

Martha's Vineyard's Workin' WACOS

Does Mike Creato Have the Best Job in the World?

BY BUDD DAVISSON | PHOTOS BY SUMMER PRAMER

Contrary to a bit of universally accepted fake news, the 1940s are not actually over. The decade is still alive and well, although somewhat disassociated from the main landmass of America, and lagging behind the new millennium. If you don't believe that, head for Katama Airfield, 1B2, owned by Edgartown, Massachusetts. And don't plan on driving or taking a bus. Plus, it might be good to pack your life vest, if flying over water worries you. Katama Airfield is located on Martha's Vineyard, that legendary summertime magnet that attracts the rich, the powerful, and the famous, as well as thousands of us common folk who are just seeking a laidback vacation or a day trip.

When flying into Katama you don't need your altimeter to give you glideslope information. With a field elevation of 18'4" (yes, that's eighteen feet and four inches), this is an eyeballs-only airport. When you turn final to any of its three nicely mowed grass runways (usually while still over the ocean), you'll know immediately that this is an airport devoted to something other than the high-dollar summer crowds that swell the island population from about 14,000 to over 100,000 pleasure-seeking souls. The jet set, however, has its own modern airport located mid-island. Katama has a different clientele, and you're more likely to see a WACO (or two) in the pattern than any other single

type of airplane. This is because, besides the number of threatened bird species for which the airport is a designated sanctuary, this is also where Mike Creato's Classic Aviators, Ltd. calls home. He and his ancient WACOs represent aviation as it was, and he makes it accessible to thousands of island visitors through his classic biplane ride business. He has been at it for 25 years and may well have the best job in the country.

An Island Kid Becomes an Island Attraction

Mike says, "I was born in Elmira, New York, but we moved to the Vineyard when I was two. My grandparents owned the airport here, Katama, and as a kid, I just took it for granted that every

At any time of the day during the summer, Martha's Vineyard vacationers will have no doubt what the biplanes overhead are doing. They are giving someone a glimpse into aviation as it used to be.



family had an airport. My granddad had been a CFI [certified flight instructor] during WW II, but by 1984, they decided to sell it at a very friendly price to Edgartown. The entire 128 acres comprise what is basically a virgin sand plain covered with brush. There are few trees. The only brush that was cut was for the runways and the ramp areas. It's island landscape as it was in the beginning. As you can imagine, real estate on the Vineyard is wildly expensive, and most of it has been developed or farmed. This was virgin, so a lot of wildlife that had disappeared elsewhere on the island had migrated there. So, even though it was an airport, it was open space, and the conservationists liked that. Even better, the city has committed to keeping it an airport

one of us had any tailwheel time. Obviously, we didn't know what we were getting ourselves into. In his defense, the brakes weren't right, but we flat didn't know what we were doing. So, we went to my grandpa and asked him if he'd teach us what we needed to know. Even though the airplane didn't have an intercom, he agreed. He'd sit up there in the front seat and shake his head one way or the other, which was supposed to tell us what to do. He took one lap around with each of us and then he was obviously disgusted. His parting words to us were, 'You guys have heavy feet.' Then he left the airport and didn't return for several days. Fortunately, we had grass runways so we finally figured it out and started flying passengers."

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and are proud of it.

"Like so many other kids on the island," he says, "I couldn't wait to get off of it and into the real world. I went to the U of Mass in the 80s and was a wannabee U.S. Navy pilot, but an astigmatism wouldn't let me fly and I didn't want to sit in the back. I got my pilot ratings after college and worked for the airlines for a while, but something was missing. However, I didn't know what until my friend showed up with a beat-up old WACO and we started learning to fly it. I had no idea flying an airplane like that could be so much fun.

"Upon his first arrival to Katama with his WACO, my buddy ground looped the thing in a cloud of dust. This was in 1994, and neither

Pleasure Becomes Business

"That first year, we were just feeling our way, as we didn't know anything. So, there was a lot of dumb luck involved," Mike says. "We painted the big word 'RIDES' on the bottom wings so, as we were circling different parts of the island, people knew what we were doing. Almost immediately, people started showing up asking for rides. However, after a few years we acquired a second airplane and noticed that the two airplanes really helped generate business for each other. When we got the second airplane, we literally became our own advertising apparatus. People all over the island knew we were there. It got really busy and we couldn't have handled it with just one airplane. Now we're flying about 600 hours a year between the two, but basically, we're doing that from Memorial Day to Labor Day. Three months! Ten-hour days are not unusual.

"We get a very wide range of customers, and the two-place front cockpit really works for that. People like to share the experience. We fly lots of kids and couples on honeymoons. However, the flights I like the most are with the old vets who probably haven't been at the controls of an airplane since the war. So, for them, we reinstall the front stick and go flying. One, who was in his late '80s and walked with a cane, had been in an airplane crash back in the day and hadn't flown since. He just wanted to fly one more time. At one point during the flight he asked, 'Do you spin it?' and I said, 'Go ahead.' Before long we were looping and

Mike Creato in his WACO business suit going to work.



