

Aspen filmmaker taking to the sky in 'Flying Boat'

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Local filmmaker Dirk Braun is making a documentary about Grumman Albatross "flying boats" and the people who preserve and pilot them today.

Courtesy photo |

An Aspen filmmaker is taking to air, sea and land for a new documentary on a little-known piece of aviation history.

Dirk Braun, best known locally for his commercial film work with his Red Mountain Productions, is digging into the history of the Grumman Albatross flying boats and the curious cast of characters who fly and preserve them today.

"I regard them as the ultimate adventure machine," Braun, 30, said on a recent afternoon in the cafe at the Aspen Art Museum. "They're amphibious machines and some of the most diversely capable machines ever created."

Now in production, "Flying Boat" will be Braun's feature debut. It will profile the pilots, history buffs and surfers who use them today while also exploring the aircraft's history. The Albatross went out of production in 1961, but its heyday was the 1930s, when its popularity coincided with the elegance and adventure of early aviation.

"These are relics from the golden age of aviation," said Braun, who moved to Aspen five years ago after studying film at the University of Colorado in Boulder. "They're like flying yachts."

Originally designed for search-and-rescue missions, the flying boats can take off and land on water and on the ground. In total, 466 of the planes were constructed. There are about a dozen still flying around the world.

The best-known flying boat in history isn't an Albatross — it's Howard Hughes' "Spruce Goose," which flew just once for about 30 seconds in 1947. The Albatrosses, by contrast, Braun noted, have circumnavigated the globe and landed in nearly every region on Earth.

Jimmy Buffett wrote about his Grumman Albatross — a 1955 model nicknamed "Hemisphere Dancer" — in his memoir "A Pirate Looks at 50" and the song "Jamaica Mistake," which recounts him being shot down by Jamaican police.

Charles Lindbergh flew one of the planes on a South American tour in 1929, two years after his trans-Atlantic flight made him one of the most famous men in the world. Lindbergh climbed out of the hatch and onto the plane's bow at one point to shoot aerial photos on a flight to Venezuela, according to an account in the book "The China Clipper: The Age of the Great Flying Boats." Braun and his team plan to do the same during an upcoming flight around Manhattan, in homage to Lindbergh.

Among Braun's film subjects is Tom Casey, a New York-based novelist and pilot who restored an Albatross from an "aviation graveyard" in Arizona. On Aug. 1, Braun will join Casey — also a co-producer on the film — for the flight along the Hudson River Valley and around the New York City skyline.

The art deco marine air terminal at LaGuardia Airport is among the New York locales that have survived since the Albatross' early days. Braun plans to film there and to re-enact scenes from the Albatross' pre-World War II exploits in the film. Braun also plans to film with pilots and collectors around Connecticut, the lakes of northern Minnesota and central Texas, the beaches of Florida and in Bermuda, where Pan Am once flew regular Albatross flights. Billabong has used the planes for surf expeditions, taking advantage of the plane's ability to anchor at sea and allow surfers to paddle into waves from the flying boat.

"Just a handful of people still fly them," Braun said. "They're all interesting, and they all have a different story of what brought them to flying boats."

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