

# THE PILOT MAKER



## Kevin Russo's SNJ Aerobatics

*Report and photography by Scott Snorteland*

With hundreds of airshow performers taking to the skies each season, it's somewhat surprising that only a handful fly the well-known World War II trainer known as the SNJ/T-6 Texan. Though most of us never get tired of seeing high performance loops, rolls, and tail-slides in Extras, Pitts and other extreme aerobatic aircraft, there is something even more special when seeing some of these same maneuvers flown in a two-and-a-half ton 1940s-vintage trainer. Though not as sleek or hair raising as the MX-2, most aviation enthusiasts can appreciate what the Texan represents.

Kevin Russo is one of those performers flying aerobatics in the venerable Texan. When you see Kevin's demo, and if you understand a little about the Texan's engineering and what it was originally designed to do, you will appreciate the performance even more.

### **Beginnings**

Born in Montreal, Canada, Kevin Russo dreamed of being a pilot as early as age two. "I was always playing with toy planes when I was young," recalls Kevin. "My mom and dad told me stories about how I used to run around the house with my arms stretched out like wings making airplane noises. Its funny but, I can't tell you what I had for

dinner last Saturday, but I can describe in detail my first flight on a DC-9 at three years old during a trip to visit my grandparents."

The experience of that day was etched in Kevin's mind forever and prompted him to begin flying at an early age. Soloing at age 16, Kevin received his pilot license on his 17th birthday. He continued to press on and obtained his commercial, instrument, multi-engine, and instructor ratings all by the age of 19. Kevin joined the United States Air Force Reserves in 1984, where he would fly the C-141B and C-17 over the next 24 years. He served as both an instructor and evaluator pilot, as well as Squadron Safety officer and Chief Pilot for the 732nd Airlift Squadron at McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey. During his service, Kevin flew several hundred missions in Desert Storm, Desert Shield, and Operation Iraqi Freedom, and reached the rank of Lieutenant Colonel before his retirement in 2008. Throughout his journey, Kevin has logged over 19,000 hours flying military, airline, and corporate aircraft. He currently holds commercial, glider, helicopter, and ATP ratings

While with the USAFR in 1988, Kevin began to fly the C-141 to airshows for static display. "I grew up an airshow lover and was happy to do any show I had a chance to as part of my service in the Reserves," states Kevin. "I met some great people during this time and it gave me the opportunity to interact with spectators in



footsteps and he began to look to purchase a Texan himself. "Once I bought my SNJ-6 in 1994, Bill, Dan Dameo, and Dan Calderal really took me under their wing," states Kevin. "They taught me how to operate the Texan safely while flying it to its maximum performance. In 1997, I took my first check ride and later that same year, I flew my first airshow at the Solber Air and Balloon festival in New Jersey. Though I was restricted to 800 feet, looking back, it didn't matter. The show was a success and I had a blast doing it."

### The Plane

Designed in the late 1930s by North American Aviation to be the primary trainer for the United States Navy and Army Air Corp, almost eighty years later, the Texan continues to fly today. Termed the SNJ with the Navy, T-6 with the Army Air Corp, and Harvard with Canadian Forces, it is also universally known to most as the



*Above left: Kevin Russo in his authentically-painted SNJ-6. Right: Kevin over the top in 2008 at Binghamton, New York. Below: Kevin pulls up at the 2009 Reading, Pennsylvania show.*

somewhat of a teaching role. In the end though, I ended up being taught a lot as well."

It was only a matter of time before he became more involved in the airshow business. Later that year Kevin met some of his future mentors within the airshow circuit, particularly Bill Dodds and Dan Dameo. "I met both Bill and Dan in the late 1980s when they were both flying the T-6/SNJ with the Six of Diamonds Team," recalls Kevin. "They were both really good guys who taught me a lot about the SNJ, in addition to what was expected of the pilots who flew them." Kevin also met the rest of the team including Ed Shipley and Jim Beasley and soon knew he wanted to join the ranks of being an airshow performer.

