



Ted Homan literally steps from the present to the past when he leaves the Western Air Lines' 720B fan-jet, which he captains, for the 1928 American Eagle he spent five years recreating. Here the five-foot, five-inch pilot props his pride and joy

*Los Angeles Airport photo*

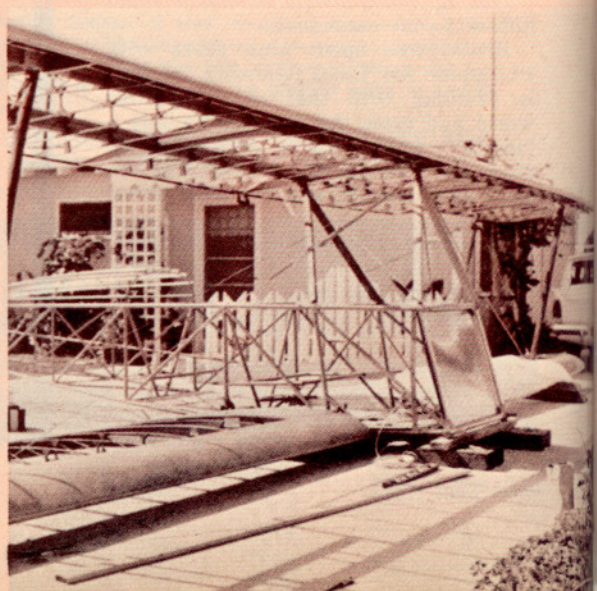


Homan is fond of big jets, such as the 720B in the background, but his reconstructed American Eagle's open cockpit gives him a thrill he does not get in the 'office' of the fan-jet

*Los Angeles Airport photo*

The American Eagle flies again with Jet Pilot Homan at the controls

*Photo by Don Downie*





# Jet Pilot Restores An Eagle

*Ted Homan, Western Air Lines captain and former 'airport kid,'  
spends five years recreating one of rarest birds  
of the twenties, the American Eagle. His antique plane makes  
a clean sweep of awards at a California show*

by LOIS C. PHILMUS

**A**mong the dozens of aircraft types that helped launch the world into the air age with the power of the OX-5 engine was the *American Eagle* of the twenties.

Now, intruding the past into the space age, an *American Eagle*—vintage 1928—flies again from the runway at Van Nuys Airport, painstakingly restored and recreated by a Western Air Lines jet-transport pilot who got a “hankering” for the kind of OX-5 airplane in which he had accidentally taught himself to fly as a teenager in Las Vegas, Nev., 30 years ago.

Capt. Ted Homan (AOPA 130321), one of a dedicated, tiny corps of antique buffs, spent five years, \$5,000, priceless dedication and inestimable patience in producing one of the best restorations in the country to satisfy that “hankering.” The monument to his tenacity and craftsmanship is the return of life to one of the rarest aircraft of the golden age.

In California, Captain Homan's *American Eagle* was adjudged the best, when it made a clear sweep of the awards presented at the annual western antique aircraft fly-in at Merced, Calif., last summer, and he hadn't even intended entering the competition.

“I just flew up for the fun of it and to see the other airplanes,” he says with pleased bewilderment. “When friends told me to register the airplane on arrival I thought it was a formality. I didn't know I had entered into the judging.”

The judges did though. The *American Eagle*, which had left its Van Nuys nest that day for its first extended flight, traveled light and alone with its goggle-eyed pilot. It returned laden

down with three trophies and three plaques, as the judges declared it the best antique restoration, the best of the “Golden Age” (1920-1934) and the best of the oldtimers in all categories, bringing it the coveted Mayor's Trophy.

“Heck, I even won the door prize that day,” Homan grinned. “My only complaint is I never had a chance to see anyone else's airplanes. People swarmed around the *Eagle* all day and I was busy answering questions until it was time to go home.”

And well might the questions fly.

The *American Eagle* is an integral part of aviation's most spectacular period in history and Holman's plane is the only one of three successfully restored in the entire country. It is the first operating *Eagle* seen on the West Coast in at least 20 years.

Homan's *Eagle* was originally built in 1928 and, as best can be determined from the aircraft's incomplete records, had not been airworthy since before 1941. All but a few sections were rusted, missing or rotted.

