time in 101 years!



5) A Submarine Spitfire Mk Ia, as flown by the British Air Force during World War II. This was photographed in the skies over Duxford, England.

6) A Vought F4U-5N Corsair fighter aircraft in US Navy colours flies over the coast of Houston, Texas, United States.

It's an incredible story – we're almost finished so it should be available in the next few months."

Naturally, over the years, Phil has collected quite a few stories to tell, and his casual recollections of close calls are enough to bring anyone with a fear of flying out in a cold sweat, myself included. "The sky is actually very small when the planes start to come together. The last thing you want is any bumping. I've had three good crashes in my career – I've gotten away from every one. No one was seriously injured so they're classed as good crashes. I'm not in control up there; I'm in the hands of the pilots and fate. Fate is the key word. Fate has been stronger than any of the plans that I've made."

To purchase the 2014 *Ghosts* calendars, or to view more of Phil's work, visit: www.ghosts.com