

## ERNIE NATHAN – A GREAT PILOT



**ERNEST NATHAN, appearing in San Diego Aviation's beautiful red and White Boeing Stearman, has one of the most colorful careers of any pilot alive today. He began flying in 1922, starting with the famous JN-4 "Jenny," and has piloted nearly every make and model aircraft manufactured since WW I. After serving as a military flight instructor before WW II and until 1943, Nathan then served as test pilot with Consolidated Aircraft (now Convair) on the PBY and the B 24 bomber. Nathan is now Chief Aerobatic Instructor with San Diego Aviation, Brown Field.**

During my affiliation with the Navy Flying Club at Brown Field, Chula Vista, California, near San Diego and right on the border of Tijuana, Mexico, I had the good fortune to take aerobatic lessons with Ernie Nathan, the Chief Aerobatic Instructor for the club beginning in October 1967.

During my brief acquaintance with Ernie Nathan, he told me how he learned to fly and the story is incredible. In 1922, Ernie and a friend bought a JN-4 Jenny, in a box, surplus from World War I. The Jenny was in a box since it had been crated for shipment to Europe in 1918 before the end of the *Great War*. That didn't happen, World War I ended. There were many of these crates available for sale so he and his friend paid \$50.00 for one surplus Jenny. There were many crates stored somewhere on the east coast, I suspect near New York harbor where the

crates would have been shipped to Europe. The price sounds cheap to us today, but that was over a century ago!

Inside the crate was the airplane in parts, including the engine, and an instruction book. Ernie said, “the instruction manual explained how to put the thing together and showed how to fly it!” Possibly, one of the first ever Pilot Handbooks. At any rate, Ernie and his friend (the team) assembled the aircraft according to the instructions and then flipped a coin to see who would fly it first. Ernie won the toss and by self-instruction reading the book, Ernie learned to fly. He soloed on his first flight. How about that? That was in 1922. Guess that’s how you did it in those days. His buddy and co-owner watched from the ground even though the Jenny was a tandem, two-seater. Naturally, Ernie was by himself because no fool, not even his buddy who lost the toss, wanted to risk his life with a pilot who had never flown before. Think about that one.

Amazing how times and airplanes have changed, and besides, there were no pilot licenses required or issued at the time. In fact, it was 1925 when the Civil Aeronautics Board was formed and a law passed requiring a license to fly. I think it was 1926 before the paper work was finished and the word got out. You can imagine the communications problems from that era.

This new pilot’s license deal by the federal government caused consternation among those persons already flying. Some flyers rushed to get a low number on their license and some balked, saying, “they didn’t need no stinkin’ license,” they already knew how to fly. I don’t know when Ernie Nathan applied for his license or where he lived at the time, but my logbook is signed by him for aerobatic flight instruction showing a flying license number of 6539 CFI.

My first logbook entry by Ernie was October 1, 1967 showing a checkout for chandelles, figure eights and spins in the Champion Citabria (airbatic spelled backwards). Next flight was a checkout in the T-34 Beechcraft for snap rolls, eights, and spins. The T-34 Beechcraft had recently been acquired by the club from the Navy although I had flown the same make and model solo for cross countries in the Philippines while deployed to the WesPac during the previous year as a student pilot. My logbook also shows instruction from Ernie in Snap Rolls, Slow Rolls, Barrel Rolls, Split S’s, Steep Eights, loops and Spins. I logged seven flights with 4.8 hours instruction before moving out of the area to Los Angeles. My last flight with Ernie was February 15, 1968. The instruction was fantastic and memorable to say the least.

### **A Sad Note to Ernie Nathan’s Career**

In the mid-1970’s after I moved to the Los Angeles area, Ernie was one of the flight instructors training Iranian pilots to fly the twin engine Piper Aztec out of Brown Field. The Iranians were being trained at the expense of the Iranian government and were to return to Iran ready to fly for their airlines. One day Ernie was in the practice area near Miramar Naval Air Station with an Iranian student, and another Iranian student flying solo in an Aztec, began some horse play. The solo pilot began diving his twin engine aircraft at his friend’s and Ernie’s

aircraft. I do not know the complete circumstances, but do know it was without any approval by Ernie, according to sources, but “the attacker” collided on the second pass tearing off half, or one third of Ernie’s wing.

The crazy Iranian pilot just horsing around immediately spun into the ground to his death. Ernie, according to known reports from the Miramar air traffic control tower, took the controls and steeply slipped his Aztec from the practice area toward the runway at Miramar Naval Air Station with Ernie declaring an emergency, and attempting to land. At less than fifty feet above ground and crossing the threshold of the runway in a steep slip and at an angle, Ernie’s severely damaged and essentially unflyable Piper Aztec clipped the tail of a stationary military jet fighter off the active runway waiting for takeoff clearance. Ernie’s Mayday radio call, of course, had priority. The Navy fighter aircraft was off the runway and stationary in the run-up area when Ernie’s Aztec and his Iranian student, impacted the tail of the military fighter cartwheeling onto the runway (or off the side of the runway), killing Ernie and his student. A terrible tragedy.

The accident ended the life of a great pilot with a long and successful history in aviation. Ernie Nathan was a great guy, a friend in aviation, and my aerobatic flight instructor for learning how to fly an airplane upside down.

**May Ernie rest in peace.**

Note: The picture of Ernie Nathan above was taken from an Air Show & Air Races Program at Brown Field, Chula Vista in the fall of 1967 leaning on the prop of an early Boeing Stearman. Ernie performed aerobatics in a later model Stearman biplane that day. Also performing was Chipmunk pilot Art Scholl, a member of the U.S. Aerobatic Team, Starduster pilot John Tucker, comedy flying antics by pilots Dick Walton and V. L. Pendergraft, a crop dusting demo by Bob Gebhart in a Piper Pawnee, and other performers. The show included an antique air race over a 10-lap pylon course, and a women’s cross-country race start with the finish line at the end of the show. Quite a performance and a tribute to all the performers.

Jim Davis, West Valley Flying Club