

MU-2 Artist Keith Ferris Earns His Wings and Acclaim With On-The-Job Training

By Mike Taylor

Mike Taylor is a former aircraft design engineer, 25-year aviation industry veteran, current marketing consultant and private pilot.

Keith Ferris grew up a military brat on the grass flying fields of the 1930s. As children of service personnel often do, he attended numerous schools. For Ferris these were high schools in Kansas, and in the Texas towns of Fort Worth, Boerne, and Kerrville. The latter initiated what was to be a pseudo-military career. Founded in Kerrville, the Schreiner Institute (now Schreiner University) incorporated military training during Ferris' time there.

As a child, Ferris had always hoped to fly in the U.S. Air Force. He attended Texas A&M College (now Texas A&M University) from 1946 to 1948, majoring in aerospace engineering and hoping for an Air Force commission on graduation. While his father was stationed at Randolph Air Force Base in San Antonio, Ferris spent part of his college freshman and sophomore years working as an artist in the Air Force Training Publications group in a building next to the airport's (KRND) flight line.

Ferris was present at the base at the time Air Force Day was established on August 1, 1947. Instituted by President Truman the celebration was, "In recognition of the personnel of the victorious Army Air Forces and all those who have developed and maintained our nation's air strength." The day marked the 40th anniversary of the establishment, in 1907, of the Aeronautical Division in the Office of the Chief Signal Officer of the Army. The U.S. Air Force came into being immediately after the signing of the National Security Act of 1947.

From his office window, Ferris recalls seeing planes arriving the week prior to the celebration to participate in the weekend-long public open house. While Air Force Day was observed only three sequential years, its heritage endures along with the impressions it

made on the young Ferris.

"The sound of jets for the first time brought me out of my chair. Watching as they effortlessly circled the base, landed and taxied to park right in front of our building, I took one look at those beautiful airplanes, put down my brushes and paid a visit to a flight surgeon friend requesting a flight physical for cadets," commented Ferris. He continued, "I could not wait the extra years for a commission.

"The flight surgeon, whom I had known since I was a little boy, said: 'Keith you are not going to be able to get in the Air Force at all,' recounting an allergy to eggs and tetanus anti-toxin from

my past. I was informed I would not be able to take all of the required immunizations."

Upon his return to Texas A&M, Ferris decided that since he was not going to be able to fly in the Air Force, he would abandon the engineering curriculum and return to the publications unit to pursue a career in aviation art. Ferris attended Corcoran School of Art for half days in 1948-49, while attending George Washington

University in Washington D.C. Following one year of art school, he relocated to St. Louis for a job in offset lithography. There he learned production printing, then later moved to a large St. Louis art studio which had contracts with Air Force Publications.

With his acquired knowledge of the Air Force, art production and printing, Ferris landed a job, at age 22, of managing the studio's Air Force contracts. He also served for a period as Production Manager of the studio.

However, the Air Force eventually closed its St. Louis Publications



"Mountain Airstrip" by Keith Ferris.

unit, and “without my Air Force,” Ferris avowed, it was time to move on.

At the time, all of the aircraft manufacturers’ corporate headquarters were in Rockefeller Center and their advertising agencies were lined up along Madison Avenue in New York. So in 1956, Ferris packed up his “little family” and moved his studio to the New York area where he serviced the advertising, editorial, public relations and historical documentation needs of the commercial aerospace industry.

As an illustrator, his initial clients included Curtiss-Wright Corp., Sperry Corp., Pratt & Whitney, Aircraft Radio Corp. (later purchased by Sigma-Tek, Inc.), and Aviation Week & Space Technology magazine. Ferris’ clients also included the military services’ publications units as well as the National Air and Space Museum. He has maintained most of these relationships for the past 68 years.

The prominent New York based Society of Illustrators, founded on the prismatic credo “to promote generally the art of illustration and to hold exhibitions from

time to time,” invited Ferris to become a member. “This was a rare honor,” Ferris relished.

Another surprise invitation was extended to Ferris, this time by Secretary of the Air Force, whereby he was asked to fly a B-52 mission under the Society’s Air Force Art Program. His assignment would be to join the group and document the Air Force mission with paintings. Although the paintings were to be donated to the Air Force, Ferris was amply willing to embrace the opportunity to fly and travel with the Air Force.

His enthusiasm for flying proved ceaseless. In 1953, Keith, and his new wife Peggy, took flying lessons in a J-3 Cub, a Luscombe Silvir, and a Cessna 140. Keith amassed a total of 11.5 hours of flight and two solos when “it just became too expensive to continue,” he conjured.

But the requests kept coming. “Exactly ten years later, in May of 1963, I was invited under the Air Force Art Program to Randolph [AFB] to document, in artwork, the mission of the brand new T-38 Instructor Pilots School,” stated

Ferris. He continued, “As the instructor was briefing me for my T-38 introductory flight, I realized that he expected me to fly this supersonic airplane. I hesitated and said wait a minute. He asked how much flying time did I have? When I told him, and in what aircraft, he said ‘You are fully qualified.’

“Sitting there with the Dash One Flight Handbook in my lap and the Syllabus sequence, I began to really pay attention. He was a superb instructor, for I was able to fly the entire introductory ride for the IP School student, including max performance climb, slow flight, stall recovery, supersonic flight, three touch and go landings, and a full stop landing. I taxied the airplane right past my 1947 Training Publications Unit Offices where [years before] I found out I was not going to fly in the Air Force. From there, I immediately went up to Big Spring Air Force Base (now Webb Air Force Base) in West Texas where I flew the T-38 IP School Syllabus aerobatic ride.”

