



Ghosts

NOT MANY LIVING PEOPLE CAN SAY THEY'VE PHOTOGRAPHED BOTH WORLD WAR I AND WORLD WAR II AIRCRAFT IN FLIGHT, BUT AVIATION PHOTOGRAPHER PHILIP MAKANNA IS ONE SUCH FLYING LEGEND. CAROLINE SCHMIDT SPEAKS TO HIM ABOUT HIS LONG CAREER AND HIS LATEST, MOST REFLECTIVE, GHOSTS BOOK THAT ENDS THE SIX-STRONG 40-YEAR SERIES ON A HIGH

Interview: CAROLINE SCHMIDT

THE PHOTOGRAPHER...



Philip Makanna's fascination with aviation began as a young boy growing up on Long Island, USA, miles from the Grumman factory. After moving to California to pursue a career in the fine arts and filmmaking, Makanna found himself reliving childhood dreams as he was sent to cover the Reno Air Races in 1974. It was his photographs of the classic WWII aircraft flying overhead that landed his first book deal. His series of books and calendars have had him searching for aircraft worldwide and documenting great aircraft collections in the US, the UK, New Zealand and Australia. www.ghosts.com

WHEN YOU REACH the end of a journey, you often reflect back on its beginning, and for Phil Makanna that's the little boy who hung die-cast propellers on straight pins, held his makeshift fighter plane overhead and ducked it through imaginary clouds. He, along with many boys of his generation, dreamt of being World War II test pilots and, for the past 40 years, he's devoted himself to flying high with some of the best pilots in the business. His last book is more than just a collection of his best air-to-air photographs taken of iconic aircraft that have appeared in GHOSTS over the past four decades. *GHOSTS - Aerial Photography* strings a lifetime of images together. Phil's awe-inspiring colour photographs are this time enhanced further by carefully-researched historical context. Throughout the limited-edition, 192-page book are original black & white photographs of the same iconic aircraft being used during the World Wars. The book itself is a poetic piece of history that any aviation enthusiast, historian or photographer will appreciate - populated with quotes from Cecil Lewis, V.M Yeates and Dwight Eisenhower, to name a few. It's an amazing then-and-now collection that captures perhaps the most important 30 years of aviation history in a visually-rich and romantic story of dreams, drama and tragedy.

Despite being now 80 years' old, San Francisco-based Phil's last flight was a mere two years ago at IWM Duxford air show in Cambridge, a venue he's flown at annually for the last 28 years. "There has been an awful lot of lovely England in my past, particularly at Duxford, including many close calls and a 'happy' crash. I say 'happy' because everyone walked away unharmed; I've lost a lot of dear friends in aviation crashes over the years. Aeroplanes are nasty; these are built to kill and that's why I see this book a tragedy that's about dreams and death. Aviation brings a lot of death with it. The book begins in 1914 with the start of the First World War and words from British fighter ace Cecil Lewis as a young boy who lied about his age to fly. It



ends with a poem about the war in the air and not coming home - very few made it home," explains Phil. "The book and the GHOSTS series as a whole are my photographic legacy. I have managed to photograph history and the dream of flying and that's important. We're in a dark age for historic aviation; appreciation for it is dying as the World Wars move farther away and now with the pandemic, I'm not convinced air shows will start up again. Back at the beginning, these planes were flown by 17-year-old kids; now, they're flown by old men and women." ▶

Previous page) This Hawker Hurricane Mk I R4118 flew in the Battle of Britain. 1) My sneakers over a B-26. 2) North American TF-51D Mustang. 3) The Supermarine Spitfire Mk. Ia was exhumed in 2011 and restored after it was forced to land on a beach in 1940. 4) A Lockheed P-38F 'Lightning'. 5) A Curtiss P-40E Kittyhawk over New Zealand.



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GHOSTS is the product of Phil’s life’s work and unflinching dedication to classic planes and capturing the original, romantic dream behind flight. “These are the planes that I grew up with, the ones that I used to build in miniature scale in my basement and dreamt about flying as a boy. Born in 1940, I grew up on World War II planes and about 25 years ago I stumbled upon World War One aviation thanks to two collectors in New Zealand and California who I worked with.

