



Stinson

BY JAN TEGLER

SR5A Reliant

Harry Ballance's pursuit of perfection

Harry Ballance Jr. has no memory of his father's Stinson SR5A or any of the Stinsons his father owned. Born in 1939, he was too young to comprehend the beauty or significance of the Reliant series of elegant, high-wing commercial/private aircraft made in Wayne, Michigan between 1933 and 1941. With 10 principal civilian models, four military versions, and an assortment of subtypes, the SR line was offered as swift, luxurious personal transport for the well-to-do, company personnel, commercial passengers, and successful executives like Harry's father, Harry Ballance Sr.

Ballance Sr. bought his first Stinson in the early 1930s, an SM8A "Junior" that he used to fly himself to the branch offices he oversaw in 13 states around the southeast for 20th Century Fox. Involved in the distribution and promotion of the famed Hollywood studio's movies, Ballance Sr. flew the SM8 to commute to offices as far away Oklahoma from his home base near Atlanta, Georgia, much as executives use today's Gulfstream G650/700/800 and Bombardier Global and Challenger series bizjets to globetrot.

By 1934, the elder Ballance and Harry's mother, Marthe Wall Balance—the second licensed female pilot in Atlanta—were ready for a new Stinson. Harry Sr. flew the SM8 to Detroit Metro Airport adjacent to the Stinson factory and bought the gorgeous SR5A you see here.



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—Moffett Photo
Early arrivals for Miami's annual Air Maneuvers Jan. 11 are Mr. and Mrs. Harry G. Ballance, Atlanta, both holders of commercial licenses. They are staying at Archway Ocean Villas.

The SR5 went to work immediately, carrying the executive all over his "territory" until 1938, when he upgraded to a new model once more, an SR9 "gull wing" Reliant, so called because of its taper wings that step up from the fuselage and vary in thickness along their span. Gull wing models began with the SR7 and continued through the final SR-10 versions. In total, 1,327 Reliants were produced.

But not long after the SR9 joined the Ballance family, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor and Uncle Sam came calling. The government "impressed" the SR9 for the World War II war effort. The airplane went into service with the Civil Air Patrol, hunting German submarines along the Atlantic coast.

"The SR9 went into the ocean off Brunswick, Georgia," Ballance Jr. says.

That's why he doesn't remember his father's Stinsons. By the time the war ended, Ballance Sr. was older and "decided he wouldn't get back into flying again because he had two young kids," his son remembers.

But aviation was in Harry Jr.'s blood. He learned to fly while in college, served with the U.S. Army, then went to work for Delta Airlines in 1964, flying airliners including the Douglas DC-6/7 and DC-8 as well as the Boeing 757. He retired as a Boeing 777 captain after 35 years with Delta and went on to fly corporate jets for charter companies and a private client before retirement.

"I had no idea that I would ever see any of my dad's airplanes," Ballance Jr. says. I thought they had all gone under the sea."

Opportunity Calls

The SR9 was gone, but much to Harry Jr.'s surprise, he learned that his dad's SR5 was alive and flying.

"It came into my life in 1980 with a guy named Gary Wilson. He had found the airplane in Painesville, Ohio near Cleveland."

Wilson had recently purchased the Reliant and moved it to Philadelphia. He was interested in

contacting as many of the previous owners as possible. "He got in touch with my mother, Ballance Jr. says. "But she told him to call me because I was into old airplanes."

Wilson called Ballance Jr. and the two discussed the airplane's history. Sometime after the war, the SR5 was put into service at Tuskegee Army Air Field. "I think they used it for a navigation trainer, but they also tore it up," Ballance Jr. notes.

After Tuskegee, the airplane's whereabouts are less clear but its current owner says it ended up at a trade school near Detroit where it was repaired. "But I don't think it flew much," Ballance Jr. adds.

"Gary asked me to come to Philadelphia and take a look at it. I did and a couple years later he offered to sell it to me."

But Ballance was now a father himself, with four children in college and other



airplanes to feed, including a PT-13 Stearman and a Piper J-3 Cub. So he passed on the opportunity.

Curiosity

A quarter century passed following Ballance Jr.'s close encounter with his father's Reliant, but the airplane never really left his mind.

"I was sitting around with my wife one night wondering what happened to the Stinson," he remembers. "I put out an inquiry on the Stinson website in 2006. I didn't think too much about it. A month or so later, a retired college professor from Maryland called me and said he knew the airplane."

Shortly thereafter, Ballance Jr. "hopped on a Delta jet up to Baltimore" and made his way to Hayesfield Airport, a privately-

owned grass strip near Clarksville, Georgia was expected to be an overnight stop. But two years later, Ballance Jr.'s SR5A was still there.