“Who knows?” is Homan's honest reply when asked what kept him going through the hunt for an OX-5 aircraft and through the frustrating years of tackling a Humpty-Dumpty assignment.

He began the search for an OX-5 powered aircraft—similar to the one he first flew as a boy—at the time Cliff Ball of Pennsylvania called all OX-5 pilots to the aid of the OX-5 Club.

Homan has been around airplanes since boyhood, when he virtually “lived” at the airport.

When others would play ball after school, he would ride his bike two miles from his home over a bumpy gravel road to the Las Vegas airport to watch the Douglas M2 mail planes land and depart.

“I talked my way into odd jobs,” recalls Homan. “I guess I did everything from taxi planes to pump gas and work

◀ The *Eagle* was slowly regaining her feathers in a front-yard workshop when this photo was made. Homan spent five years and \$5,000, and traveled an estimated 26,400 miles chasing down parts, in getting the *Eagle* in flyable shape





Homan's reconstructed American Eagle at an antique aircraft show, where it won acclaim

Photo by Don Downie

as a night watchman. Come to think of it, Western gave me my first job as a night watchman. My gun was bigger than I was.

"I learned to fly in the *Commandaire*. It really was an accident. I had been taxiing around for days waiting for an airline pilot to fulfill a promise to teach me to fly. I got to playing around with the power and the stick and somehow got the right combination to fly—very unintentionally," Homan recalled.

"I was a little scared to find myself in the air. But I made a few shallow turns and practiced approaches until I got the right combination for landing. It worked out so nicely I refueled and took off again the same day."

His do-it-yourself flight instruction program continued and he became an airline pilot, a status he'd dreamed of ever since he'd been hanging around Western's operations in Las Vegas when he was a sixth grader.

Thus, came the roots of the passion and respect for the OX-5 engine—from which so many airmen's beginnings stem.

Homan's nostalgic hunt for a plane similar to the *Commandaire* began in 1955 with the secret stalking of "finds" practiced by the antique aircraft cult and ended in 1957 when he located an *American Eagle* in Oxnard, Calif. It had been shipped out by boxcar in bits and cartons from Ohio by a would-be restorer—who apparently took one look at the condition of a real antique and quit on sight.

The "dicker" was concluded when Homan successfully negotiated a trade. He took the *Eagle* and a Curtiss *Robin* in exchange for a 1929 *Fleet* which he'd bought just weeks before in excellent condition.

Over the next few years, he would

have moments of doubt as to who really got the best of the trade.

The only parts of the original that are in the restored *Eagle* today are the skeleton of the fuselage, the tail group, spars, one cabane strut, instruments, radiator and parts of the landing gear.

Every other single part was built by Homan with a modicum of contributions from a few technically oriented friends with the necessary complex machine shop equipment not in Homan's own tool kit.

Homan rolled up his sleeves and got to work in September, 1957, with the optimism and energy that comes only when you don't know what you're getting into. A survey of his "treasure" would have sent a less dedicated hobbyist into stamp collecting.

The wings were still covered, but the fuselage was bare. The floorboards and seats were rotten through and through. The back fairing was missing. The galvanized iron firewall had gotten lost somewhere along the way or else had just corroded out of this world. The OX-5 engine had been disassembled for overhaul with parts piled into orange crates and apple boxes with the master plan of a two-year-old.

There were a few silver linings, though.

The fuselage and tail group sections, while uncovered for years, were rusty, but this nothing that considerable sand blasting and a little painting couldn't cure.

"The wings looked to be in pretty good condition through the inspection hole on first glance," Homan said. "But after I pulled off the covering I had a second glance. They had apparently been stored where moisture was able to cause considerable deterioration."

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tion," the Louisiana pilot added.

By that he meant that, while the wing spars were in good condition, every other wooden part was completely rotten. It took Homan a total of two years to rebuild the wings—including such Job-like tasks as cutting out each rib—all 44 of them—to the close tolerances of one-quarter inch thickness by  $\frac{3}{8}$  inch widths, using aircraft grade spruce and a table saw.

