CREW CHIEF

THE STORY OF BILL KERCHENFAUT — "THE LITTLE GUY WITH THE SCREWDRIVER"

BY TIM WEINSCHENKER

ALL PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIM LARSEN EXCEPT WHERE NOTED

Bill Kerchenfaut enjoyed great success as crew chief for *Dago Red* when Bruce Lockwood and Skip Holm were flying it. In this photograph, Skip is piloting the highly-modified Mustang. (M. O'Leary)

INTRODUCTION

During November 2016, I received a message from Rose Thorn that I did not want to read. All of us close to Bill Kerchenfaut had been concerned about his health for some time. Rose confirmed our worst fears — Bill had suffered a stroke and was in serious condition. I was hoping that he would somehow recover and, at first, there was some hope. However, it wasn't long before I was told it was just a matter of time and I then received the sad news that Bill had passed away.

My first contact with Bill had been in the summer of 1988 when I was doing research on the history of Darryl Greenamyer and his Bearcat. I knew that Bill was part of the crew and I wanted to discuss his time with that aeronautically creative group.

I also knew Bill had been crew chief for Sherm Cooper and his highly modified Sea Fury racer and our discussion soon turned to his days with Sherm. I told Bill I was really interested in the technical side of Unlimited racing. I thanked him and thought that was the end of things. He asked for my address and said he might send a few things about the Sea Fury. I could hardly believe it when a week later a large package arrived that contained photocopies of Bill's entire file on that Sea Fury plus others. I was humbled and so thankful that he would take time for a "nobody." This was the beginning of a friendship that would continue to grow. Our face-to-face encounters were usually limited to the Reno Air Races or others aviation events. I did manage to visit his workshop in Santa Clara, California, and to experience him without the pressure of race week. Our friendship started with a common interest in air racing but in the last few years it had progressed to become more inclusive.

Many times when I would call Bill would start with, "I don't know why you want to talk to me. I'm just a little guy with a screwdriver! What can I know?" Of course, Bill knew lots and lots. I cannot sum up all the memories I have of those times, but I hope this story will provide insight into one of the finest human beings I have had the privilege of knowing — Bill Kerchenfaut.

It was June 1972 and aviation mechanic and air racing crew chief Bill Kerchenfaut was pondering a most uncertain future. His employer, mentor, and friend Sherman Cooper had just lost his life in a tragic and senseless accident while practicing aerobatics in his Pitts Special. Senseless because Sherm, Bill, and others knew that the upper wing spar of the Pitts was damaged and that Sherm should not have been flying it, let alone doing aerobatics.

Bill discovered the damage during a routine maintenance inspection. The damage was shown both to Sherm and the builder of the airplane. Bill wanted to ground the Pitts until it could be repaired. The builder agreed but, as the owner, Sherm thought otherwise and continued to fly the airplane. He promised he would not do aerobatics until repairs were made. Besides being an excellent pilot, Sherm was also a licensed A&P mechanic and why on earth he wanted to continue to fly this craft was beyond reason. Sherm was asked to perform in the annual Merced airshow. He based his fleet of aircraft at Merced and decided to do some gentle aerobatics in the Pitts. The damaged wing spar failed, and Sherm lost his life in the crash.

For decades, Bill Kerchenfaut could be counted on for the care and feeding of a variety of Reno Unlimiteds. In this photo, Bill is monitoring communications with Mike Brown in Race 232.

The accident left Bill devastated. He had become very good friends with Sherm and found in Sherm the same skill set that he had seen in Darryl Greenamyer. Now he was unemployed. He had about $35 to his name and all his worldly possessions would easily fit in the trunk