

TRAVEL STORY: TOP GUNNING IN LAKELAND, FLORIDA!

WE SPEAK TO PHILIP CRANDON ABOUT FULFILLING THE DREAM OF COMPETING AT THE PROMINENT ANNUAL AEROMODELLING EVENT, TOP GUN

"It's been something I've wanted to do for many years. I'm 61 now and I've been modelling ever since I was about ten. Scale models have always been a passion, literally from the word 'go' and attending Top Gun was the ultimate dream come true for me!"

Scale modeller Philip Crandon, a member of the Lismore Model Flying Club in northern NSW, is talking about how he finally embarked on a journey to Florida to compete at what is considered the largest, most prestigious scale model event in the world.

"Top Gun was a milestone event created by one man in the US who was looking for an alternative to the rigours of FAI-style judging and competition," continues Philip.

"Thirty years ago, he came up with the idea of having a more relaxed flying show where you were rewarded, not just for complexity in the building process but for putting on a good show as well."

The event now attracts around 150 entries internationally. However, out of that number, this year only about 35 pilots actually built their models; placing Philip in a hotly contested category.

Nevertheless, Philip worked for many years to reach a position for him to feel confident enough to attend Top Gun, investing considerable time over a five-year period perfecting an intricate 5th scale JU87 Stuka (see pictured) – which was also one of the first plastic models he built as a youngster.

"It was the shape of an aeroplane that I always admired as a little fella. When I built the scale model, I had to significantly modify the design plan to ensure it was accurate to the 3D drawings that I had," he continues.

"I literally redraw the entire fuselage of the plane, as unfortunately the ziroli plan wasn't accurate. There was a lot of building to get it to the standard that I felt was required to go to Top Gun."

Philip says he has always had an interest in and admired German aircraft and engineering, which is why he focused on building the infamous German dive-bomber.

"In both wars the Germans were ahead of their allies as far as engineering and design was concerned – it was always cutting edge stuff."

However, travelling to the Florida event with his beloved but hefty scale model wasn't exactly easy, as he explains.

"The logistics of getting a 5th scale model to the other side of the United States and back was a journey in itself, particularly in airports where you walk in with these huge boxes on wheels and staff look at you as if to say 'what is this?'" he says.

"I had some guidance from people who had done it before me. They recommended having a photograph of the assembled aeroplane on the outside of the box, so people know exactly what's in there. However, customs assumed I was carrying several mini model aeroplanes



that I was bringing in to sell, but after putting it through their scanners, they thought it was really cool and proceeded to tell me about their experiences flying control line.”

Philip says he had a fantastic time at Top Gun, where he came away with the prestigious Best Military Pilot’s Choice Award.

“I flew the best I could and met some wonderful people and coming away with that was more than enough reward for the effort to get there,” he considers.

“I was there one of 24 others in my category and I ended up coming 11th. Initially, I was disappointed, because I flew better than I’d flown in any other event in Australia, however the interesting part was that the distance between myself and first place was 5.25 points out of 200 - that gives you an idea of the competitive nature of this particular event.

“You literally could not falter in any part. My static score was 95.25 out of 100 and that just isn’t good enough. You’ve got to get 96+ to be able to be competitive and finish at the top ten. So, that’s the standard that you’re flying against.”

Despite this, Philip was very impressed by how well judged the event was, with five different sets of judges operating at all times. He was also won over by the ‘can do’ American mentality.

“My experience over there is that in competitions you can fly multiple flight lines. We had five aeroplanes in the air at any one time and while they could’ve been the fastest jets, there were no accidents nor any close calls,” he continues.

“In Australia we have this attitude of ‘well, you can’t do that because something may happen.’ However, the Americans have a completely different view of ‘don’t tell me why it won’t work – tell me how we can make it happen.”

Philip also acknowledges that Top Gun isn’t solely about competing for the coveted ‘Mr. Top Gun’ accolade but also about experiencing that great aeromodelling staple of camaraderie as well.

“It’s not only about competition, it’s about five days of social events. People were so welcoming, generous and hospitable. I was rubbing shoulders with people who had a complete passion for scale models, and in the vast majority of cases, had the means to fund their passion,” he considers.

“It certainly turned out very worthwhile and an event I’ll never forget.”