The Six of Diamonds influence persuaded Kevin to follow in their

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"Texan." Its role as a trainer yielded it yet another less commonly known name – "The Pilot Maker," prepping young pilots for air-to-air combat during World War II.

Kevin's SNJ-6 was built in 1944 and delivered to Pensacola Naval Air Station in August of 1945. Powered by a six hundred horsepower Pratt & Whitney 1340 engine, the aircraft weighs in at about 5,300 lbs when fully fueled. Kevin restored his SNJ back to its original blue, white, and yellow Pensacola colors he flies now. With only 3,000 hours on the airframe, it's thought to be the lowest time Texan around today.

At two-and-a-half tons of raw 1940s metal, the Texan has its pros and cons in flying aerobatics on the circuit today. Kevin focuses on the pros. "I picked the Texan because I felt as a World War II trainer, it was a great aircraft to see in the air," states Kevin. "I wanted to fly a demo with both a meaning and story behind it. Due to the significant history of the SNJ, I felt it was a perfect match in al-



Kevin and Buzz Cortese fly their SNJs alongside the author who was in Bob Mazure's photo ship.

lowing spectators of today to witness the exact same maneuvers that were taught to the student pilots back in the 1940s and 1950s."

Another advantage of the SNJ is its appearance and presentation. Though noticeably larger and more cumbersome than today's aerobatic aircraft, its size and noise allow for better visibility during the performance without Kevin having to get right down on the deck. "I can stay around 200 feet at points in my demo and still allow everyone in the crowd to see what I'm doing," says Kevin.

A third factor embraced by Kevin is the SNJ's uniqueness in flying aerobatics on the circuit. "Most of today's aerobatic performers fly super high performance aircraft specifically designed to fly the intense maneuvers you see them do," remarks Kevin. "After seeing two or three of these astounding performances, I get to fly the big old two-and-a-half ton plane in a totally different show." To some of the crowd it's just a change of pace, but to those in the know, it's like apples and oranges.

Today's aerobatic aircraft are highly tuned pieces of aeronautical engineering, weighing as little as 1,200 lbs with over 300 horsepower. When you compare that with the Texan at 5,300 lbs and 600 horsepower, it really is another way of flying. "Performing aerobatics in the Texan requires it be operated at the edge of its envelope with very little room for error," states Kevin. "The aircraft forces you to manage your show precisely, making sure your routine is right on at all times. Its engineering does not allow me to power up to correct like an Extra 300, and as a result, I may not have enough airspeed to perform the next maneuver."

"One thing that every pilot – past or present – must remember when flying is that power, or energy, is life," says Kevin. "Texan pilots training during World War II needed to learn how to manage the

power of the plane so they would not find themselves in a position in which they might not be able to recover. Power or energy management is simply that. You have to understand the maneuvers you're planning to do, see where the aircraft will run out of speed, and have a way to regain that speed without sacrificing flight characteristics. The Texan taught the pilots to respect power management and in doing so, helped them become some of the greatest fighter pilots in the history of the world."

### **Moving Forward**

Though the flight characteristics of the SNJ have not changed over the past 70 years, the airshow industry has. In his twelfth year of flying airshows, this year Kevin flew about half the shows he normally does. "I lost two shows this year due to budget cuts," remarks Kevin. "The shows were both canceled due to a lack of funding. I love to do what I am doing, so I am hoping that promoters will continue to open the doors for more performers like me that don't have sponsorship."

Kevin can be seen on the circuit with his eight year old crew chief and daughter, Spencer. Flying in the back to shows, Spencer takes on the role of crew chief by assisting with smoke oil as well as cleaning and refueling the plane. "My job is great in that it allows me to spend quality time with my daughter in doing something we both love," remarks Kevin. "In addition to her responsibilities as crew chief, she always hands me my helmet and gives me a kiss before I fly." How many crew chiefs do that?

*For more information on Kevin, booking, and where you can see his performance, please visit his website at [www.kevinrussoairshows.com](http://www.kevinrussoairshows.com).*