

Makanna's Messages

- By Steven L. Thompson

April 14, 2011



For World War I or II warbird enthusiasts, the annual release of Philip Makanna's "GHOSTS" large-format calendars is itself a redletter day because his stunning air-to-air photography is breathtaking in its art.

This year, Phil will receive the International Society for Aviation Photography Lifetime Achievement Award, and his 2011 "Ghosts of the Great War" has won the International Calendar Competition's "Calendar of the Year" and "Best of Show" awards.

Phil holds an MFA from U.C. Berkeley and a B.A. from Brown University, has survived three crash landings in his career shooting awe-inspiring photos-as-art from B-25s, T-6s and other aircraft, and is a friend I've known since 1967. But I didn't meet him on an airfield; I met him at Vaca Valley Raceway, as it was then known, when he was racing a Norton 750 for the AFM class championship and I was a novice racing a Yamaha 350cc YR-1. By then, Phil had been racing successfully for four years in the AFM and would go on to do so until a crash at Orange County Raceway on the 750 ended his roadracing adventure.



Thing is, I didn't know I'd met the man who would one day become "the Ghost" at Vacaville until I stumbled across his display of racing motorcycles as artworks in the Berkeley student union. Makanna the artist had discerned in the kinesthetics and the machinery of Makanna the motorcycle roadracer what other artists and art historians would much, much later discover: that motorcycles are not "like" art or "can be" art objects and deliverers of art experiences but most emphatically always are and have been aesthetic in every sense. Art, in short.

Phil is now 70, but he still rides in San Francisco, his adoptive home since he moved West in 1962 aboard a BSA, as well as on his idyllic ranch far up the coast range hills in Northern California. There, a visitor will find, in addition to the usual ranchers' cows and horses, a stable-full of dirtbikes, from newbie-friendly Honda XR100s to formidable enduros as capable of daylong cross-country rides as the still-fit Makanna himself is.

I've known a lot of motorcycle racers, and Phil is like the best of them—the winners—in several ways. First, he's not one to boast; he lets his performance do the talking for him. Second, he has brought to his aviation photography and art the same intense focus on success that he brought to the racetrack.



I wrote a column for *Cycle World* 20 years ago about Phil's legacy in the motorcycles-as-art context called "Makanna's Message" (*At Large*, September, 1991). But Makanna the successful roadracer has yet another message for us, which will be familiar to many people who know other Fast Guys who have shown the hard way they have what's required to win on the track, time and again. That message comes into focus when you learn that Phil had to teach himself all about cameras and photography to begin the process of becoming a member of the tiny fraternity of world-class air-to-air warbird photographers—just as he had to teach himself how to roadrace.

The message is as old as humanity, and it's this: In racing, as in art, or life itself, the tools are of course important, be they motorcycles, cameras, computers or anything else. But it's what you do with them that makes all the difference.