Above: The two-place front seat of a WACO UPF-7 is perfect for making memories.



Below: The original hangars had a true 1940s look. Sadly, a few months ago age caught up with these WW II hangars and they had to be replaced.

rolling and having a terrifically good time. It was like he'd never left the cockpit, and when we landed you could easily see the effect it had on him. He was almost a different man. It's that kind of experience that keeps us doing this.

"One of the most important components to our business," says Mike, "is our girl Friday, Alyssa DaSilva. She keeps us pilots doing the pilot stuff, and takes care of the passengers and all the business stuff. She came to us 16 years ago as a dynamo of a high school kid. Now she's part of the family and has four kids of her own. She is as good as anyone gets at running a tourist business and interfacing with our customers. She has the perfect personality for the job and makes every single person who walks through the door feel welcome. The smartest thing she does is screen my calls and keep me away from the office stuff."

The Scenery and the Biplanes Make It Work

Mike says, "Something we see all the time is that we'll take a couple up on a flight and within a few days they'll come back with other people in tow. They want to share their experience with others. There is something about the simple joy of an open cockpit biplane that really does inspire people. However, I have to admit that we have the perfect setting in which to be doing this. Martha's Vineyard is beautiful, what with the shoreline, varying topography, and historic villages. It also helps that we have a really first-class restaurant on the field, the Right Fork. We're removed from the hustle and bustle of the rest of the island, and the feeling of being out in the boondocks, coupled with the beach being right next to the runways makes for a really unique experience."

Martha's Vineyard is actually two islands, with Chappaquiddick being connected via a limited-use bridge. The main island is about 100 square miles, and Mike says he has five different routes, with flights running as long as an hour with limited aerobatics at the end. The nice part is that the passenger will be sitting next to a friend or lover with the entire flight being captured via video cameras. A GoPro is mounted on the center section struts facing back with a wide-angle lens, filming the front cockpit occupants and their surroundings from the front. Another camera is mounted on the vertical fin, again wingtip-to-wingtip



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wide angle, recording the flight from the other direction.

Mike says, "We've made thousands of those flights and it is very, very seldom anyone gets sick, but it might be worth pointing out that guys seem to barf more often than the girls do."

Mike's WACOs are old school all the way. None of the factory-fresh look of recently manufactured airplanes but, although they are approaching being 80 years old, they are shiny and recently restored. Both are UPF-7s, a 1940 and a 1942 version, and they exude a 1940s vibe. Patina can't be faked. It has to be earned. In this case, we're talking about nearly eight decades and thousands of feet climbing up the wing walks, some wearing military boots and some wearing \$800 designer sneakers.

"As biplanes go, the Stearman is much more recognized than the UPF-7 WACO," says Mike, "but, the UPF is better for our ride business. Obviously, the ability to take two people up at a time makes our business work. When being used as a trainer during the war, the superwide front fuselage was a waste. But, not for us.

Plus, to get in the front seat of a Stearman, the passenger has to climb up the side of the fuselage and step over the side to get in. That's not easy for some people. There is virtually no one who can't get in the WACO.

"Although you'll see UPFs with lots of different engines, ours still use the 220hp, W-670 Continental they came out of the factory with. The same engine with a slightly different crankshaft was used in the M3 Stuart light tank, as well as most of the round motored primary trainers, so tens of thousands of them were built. This makes them one of the easier radial engines to maintain, as well as one of the most reliable. In fact, we use tank engines. We generally get 1,500 hours out of each, although we might do a jug along the way.

"One of our airplanes is covered in poly-fiber and the other in Ceconite. With these kinds of modern coverings, we have to rebuild an engine before we have to worry about the fabric. However, there are difficulties associated with basing airplanes less than 100 yards from the ocean. In fact, we have to treat them as if

they're seaplanes. We have to stay right on top of preventing corrosion or rust on nuts, bolts, et cetera, so we use a lot of LPS and do our best to keep the airplanes covered. At the same time, the wooden wings and fabric covering won't rust or corrode, so, even though they are old, they still last longer in our operating environment than aluminum does."

Many amongst us dream of flying a biplane. We often times imagine hearing the gentle whisper of our landing gear touching the grass on landing; of blasting the tail around while parking our bipe, and, when the mood strikes us, taking off our shoes and wandering down to the beach. Many dream of it. Few do it. Mike Creato, however, does it. Better yet, through his thoroughly anachronistic operation and his ancient airplanes, he is a man who is living his own dream (7,000 plus hours in WACOs), while sharing it with others. You have to wonder how many of his passengers, unbeknownst to him, have been so inspired by the flight that they eventually owned their own biplane. We bet it is more than a few. J

A 1942 WACO biplane and a grass airport: THE perfect combination for fun!