

Biplane rides: 'Beautiful'

By Steve Evans

Culpeper Star-Exponent

We were somewhere over northwestern Culpeper County in central Virginia, cruising at 1,100 feet when pilot John Corradi hollered over the headset in the open cockpit, "Hey! Do you wanna do a roll?" "Beautiful," I said, after a second's hesitation, more out of courage than actual conviction or desire. "Let's go!"



Corradi pulled back on the stick and the engine roared as the 1942 Waco biplane rose sharply at the nose, up, up and over. The sky became my horizon from the front cockpit where a leather harness crisscrossed my chest and held me in place as we roared upward into the arc of a loop. I held onto the rollbar anyway.

I felt my lips peel up into a clown's crazed smile as the G forces tugged at us. Looking up, I realized I was actually looking down, at the earth more than 1,000 feet below – a blur of green and freshly tilled red Virginia clay that some farmer was trying to cultivate for a fall harvest while we went screaming over his head on this hot afternoon in late spring. Upside down. In a vintage biplane. But in seconds we pulled through the roll and were upright again.

Corradi laughed over the headset and said, "How you doin'?"

"Beautiful," I replied. This time I meant it.

The plane banked sharply and we came around, bearing north, approaching Culpeper County Airport and Corradi's hangar.

The air was redolent with the scent of honeysuckle and the smell of engine fuel. Now the wind felt clean and cool on my face and I marveled at the view far below as the propeller roared five feet in front of me like a hundred Harley motorcycles.

Some people thrill to the rollercoasters at amusement parks, those rides that twist and turn and drop vertically and do loop-de-loops for the screaming gratification of the riders.

It looks like a hoot, but the coaster is firmly connected to the track and the latticework of iron and steel supporting the ride. And all that steel is bolted to the ground. No matter where you are or how fast you go, that connection with earth remains constant. Some thrills are merely superficial.

Not so in Corradi's aircraft, which he pilots as a mostly weekend business – Blue Ridge Biplane Rides. For a fee, up to two passengers can soar over Culpeper County, take in the sights, revel in the sweet air and feel gloriously alive.

Corradi flies passengers over their homes, over town, across the Skyline Drive at sunset. The possibilities are limited only by the range of the aircraft and the duration of the flight. For a bit extra, Corradi offers the "Ultimate Acro," which includes vertical loops, barrel rolls and other aeronautical tricks that remind the adventurous flyer what the joy of living to the max is all about.

Corradi and his aircraft came into this world the same year, which makes them each 64 years old. That pleasant coincidence seems to be one of many happy circumstances that shaped the life of a man who knew he wanted to be a pilot by the time he was 5 and has devoted his life to the skies ever since.

Corradi married his high school sweetheart, Maggie, nearly 47 years ago. He enlisted in the U.S. Navy and served as a pilot in Vietnam, flying P-3 Orions. Corradi joined United Airlines in 1967 and later skippered international flights aboard the Boeing 777. He left United in 2002. He's been flying the Waco (pronounced "wah-ko") since 1999.

Corradi has logged more than 23,000 hours of flight time during a career spanning over 40 years. He was also the project coordinator for The Wright Experience, and helped build and fly the 1903 Wright Flyer reproduction for the centennial Countdown to Kitty Hawk Celebration, later broadcast on the Discovery Channel. Now semi-retired with a farm in Rixeyville, Corradi may have given up flying a Boeing 777 across the ocean, but he remains devoted to the Heavens.

"One of my dreams was to be able to continue flying and getting to know new people, sharing the fun of flying with them," he says.

Airplanes and their maintenance are expensive, about \$200 an hour to operate a biplane, so Corradi decided if he could make the plane pay for itself, he could essentially keep flying at no cost. After buying plane and investing \$100,000 in restoring the aircraft to its original, shimmering glory, it may be a while before Corradi flies for free.

But he's still flying - both out of Culpeper Regional Airport and every Sunday at the Flying Circus in Bealeton, about 14 miles south of Warrenton. He specializes in formation flying, balloon busting (flying low enough to pop a helium balloon with the propeller) and flour bombing (dropping two-pound sacks of flour onto the airfield near ☹ but not too near ☹ "unsuspecting" circus clowns who scamper around on the ground, entertaining the crowd.

The biplane is equipped with two-way radio headsets, so pilot and passenger can remain in constant contact. Corradi is a most agreeable pilot and aims to give his passengers maximum thrills ☹ up to their threshold for excitement and the obvious need for practical safety.

He is insured, highly experienced and has an infectious sense of humor. Corradi lives by the pilots' motto: "landings should always be equal to the number of takeoffs and there's no charge for the adrenaline rush."

Visit Blue Ridge Biplane Rides and schedule an adventure online at www.blueridgebiplanes.com. Check out the Flying Circus Airshow at www.flyingcircusairshow.com