

A Boeing Legend

The primary trainer for U.S. pilots during World War II, hundreds of Stearman Kaydets are still flying today. By Mike Lombardi

What are the most popular and beloved Boeing and Boeing heritage planes of all time? That question might bring up images of the B-17, 707 and 747, or the Douglas DC-3 and DC-8, or the North American P-51 Mustang—but probably not that of a single-engine biplane. On the other hand, if you are one of the more than 1,000 proud owners of a Boeing/Stearman Model 73-76 Kaydet trainer, affectionately known as a “Stearman,” you would not be surprised.

The Stearman represents the largest production run of a Boeing heritage plane at a single site and also helped launch what would become the Boeing Wichita Division in Wichita, Kan.

Today, those operations continue as Boeing Integrated Defense Systems Wichita and Spirit AeroSystems, none of which would have been possible without the vision and perseverance of one Boeing leader—James “Earl” Schaefer.

The Kaydet trainer began as a product of the Stearman Aircraft Co., a wholly owned subsidiary and later a division of the Boeing Airplane Co. Named for its founder, Lloyd Stearman, the company was established in Venice, Calif., in 1927, and enjoyed some initial success building mail planes. Stearman was soon looking for additional capital to expand his company. A group of Wichita investors pledged \$60,000 and convinced Stearman to return to his Wichita home.

After establishing operations in Wichita, the company caught the interest of William Boeing, and in 1929 Stearman Aircraft was merged into Boeing’s aviation holding company, United Aircraft and Transportation Corp (UATC).

Not satisfied being a part of a large corporation, Stearman resigned from his company and UATC in 1931.

Even though the company would continue to carry the name of its founder, the man who saved the Stearman Co. and secured the future of the Boeing business in Wichita was Schaefer. He had started at Stearman Aircraft as vice president of sales and later replaced Stearman as general manager.

Taking over leadership of the company, Schaefer faced a crisis that required all of his skills as a leader and salesman to find a way to turn around UATC’s board of directors, who wanted to shutter the Wichita operations. Indeed, Schaefer set a course that would prove to be a huge success for Stearman Aircraft and later Boeing Wichita—building military trainers.

Under Schaefer’s leadership, a small team at Stearman, including chief engineer Mac Short and notable designers Howard Zipp and Jack Clark, set out to design a military trainer based on the earlier Stearman Model 6 and Boeing Model 203 biplane trainers. Within 60 days the team developed the



PHOTO: A U.S. Navy version, designated N2S-5, is shown in flight. BOEING ARCHIVES



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PHOTOS: (LEFT) J. Earl Schaefer (left), who led a Boeing team that produced more than 10,000 Stearman Kaydet trainers, confers with Stearman founder Lloyd Stearman. **(ABOVE)** The last of more than 10,000 Kaydets, all built by Boeing. BOEING ARCHIVES

Model 70, a prototype for the Kaydet biplane trainer that eventually would be used for primary flight training by nearly every U.S. Army and Navy pilot during World War II.

For Stearman Aircraft, 1934 was a monumental year beginning with the first flight of the Model 70 and followed by the reorganization of UATC, which made Stearman Aircraft a subsidiary of the Boeing Airplane Co. But the big news of 1934 was the company winning its first government production contract, a U.S. Navy order for 61 Stearman Model 73 trainers. Designated NS-1 in Navy service, the first one flew on Nov. 26, 1934, and was delivered on Dec. 18.

The Army followed with an initial order for 36 Model 75 trainers designated the PT-13. It was the beginning of a highly successful program and by 1945 Boeing had built the equivalent of 10,346 Kaydets in all versions.

The last Kaydet built was an Army PT-13D model and it was delivered in a special ceremony on Feb. 16, 1945. When

the final Kaydet became surplus after the war, Boeing bought it back from the Army.

Schaefer not only delivered results with the Kaydet, but he also led the expansion of Boeing operations at Wichita, which allowed for the production of 1,644 B-29s and more than 1,300 B-47s. In June 1959, Schaefer announced his retirement after seeing the second B-52 production line established in Wichita. He was vice chairman of Boeing at the time. When Schaefer retired, Boeing also decided it was time to retire the last Kaydet, and it donated the plane to the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force in Dayton, Ohio, where it continues to be displayed today. The plane was flown to Dayton on June 24, 1959, by well-known Boeing test pilot George Hanna.

Fittingly, the passenger on that final flight was the man who had made Boeing Wichita and the Kaydet a success—Earl Schaefer. ■

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