“Photographing World War II planes is hard as they’re expensive to run, difficult to get into the air and fast once they are. They fly at speeds of 150 to 250mph and the air is not at all friendly: it’s cold, bumpy and nasty. World War One aeroplanes are friendlier, flying at around 85–90mph. I’m usually sitting in a high-wing Cessna with the passenger door off and a rope around my middle, legs dangling out of the aeroplane. We go around at a leisurely 80mph and it is lovely,” describes Phil. “But for World War II fighter planes, the Cessna can’t keep up so I have to shoot from the back of a North American AT-6 or B-25 and shoot through where its glass canopy should be – it’s windy, noisy and the slipstream is constantly trying to rip the camera from my hands.” Up until two years ago, Phil was doing ten to 12 shoots a year and spent the rest of his time curating images for his two annual GHOSTS calendars, which have become somewhat of a tradition and helped establish Phil as a master in his craft.

Shooting air-to-air comes with technical challenges, complications and an uncompromising stomach for heights. Some



1) A formation of Polikarpov I-16 (Little Donkey) in Wanaka, New Zealand. 2) A Sopwith Camel. 3) A Royal Aircraft Factory FE.2b and Platz D.III in New Zealand. 4) Boeing B-17G Flying Fortress over Madingley, near Cambridge, UK. 5) A Vought F4U-5N Corsair near Galveston, Texas.

of the planes Phil photographs are more than 100 years old and getting the engines to start is the first challenge, and even small planes can burn up to 100 gallons an hour. When asked about his approach for a successful shoot, Phil declares: “Prayer – lots of prayer, luck and good pilots. You can’t control the events in the sky. The quality of the air can be super smooth or wicked bouncy. We fly in circles, ideally with the subject plane on the inside so I can shoot down on it to include the landscape, too

– it’s glorious and lasts for all of three minutes before we wave goodbyes and separate. It’s a very strange and wonderful type of photography that I cannot control – you get what you get. You have a visual idea of what you want to capture and try to make something happen – sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t – most of the time it doesn’t. I wear white gloves and direct the pilots in the subject plane to go up, go down, ▶





to come closer or to not dare move. There's a lot of trust between everyone involved as everything is based on hand signals and eye contact. There are no radios as most of these craft don't have them in the name of authenticity," he adds.

With so many uncontrollable factors involved in an air-to-air shoot, Phil tries to give his composition structure by shooting down on the aircraft and using the landscape as a background. He says he particularly adores England for its recognisable wiggling lines that define its fields and roads from overhead. "New Zealand is always beautiful, too, with its hillside vistas and amazing skies; when there aren't many defining features in the landscape though, like across Texas, I prefer to shoot over the ocean. I try to always include the pilot as the machines would be nothing without their human counterparts," says Phil. A favourite image from his career, and in the book, is the early World War One FE 2b: "The gunner sat in a bath tub hanging on for dear life - they were big, slow and easy to shoot down. They're

known as Fokker Fodder due to the German Fokker Eindecker fighters having a significant tactical advantage over these poorly armed British planes," he says.

When it comes to equipment, Phil flies light with two bodies and two lenses. He has always been a Nikon user ever since his 20s when his mother gave him a Nikkormat 35mm SLR. "I went through all the Nikon Fs this and Fs that, then Mr Nikon came along in 2007 and said I was a fool for still using Kodachrome film. He handed me a Nikon D2, then two D3s and finally a D4s. I also have a 70-300mm f/4.5-5.6 and a 24-120mm f/4, both fast and compact enough to fit inside a cramped aeroplane."

Phil hasn't always been an aviation photographer - it was his other commercial work and a personal photographic project on the circus that led to the publishing and branded creation of GHOSTS. Having gone to a New York - publisher to pitch his circus images, they preferred some of his, at the time, incidental aviation images and GHOSTS volume one was founded.

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Over the course of his career, Phil has published more than 41 calendars and seven limited-edition books since the mid-1970s. But it's this last beautifully-crafted coffee-table book that is perhaps the most special of the series. The accompanying black & white images, featuring alongside Phil's colour photographs, has equally taken him 40-45 years to collect from archives around the world as he feels it's important for future generations to refer back to. GHOSTS - Aerial Photography has many



1) JA Royal Aircraft Factory BE.2C in New Zealand. 2) Two Sopwith Pups near Masterton, New Zealand. 3) JA Sopwith Camel, Clerget rotary engine, 130hp. 4) The Fokker D.VIII. 5) Royal Aircraft Factory BE.12 in New Zealand.



merits for being a collectable at any point in time but in the year of the 75th Anniversary of VE Day it's particularly poignant. The book is limited to just 1,000 copies and expected to sell faster than a Spitfire but it won't be the last we see of Phil's magnificent images - he's already curating two calendars for 2022. To order a copy of the book, or a 2021 calendar, visit: www.ghosts.com