

# Aspen filmmaker to screen 'Flying Boat' at Filmfest

Dirk Braun spent more than five years on aviation documentary

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Aspen filmmaker Dirk Braun shooting "Flying Boat." (Courtesy Dirk Braun)

One pilot in the film calls it "a ship of dreams," another a "dream machine." There is nothing in aviation like the Grunman Albatross, an antique plane that moves between air, land and sea, according to the romantic pilots profiled in the new documentary "Flying Boat" by Aspen filmmaker Dirk Braun.

The film will screen Thursday at Aspen Filmfest.

Braun, best known locally for his commercial film work with his Red Mountain Productions, spent more than five years on “Flying Boat,” researching the aircraft’s history and finding people who fly and preserve them today. A passion project from the start, the scope of “Flying Boat” widened and grew more interesting to Braun the more he learned.

“The subject just kept getting more rich with more to discover,” Braun said in a phone interview from California. “It’s a tight-knit group of people that still operate and maintain the Albatross. I was following them and their stories, and I was on a quest.”



The Grunman Albatross in flight in the new documentary “Flying Boat.” Filmmaker Dirk Braun used helicopters to capture the plane in the air. (Courtesy Dirk Braun)

The film follows planes from scrapyards into the sky and profiles passionate owners like the novelist Tom Casey and a diverse lot who’ve been drawn to the aircraft.

“The Albatross owners are an eclectic group,” pilot Joe Duke says in the film. “Very different, all slightly crazy. The one thing we all have in common is that same romantic notion, that sense of adventure, flying these old boats around the world to remote locations. I really admire that.”

The Albatross pilots tend to be philosophical, as evidenced in the film, speaking fluently to the spiritual, intellectual and physical freedom they’ve found flying the planes. Its utilitarian uses also have a dark side: The film recounts its notorious use as a drug smuggling vehicle and, in one memorable segment, the notorious cartel kingpin El Chapo makes an appearance in “Flying Boat.”



Aspen filmmaker Dirk Braun's "Flying Boat" will screen Thursday at Aspen Filmfest. (Courtesy Dirk Braun)

Originally designed for search-and-rescue missions, the flying boats can take off and land on water and on the ground. Last used commercially in the 1950s by PanAm, going out of production in 1961, they are a throwback to the golden age of aviation and a ticket to some of the most remote and rarely seen places in the world. Filming over the course of more than five years, Braun followed pilots to icy oceans and into the tropics, flying the Hudson River and circling the Manhattan skyline, venturing to the Bahamas and a heavenly stretch of alpine waterways in the Adirondacks — even going wake-surfing on the back of the plane at one point.

“As a filmmaker, I wanted to go to all of the exotic locations that one couldn’t get to any other way,” Braun said. “That was the mission.”



The "Flying Boat" production crew at work. (Courtesy Dirk Braun)

Visually, there are spectacular sections of "Flying Boat" where Braun harnesses his passion for the plane and the skills he's honed making commercials. Filming from a helicopter, he follows the Albatross and creates some astounding and slick portraits of the machine in flight and on water.

The film had its premiere this summer at the 68th AirVenture Fly-in, a Wisconsin aviation festival, screening outdoors to a crowd of thousands.

"It feels great to get to see it on the big screen," Braun said. "It's wonderfully satisfying at this point."

His hometown premiere is particularly meaningful.

"I credit Aspen so much," he said. "This is where I honed my skills and my filmmaking, and I am so appreciative of how supportive this community has been."

Braun is hoping to get the film into more film festivals and into theaters in the months to come.

"I don't want to go straight to streaming," he said.

For the hometown screening, Braun will take part in a meet-and-greet reception before the show and he will display and sell a series of his "Flying Boat" photographs, with proceeds going to Aspen Film's Ellen Fund for film education.

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