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The Aerial Photography of Paul Bowen

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How digital changed the flight plan of the world's best air-to-air photographer. **By Russell Hart**

Back when the Beach Boys were at their peak, Paul Bowen was studying zoology at UC Santa Barbara. When he wasn't in class he was surfing. But for Bowen, the perfect wave turned out to be photography, and he has ridden it into the digital age. "A buddy of mine had an SLR with a telephoto lens that he used to take pictures of the rest of us surfing," Bowen recalls. "One day I said, 'Show me how to operate this thing,' and I ended up taking some pretty decent pictures." Bowen kept shooting, using his father's old twin-lens reflex, and he learned his darkroom skills during a stint with the Air National Guard. Bowen wasn't spending much time in the water by then, yet he never once got into the air.

A few years later, by sheer coincidence, Bowen found himself in Wichita, Kansas, which bills itself as the Air Capital of the World. Indeed, more airplanes were being made in Wichita at that time than anywhere else on earth. Bowen had come there to direct a church-sponsored halfway house, but one thing led to another and he got a job assisting a local photographer who had a number of big commercial accounts, including Cessna, known for its single-engine prop planes. After half a year of assisting, Bowen had enough of his own photography to put together a portfolio and make a pitch to Beechcraft, Cessna's local rival. Beechcraft offered him what's known in the business as an air-to-air assignment. Alas, poor Bowen had *still* not been up in the air. "As an assistant, I only photographed planes on the ground," he says. "So when they flew me up to do the shooting, I promptly got airsick."

Fortunately, it was the first and last time that happened. Still, as Bowen often points out to aspiring aviation photographers, midair shooting is not an unqualified blast. "It's a hostile environment," he says. "It can be extremely disorienting looking through the lens and doing circles and so forth while trying to shoot another airplane."

Adding to the stress are the myriad decisions Bowen must make while airborne. Though he doesn't pilot the plane he shoots from—he got too busy with photography to continue his flying lessons—he *is* dictating, more or less, where the plane goes and what it does. "I'm choreographing our movements while we're up there," says the photographer, who prefers to shoot from the open tail of a B-25 bomber, relaying instructions to the pilot by radio. "I can



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Paul Bowen



Here: Bowen shot Gary Kohs's WWII Corsair over Lake Erie with his Canon EOS-1Ds digital SLR. Below: Bowen's shot of the Lima Lima T-34 flight team.

Bowen feels that his **Canon EOS-1Ds** and **EOS-1Ds Mark II** deliver image quality better than the finest-grained 35mm film.



anticipate what's going to happen. I know when we're going into a turn or will be descending, or doing a maneuver that might be disorienting."

An older photographer once said to me that commercial photography is a young man's game," Bowen recalls. The older man hadn't been referring to the physical demands of aviation photography, but to the intense competitiveness of the business. "I didn't understand what he meant at first," says Bowen, who now does more work for corporate and general aviation companies than virtually any other photographer in the world. "Basically it's that the people who hire photographers—art directors, creative directors, art buyers—are young, closer to 30 than 50. So as I've gotten older, I've wanted to make sure they don't consider behind the times."

One way Bowen has accomplished that is by keeping up with technology. "When-

ever Apple comes out with a new computer or Photoshop gets an upgrade, we get it right away so we can tell our art directors we're working with the hottest stuff," says Bowen. (Bowen's staff consists of assistant second photographer Tom Jenkins and studio manager Deana Torgerson, and sometimes an intern.) The same thinking applies to Bowen's cameras. In recent years he has always shot with the newest top-of-the-line Canon EOS SLR, and justifiably so given the speed (often 200 mph) and rigors of air-to-air shooting.

Almost five years ago Bowen began working with the EOS D30, Canon's first interchangeable-lens digital SLR. He says it was a novelty at first—only three megapixels and not a full-fledged pro model—and he continued to shoot film. About six months after he got the D30 Bowen was on assignment for Lear Jet in South Africa. He packed his tried-and-true Fujichrome Velvia and took off in late afternoon to do some air-to-air photography over Capetown. "I brought the D30 along and used it to back up everything I shot on

film," he says. "It was a gorgeous sunset, and I got some great stuff. We were planning to meet the client and art director for dinner, and I had time after we landed to download the D30 shots to my laptop and put together a PowerPoint presentation. I showed them the pictures while we were drinking wine, waiting for dinner. They loved it."

For Bowen—whose other big clients include Gulfstream and Canada's Bombardier, in addition to Flying magazine, where he does a limited amount of editorial work—the charm was more than fast feedback. The insurance policy of the digital shots was a great comfort. "We knew that, depending on how large they went with the images, they could still use those pictures if something happened to the film going through X-ray, or if someone stole my camera bag. That was a real turning point for me."

Bowen shot both film and digital for about three years. But it has been over a year since any of his clients have asked him to shoot film. "At first I felt very uncomfortable with digital," says the photographer. "And I have to admit that I didn't expect to have to deal with it before I retired." The technology's supersonic development changed that expectation, but Bowen is sanguine about the shift. He feels his Canon EOS-1Ds and Canon EOS-1Ds Mark II deliver image quality better than what he was getting from the finest-grained 35mm film, yet with a level of control film never afforded. With that kind of resolution it's particularly important to have good optics, and Bowen keeps an EF 28-70mm f/2.8L USM zoom on one body and an EF 70-200mm f/2.8L IS USM on the other. (He also keeps EF 16-35mm f/2.8L USM and EF 100-400mm IS USM lenses on hand.)

Shooting digitally makes Bowen less anxious about bringing home the pictures his clients need, though years of experience certainly contribute to that confidence. Digital's chief headache comes after the shoot, says the photographer, with all the required postproduction work. "It was faster and easier to edit slides on a lightbox," he says. "We could sort through a roll of 36 shots in a few minutes and just send the edit to the art director, who would handle retouching. That was pretty sweet. But with digital we spend much more time processing, editing, and managing the files." On a major shoot Bowen may deliver as many as 15 DVDs of images (each with a digital "contact sheet"), owing to the high resolution of the RAW+JPEG files he prefers to shoot.

Even with the extra work, Bowen considers the control afforded by digital to be a tremendous gain. And digital's comfort zone hasn't changed his basic approach. "I treat every job as if it's the most important assignment I've ever had," he says. "And when it's finished, I can't wait to move on to the next project." ■



A King Air C90B propeller plane.



Here: The trademark of Bowen's aerial photography is the vortices created by a plane's wings passing across the tops of clouds.

Opposite, top: Two Mustang P-51D "warbirds," owned by Jack Roush and shot by Bowen with a Canon EOS-1Ds and EF 70-200mm f/2.8L USM lens.

Bottom: The photographer in his preferred perch, the open tailgunner's position in a B-25 bomber.