

From Blue Skies over Buffalo to the Silver Screen

Chapter 878 member Ray Johnson's red Stearman biplane has role in latest Mission: Impossible movie

by Wayne Flury

There may not have been tuxedos and fancy gowns on display among the crowd in attendance at the St. Michael Cinema on Thursday evening, May 22, but the family and aviation friends who gathered with Ray Johnson of Buffalo and his wife, Helen, didn't mind. And a red carpet has little attraction for a group that prefers the grass or pavement of an airport runway. They were there for a pre-release viewing and celebration party, organized and hosted by Ray's family, for the appearance of "Ray's Stearman" in

Mission: Impossible – The Final Reckoning, the latest release in the movie series starring Tom Cruise.



(Paramount promotional poster)

For many years, residents of Buffalo, Maple Lake, and surrounding areas always knew when Johnson was out enjoying a flight. His red with black trim 1943 Boeing Stearman biplane was a distinctive sight and sound whenever Johnson took the aircraft out of its hangar home at the Buffalo Airport. And most likely there was a grateful passenger with him in the forward cockpit. Johnson rarely passed up an opportunity to give rides, and he recorded the name of hundreds of those passengers in an autograph book.

Johnson purchased the Stearman in 1980. It had most recently been used as an agricultural spray plane and, in Johnson's words, it was "dirt dirty!" The next year he began an approximately 20-year long process of rebuilding the aircraft to his exacting standards. Flying this World War II era primary flight training aircraft was a passion for Johnson and, when he took it to fly-in events, he always strived to be parked in the front row where he

could talk to everyone about this airplane. It was an award winner at AirVenture Oshkosh in 2002, and at other aviation gatherings.

In 2021 Johnson made the difficult decision to pass ownership of the Stearman on to someone who could continue to showcase the airplane, and who had the resources and a commitment to care for the airplane as he had done. That's when Paramount Productions stepped in with an offer and an idea to utilize the Stearman in a future movie role, a plan which Johnson happily accepted and approved.

Johnson and his buddies at the Buffalo Airport carefully followed the next phases of the Stearman's life as it traveled to Florida for disassembly and then to the UK for filming.

Watching YouTube videos of Tom Cruise getting trained in the airplane became the next highlight

activity around the airport coffee table. Cruise is well known for doing his own stunt work and was already a certified pilot. Each new trailer for the movie was carefully examined to see if "Ray's Stearman" was in it.

Finally on this evening, Ray Johnson, family, and friends, a little over 200 of us, got to cheer when the Stearman made an appearance. Now, if only Paramount had been able to find a part for Ray as an "extra" in the movie...



Wayne Flury (left) about to get a ride with the master Stearman pilot, Ray Johnson. I got to add my name to his long list of passengers, but I did NOT climb out onto the wing!