As a matter of fact, except for the spars, metal fittings for the strut attachments, and the drag wires, everything in the wing is not only new but Homan-hand built.

Homan's goal in restoring the *American Eagle* was built on a promise to himself that it would be as trouble-free as possible. His fetish for safety, inherited from his railroad engineer sire and practiced in his 25-year airline career, resulted in precautions the average restorer wouldn't even think of.

For example, although the chances of moisture accumulating under the covering to cause rust are remote, he stubbornly painted all critical parts inside and out, including the wing and main struts, and the push-pull tubing for the aileron and stabilizer.

While scrupulously following original parts design, Homan just as scrupulously carved his hand-made replacement parts out of modern and better materials—using original parts as patterns. Stainless steel, for instance, replaced the galvanized iron originally used in the firewall and water pump shaft. He substituted the synthetic Ceconite for the original cotton covering, cementing it to the wing or fuselage and then shrinking it with a common household variety of steam iron.

Slowly the airframe took shape, but Homan had his problems.

"You really need someone to work with you," he said in retrospect, "if only to hold things. Trying to clamp a part of tubing in correct position for welding when that part is longer than your reach is like trying to scratch your ear with your elbow. I bet I spent 50% of my time improvising ways to hold something at one end while I worked at the other.

"There were times that I could have put a match to the whole blasted thing," he added drily.

Somehow, you get the impression he's glad he didn't.

Finally—without blueprints—the airframe was authentically recreated. Homan used as guides old photographs and parts. He'd use the most salvageable parts as patterns and, as in the case of the ribs, to make his own jigs.

As he sorted out the OX-5 jig-saw parts puzzle, he received his just reward: no major parts were missing. Majoring the engine himself, he used new crankshaft and connecting rod bearings of diesel babbitt and line-bored; new pistons, new camshaft

bearings of improved aluminum, and water-pump shaft were made of stainless steel.

At last, the *American Eagle* had been brought back to life.

The finishing touch and Homan's most proud possession: the authentic insignia for the vertical fins with an American eagle in flight, acquired from some other buffs in Wisconsin.

Thus, finally—five years and two months from when it all began—the *American Eagle*, authentic right down to its vertical fin decals, made its first flight in more than 25 years, in November, 1962, with a Boeing 720B fan-jet captain at its controls. He was as excited and proud as the kid that accidentally stumbled on the right combination to fly years ago.

Captain Homan may spend his duty times with Western speeding halfway across the nation at 41,000 feet at 600 m.p.h. several times a week—but his heart belongs to an *Eagle* that he boasts has a range of six hours, cruises at 82 m.p.h. and lands at 30 or 35 m.p.h.

"I don't know what the ceiling actually is on the *Eagle*. They used to advertise it at 16,000 feet with just the pilot and 12,000 feet with two passengers. But boy, I tell you—if you can get it up that high you're really accomplishing something."

Homan sees no paradox in his roller-coaster existence from jet-high to OX-5-low. "It's the difference between driving a Rolls Royce and a sports car, that's all."

To Homan, flying his *Eagle* over the San Fernando Valley is "real pleasure."

"The jets are enjoyable to fly, too," Homan explains, "and I love them. But the *Eagle* is fun flying. It's hard to explain the thrill of flying with the wind hitting you in the face and being alone in the sky. It's a wonderful feeling. Perhaps my deepest satisfaction comes from the people I've met since I started this whole thing—the oldtimers and their memories, and the young people and their curiosities. Everywhere we go, the *Eagle* makes friends. It's worth the whole five years."

Now, Homan would like to meet the other previous nine owners of the *Eagle*. The very incomplete FAA records on this particular aircraft list the original owner as Floyd J. Logan Aviation Company in Cleveland, which back in 1928 was one of the biggest flying schools in Ohio. The records—other than the registration: NC 7172—are skeletal at best after that.

"I'd sure like to find some of them and learn what the *Eagle* did during those years."

If he had it to do all over again, would he?

Homan's answer is in his garage at home: a 1936 *Taylorcub* which he already has started rebuilding.

"I had a *Taylorcub* after the *Commandaire* and before I went to work for Western," he explained reasonably.

His secret ambition?

"I sure would like to get my hands on a *Commandaire* someday." ●