The rancher from Nevada

By Tim Weinschenker

Bill Stead may have been best known to the general public as the owner and operator of a large ranch in the Reno/Sparks area of Nevada, but to air racing enthusiasts and historians he was better known as the organizer and founder of the rebirth of big time air racing in the skies of Nevada during September 1964.

Bill Stead didn’t resurrect the National Air Races all on his own but others who helped say that the races wouldn’t have happened without his vision and strength of leadership. His tragic death at the 1966 St. Petersburg Air Races left a void in the leadership of the sport, which was never successfully filled. That the Reno Air Races still continue is a testament to the strength of his original vision and the organization that he created in 1964. Without Bill Stead there would have been no Petersburg Air Races left a void in the leadership of the sport, which was never successfully filled.

What follows is the story of the “Rancher from Nevada” who created, from the fading memories of the Cleveland and Fort Wayne races, the fall classic in Reno that has become the National Championship Air Races.

The Early Years

William McIllravy Stead was born on 18 May 1920, in Cook County, Illinois, and christened William M. Kiley. Over the years, Bill’s mother moved with her children from Illinois to New York and then, in 1929, to Nevada. Shortly after this move she married James E. Stead, and it was sometime after this that Bill chose to use the last name of stepfather and become William Stead. It was in 1929 that Bill’s grandfather, mother, and stepfather purchased nearly 2000 acres of land northeast of Reno to form the Nevada Hereford Ranch. It was on this ranch where Bill and his brother Croston were raised.

The business of using airplanes for crop dusting was in its infancy in the 1930s, and the Stead Ranch was on the cutting edge of this technology. The lure and excitement of aviation soon became a part of Bill’s life and by the time Bill was 16-years-old he was already an accomplished pilot who had flown an airplane solo.

In addition to this practical education in aviation, Bill did receive formal education. At first it was by private lessons, as his family had no practical way of getting him to a school. Then, in 1935, he was formally enrolled at the high school in Sparks, Nevada. Bill soon displayed his athletic and leadership skills as he played football, became a member of the ski club, and was elected vice-president of the senior class.

Bill graduated from high school in 1939, and that fall he was enrolled at Pomona College in southern California.

It was obvious to Bill that a world war was imminent and because of this he was quickly bouncing from college to college trying to cram as much learning into as short a period of time as possible. Transferring from Pomona College to the University of Nevada in 1942, and then back to Nevada— all in preparation for his first great adventure as an adult.

Bill’s first try at an adult venture was to volunteer his services to the fledgling Chinese Air Force to help them fight the aggressive Japanese invaders. He applied for and was accepted into the Chinese Air Force and was soon on his way to San Francisco to catch the proverbial “slow boat to China.” Upon his arrival in San Francisco, he found that his boat had already sailed.

Many of his friends would later comment that he would spend the next 20-years of his life trying to catch that boat! Frustrated by his failure to make it to China to fight with the Chinese, his next application was to the Royal Canadian Air Force to join the Royal Air Force to fight with the Royal Canadian Air Force in battle with the Japanese in Southeast Asia — another frustrated dream!

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In 1952, the war in Indochina between the French and the Vietnamesans was in progress. Bill learned of a group of boating-buffed P-51D Mustangs coming up for sale and soon was hatching a plan to create his own “American Volunteer Group” to come to the aid of the French. Such things take time to organize, but Bill acquired an option to purchase the Mustangs and was soon working on approval from the US government for such a group. Using all of his considerable powers of persuasion, including telling the former Air Force types that Saigon women were the most beautiful in the world, Bill finally obtained permission.

U. unfortunately for Bill, the French were defeated before he could get to Southeast Asia — another frustrated dream!

However, having access to all those airplanes helped Bill choose his next adventure. He became a Hollywood movie producer! Bill hoped to follow in the footsteps of Howard Hughes and produce a modern version of Houdini’s Angels just how far he got with this venture is not really known. It was said that he did go to Hollywood to discuss this idea with the movie people but nothing ever came of this project. In 1954, the State of Nevada did take Bill’s aviation skills seriously. Because of his familiarity with the unique conditions of flying in Nevada he was offered, and accepted, the position of air advisor to the Atomic Energy Commission for scheduled atomic weapon testing at Frenchman’s Flat. Bill created the air operation plan that flew the mission into the radioactive blast area to take measurements when the scheduled pilot was unable to make the flight.

None of this satisfied Bill’s drive for adventure, but soon he found something that would. In the post-WWII

This formal portrait of Bill Stead revealed little of his passion for high-speed adventuring. (Alpha Archive)