



SEAN AND RENÉ ELLIOTT with their engagement party, in front of the 1929 Ford Tri-motor.

'ENGAGEMENT FLIGHT ONE'

A MARRIAGE MADE IN HEAVEN

Young Ryan Elliott was on a Wisconsin grade-school playground when he joined his friends watching a World War II-era Boeing B-17 bomber rumble slowly overhead. “Hey! That’s my dad!” yelled Ryan, pointing up at the giant four-engine bomber.

“No it isn’t!” replied his friends. “You’re just making that up!” Ryan’s dad, my long-time buddy Sean Elliott, laughed while sharing the story.

“I was taking recurrent training in the B-17 out of Oshkosh’s Wittman Field,” Sean explained, “and found myself flying over Ryan’s school while the kids were outside for recess. After work, I asked Ryan, ‘Did you see me fly over?’ He said, ‘Yeah, Dad, I saw you. But nobody believed me when I told them!’”

Sean has one of the coolest aviation jobs anywhere. As the Experimental Aircraft Association’s vice president of advocacy and safety, he’s also director of flight operations. That includes training pilots to fly EAA’s 1929 Ford Tri-motor; its B-17, *Aluminum Overcast*; and the many other vintage aircraft that fly out of Pioneer

Field. In fact, Sean flew the Tri-motor for the scene in the movie *Public Enemies*, in which John Dillinger is depicted returning to Indiana following his capture in Tucson.

My friend’s duties also include flying EAA’s Socata TBM 700 turboprop. “My favorite is piloting the warbirds,” he explained, “but the turboprop does have its perks.” He told of circling Pioneer Field in the TBM one sweltering Wisconsin afternoon, with *CSI New York* actor and AirVenture musical performer Gary Sinise. “When some pilots flying the B-17 nearby started ribbing me for driving a cushy, modern plane, I said, ‘Hey guys, listen to this. Hear that click? It’s the air-conditioner switch.’”

Sean may also qualify as the coolest dad in the universe. When not flying radio-

controlled airplanes with his son, the two often convene at EAA’s AirVenture Museum after closing, where on each visit they spend hours poring over a given airplane. Among the latest was a 1930’s Curtiss P-6E Hawk biplane fighter.

Recently Sean treated Ryan to his first Young Eagles flight in honor of his eighth birthday, the minimum age for qualifying as a Young Eagle. Asked what airplane he preferred for the mission, Ryan picked the Ford Tri-motor. That would make any kid’s birthday memorable, but perhaps genetic influences also affected his selection. You see, Sean proposed to his wife René in that very airplane, aloft over the 2001 AirVenture fly-in.

Sean had been piloting public Tri-motor rides that day, and sent a message to the EAA public relations department—where his girlfriend, René, then worked—saying there were VIPs onboard and she was needed at the flight line.

When René arrived at the Tri-motor and stuck her head in the cabin door, she was pushed into the airplane from behind and the door shut behind her. Two of the airplane’s engines were already running, and after the door closed, Sean immediately started the third.

“Hey, wait a minute!” said René upon adjusting to the dimmer light of the cabin. “My mom! My brother! And my best friend Mary!” Even Sean’s aviation medical examiner, another family friend, was there.

René strapped in for takeoff, surrounded by her loved ones. Once level over the AirVenture grounds, Sean turned over the controls to the right-seat pilot, who began gently circling at 2,000 feet.

COURTESY EAA ARCHIVES

René, however, became alarmed when she saw Sean walking back from the cockpit.

“Honey, aren’t you supposed to be flying the airplane?!” she asked, assuming that two pilots were required up front. (EAA’s 4AT Tri-motor weighs less than 12,500 pounds and is certified for single-pilot operation. Later and heavier 5AT models require two pilots.)

After reassuring René that only one pilot was necessary, Sean knelt on one knee and asked her to marry him in front of her friends and family.

“Weren’t you afraid she might say no?” I asked.

“No,” said Sean. “Before she could answer, I reached up and pulled out a tattered old parachute I’d stowed in the cargo net above her seat. ‘In case the answer is no,’ I said, ‘I brought along this parachute for you.’ Fortunately, the parachute was not required!”

Sean had arranged with the Oshkosh tower controllers ahead of time to use the call sign, “Engagement Flight One.” They in turn insisted on a prearranged signal if René said yes. So after René accepted, Sean gestured thumbs up to the flying pilot to rock the wings. Then the happy couple made their way to the cockpit. Sean took the controls, the other pilot retreated to the cabin, and René assumed the co-pilot seat.

“Greg, you know how arriving pilots at AirVenture put those signs in their windshields showing where they want to park, like ‘North 40,’ ‘Vintage Aircraft,’ or ‘Warbirds?’ Well, after we touched down, I installed a similar pair of signs I’d made saying, ‘Just Engaged!’ in the windscreen. AirVenture volunteers wearing orange safety vests lined our taxi route back to the ramp—their hats removed and their heads bowed as if for a funeral.”

You’ll be happy to learn that Sean and René celebrated their tenth anniversary in September 2011. Clearly, theirs is a marriage made in heaven, or as close to it as you can get in a 1929 Ford Tri-motor. 🍷

Greg Brown is an aviation author, photographer, and former National Flight Instructor of the Year. Visit his website (www.gregbrownflyingcarpet.com).