Ferris is grateful for the many Air Force art assignments that have taken him all



“Night Climbout” by Keith Ferris.

over the world, but his most enjoyable have been the opportunities to fly with each of the USAF Weapons Schools. At Nellis Air Force Base in southern Nevada, he spent “about eight weeks” covering the employment of aircraft from the North American F-100 Super Sabre up through the McDonnell Douglas F-15 Eagle and General Dynamics F-16 Fight Falcon over a period of 25 years.

“In November of 1968, I flew across the Pacific as a civilian backseater with the squadron taking the first gun-equipped F-4E Phantoms to Thailand in Southeast Asia.” Here, coincidentally is where Ferris was to have his first encounter with the MU-2.

“Which brings us to the MU-2,” Ferris diverted. “I had been asked by Womack-Claypoole Advertising agency to come to Odessa, Texas, to discuss art for a U.S. advertising campaign for the new-to-America MU-2. In the discussions, I sketched the “J” and “K” Models in various scenarios and became aware of how proud Mitsubishi was of the tough airframe.”

Ferris talked the team into doing a cutaway as the final painting of the series, since they were putting so much emphasis on the airframe structure. “To create this one, it was going to have to include a visit to the San Angelo factory where aircraft assembly took place,” he punctuated.

“I flew in the agency’s Mooney down to the abandoned Air Force base in San Angelo.” While there Ferris



“Prudhoe Bay” by Keith Ferris.

photographed the production line “to capture all the hidden structure and details I was going to have to paint,” he elaborated. “As I was finishing up the photography I was tapped on the shoulder and told that my airplane was ready. I thought, that’s nice, they are going to let me see what the airplane is like in the air.

“To my surprise, demo pilot Bill Bird

placed me in the left seat, informing me once I had strapped in that he had no brakes over there, nor could he start the airplane. I thought, now this is unusual, as he talked me through the startup procedure. He then asked me to take it down to the south entry point to the runway and I thought I had better ask him for some numbers. Rotation, climb speeds, etc. He told me to climb straight out to



“MU-2 Portraits” by Keith Ferris.

10,000 feet as I recall.” And off they went.

Ferris recounted the demo pilot having him perform some slow flight and stall recoveries. Then some 360-degree turns left and right, and a left engine shutdown for a left 360-degree turn. He talked Ferris through the air start, then back to San Angelo for some touch and goes. This was followed by a full stop landing in which Bird wanted him to stop the airplane in time to turn off at the entry taxiway. With brakes and reverse thrust, Ferris made the short turn off and taxied back to their parking spot.

“On the way back to his office, Bill said to me: ‘Well what did you think? Is your company ready to buy one?’ To his astonishment I replied: Buy one! I’m the artist creating the art for the ad campaign for the airplane!” Ferris recollected, “I had been asked by so many Air Force pilots to fly their jets that I had just shrugged my shoulder and thought, here is another challenge.”

Some 40 years later, Keith Ferris returns to the MU-2 community. At the behest of Barry Martin, co-owner of Tennessee Aircraft Co., the artist was located and asked about using his artwork for a company Christmas card. To Ferris’

delight, Barry had one of the paintings in his office and was graciously given permission by the artist to duplicate the print.

Mitsubishi Aircraft International (MAI) commissioned the paintings around 1972. The company’s original plan was for six paintings. However, the cutaway Keith talked them into proved to be a much more complex effort. They agreed, and it was counted as two. So history tells us only five paintings were completed.

It is also known that the painting in Barry Martin’s office was awarded by MAI to Dean Dohm, founder of Tennessee Aircraft Co., in recognition of being the number one worldwide service center at the time. The painting hung in Dean’s office, and upon his passing, Barry Martin and a partner acquired both the company and the painting. A second painting, entitled *Night Climbout*, is located in the MU-2 Museum at the offices of Turbine Aircraft Services in Addison, Texas.

Presently, Ferris gives lectures on art and aviation military history including one on “Perspective Projection by Descriptive Geometry” used in his work as an artist to create maximum 3D quality in a painting. Ferris still does not have a pilot license,

despite his 300 hours of jet fighter time, his MU-2 familiarization flight, his tailwheel training, and eight weeks of flying with the Air Force Weapons School.

Now 85, Ferris is still painting and also writing a book. He has plans to create another large painting for Pratt & Whitney, this of the Navy’s F-35C. Ferris was enshrined in the National Aviation Hall of Fame in 2012, notably as the only member enshrined as an artist. Texas A&M University’s Aerospace Engineering Department named Keith Ferris an Honorary Aerospace Engineer Alumni in its Aerospace Alumni Academy in 2014.

Keith Ferris is founder of the American Society of Aviation Artists, www.asaa-avart.org. His website can be found at www.keithferrisart.com.

Editor’s note: Pictures of all of the Keith Ferris paintings of the MU-2 are included in this article. However, Turbine Aircraft Services is actively looking for information and the whereabouts of the three “missing” paintings. If you have any knowledge of them, please contact Carol Cannon at clcannon@turbineair.com, or 972-248-3108 x211.



“Cutaway” by Keith Ferris.