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RENTON

Magazine



**When love is
in the air...**

page 8



IT COULD BE A BOMBING RUN.

John Carson, in his red and white Super Cub, takes off from Renton Airport. He gains altitude, then turns over Lake Washington toward Mercer Island. Carson turns again, back toward the airport. Lowering the nose, he picks up speed as he descends toward the airport. But not toward the runway.

He screams along the grass next to the runway toward his target: a thin rope stretched between two poles. At the last second, he pulls up, snagging the rope with a treble hook. Full throttle, he gains as much altitude as he can before the long line draws tight. Like a giant accordion, a billboard unfolds, billows, and follows the Super Cub into the sky.

Houston, we have a launch!

ONLY IN NICE WEATHER

Carson's business, Sky Signs, tows banners that we see on nice days in the Seattle area. People don't spend time outside in bad weather. So, banner towing is reserved for nice days when people are outside and will look up.

Marry me. Buy our insurance. Happy anniversary. Buy our soda. Come to the fair. It seems there are few messages that Carson or his fellow pilot, Michael Moore, haven't towed. The signs are undulating reflections of our lives.

Some are large, commercially printed, cloth billboards created for towing. Others are text messages that Carson constructs from letters hanging in his shop. Some banners, like "Marry me," are used so often that he never takes them apart. Moore says that if they can reuse a message, they have just lowered the chance of a spelling error.

On this day in early July, Carson starts at 10 a.m., towing a sign for an insurance company. An hour later, Moore will fly a second airplane to deliver a wedding proposal, due exactly at 12:30 p.m. at the Space Needle restaurant. Carson's tow is longer. He will fly northward along Lake Washington, then toward Seattle, southward along Puget Sound, and eventually back to Renton. Moore's tow may be shorter, but will have consequences for years to come.

UNDER WATCHFUL EYES

Each tow requires a flight plan. A slow-flying aircraft with a long line and banner can be a distraction and an obstacle to other aircraft. Moore and Carson keep in touch with the local airport towers during their flights. Their flight plans and cooperation with the towers allow them to fly slowly through parts of town that are off-limits to recreational pilots.

Not just any airplane can tow banners. The airplane needs to fly slowly under good control without overheating its engine. Carson's airplanes have large engines and modifications to help keep the engines cool as they grind along at about 45 to 55 mph. Carson has also added small tabs to the airplanes' wings, called vortex generators, which help the airplanes handle better when they fly slowly.

In an era when many are cynical about advertising, towing a message behind an airplane is such a throwback, so pleasantly non-electronic, that even the hardened among us may crack a smile at the sight of it. "Marry me" towed behind an airplane may be the ultimate public display of affection.

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Below, Pilot, Michael Moore and his wife, Janice, walk out to the runway to prepare a banner for towing.

Right, the specially modified Piper Cub swoops in from Lake Washington. Using a trebble hook on a rope, it snags the banner harness to pull it into the sky. Find more photos on facebook.com/rentonmagazine.

MAGGY ♥ WILL YOU MARRY ME?

RENAISSANCE MEN

Carson hasn't always towed signs. He started working construction in Alaska, where most sites require aircraft. Over time, flying started to sound pretty good as another way to make money. Carson restores airplanes and still works construction when towing work is slow.

When Moore isn't towing signs, he's performing with his cello or working for the Seattle Opera's Scenic Studios in Renton. As Moore notes, he likes to fly, but he likes it even more if someone will pay him to fly.

Returning from his two circuits around the Space Needle, Moore swoops down in his Cessna to the grassy area by the runway and drops his banner.

Over the radio, Renton Tower asks, "Did she say yes?" Moore replies, "I couldn't quite hear, but there sure were a lot of cameras flashing as I went by."