Fifty miles northeast of Atlanta, Lee Gilmer Memorial Airport in Gainesville, Georgia was expected to be an overnight stop. But two years later, Ballance Jr.'s SR5A was still there.

"I flew the airplane around some the next day and the oil pressure wasn't going to get any better," Harry says. "So I said this is going to kill me and I'll hurt the airplane if I don't get the engine overhauled."

He pulled the nine-cylinder, air cooled engine from the Stinson and sent it to radial expert Don Sanders at Sanders Airmotive in Mustang, Oklahoma. Informed that the engine overhaul would take a year, Ballance Jr. started to examine the rest of

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owned grass strip near Clarksville, Maryland. Now closed, the small airfield had been the SR5A's home since Mike Strieter, a well-known pilot and fly-in organizer in the mid-Atlantic antique aircraft community acquired the four-seater from Gary Wilson.

"Mike and I flew it around," Harry says. "He wanted to sell it and I wanted to buy it. I then flew it back to Atlanta in July 2006."

The Long Trip to Peach State Aerodrome

The gleaming Pontiac red/cream color trim Reliant jumping off the page at you wore the reverse of its current livery—cream white with red trim—when Ballance Jr. took off from Hayesfield bound for his home base, Peach State Aerodrome in Williamson, Georgia, an hour south of Atlanta.

On the way, Harry noticed that SR5A was gulping oil. "After two and a half hours of flying it had used four gallons. That was a lot!"

By that point, nighttime was advancing and the Reliant's Lycoming R-680 radial had fluctuating oil pressure. "I said I really

don't want to be flying anything at night, much less an airplane with wavering oil pressure. So I landed at Gainesville where the guy I was working for had a hangar."

his father's Reliant.

"The first thing I did was look at the firewall, which was aluminum, and you can't have an aluminum firewall." Aluminum is no longer acceptable as a firewall material because its melting point is too low and even historic aircraft struggle to pass FAA inspection if they still have aluminum firewalls.

"To get the firewall off I had to take the engine mount off," Harry explains. "So I sent that to a guy in Albany, Georgia who overhauls engine mounts. Five grand later, I got the engine mount. Then I said, 'While I'm here why don't I overhaul the instruments?'"

By this point, Ballance Jr. was on a slippery slope. Maintenance, as often happens, was turning into restoration.

"The instrument panel was full of extra holes, so let's make a new instrument panel. It blossomed."

Keep On Truckin'

With the SR5A in a state of progressive disassembly, Ballance Jr. decided to complete the airplane's journey to Peach

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State by truck. He describes the experience as an "adventure with a wide-load permit and back roads."

But by 2008, his father's Reliant had finally arrived at its new home. "There, we took literally everything apart," Harry says. "No two pieces were left together. Everything was disassembled, stripped or bead-blasted, magna-fluxed, or a new part made or whatever."

The "we" Ballance Jr. mentions was a team that included antique aircraft specialist Harold Spivey, Barry Hutton, Leo Roberson, and Harry himself. Working from Harry's newly built hangar at the Aerodrome, the team just kept on truckin', tackling one task after another.

With the airplane's instruments sent away for overhaul, Spivey fabricated a new instrument panel with a metal base and a beautiful wood-painted finish. Ballance Jr. convinced friend Leo Roberson, an award-winning restorer and aircraft covering specialist, to take on the daunting task of replacing all of the SR5A's fabric covering.

"He's both a good mechanic and a good pilot," Harry says. "He flew A-7s from carriers in the Navy and was a Delta pilot. Nobody can do fabric work like Leo does."

The Reliant's spacious cabin was also redone with new wood trim, leather upholstery, carpeting, headliner and modern radio equipment placed discreetly in a side panel that shields it from view. The result is a luxurious interior fitting for an aircraft that was the "Cadillac" or "Gulfstream" of its day.

Sheet metal work, including new fairings for the Reliant's gear legs, was done by Barry Hutton, a former Air Force crew chief and jet engine mechanic. A talented fabricator, Hutton's experience helping to restore Ballance Jr.'s Reliant inspired him to go into the business full time with his own firm, Lost Art Aviation, where he's done work on projects including Tom Reilly's XP-82 Twin Mustang, a UH-1 Huey, and a Naval Aircraft Factory N3N.

Others, like Robby Grove of El Cajon, California-based Grove Aircraft Landing Gear Systems Inc., contributed custom-made components.



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Ballance Jr. has Grove brakes on his Cub and wondered if Grove could make brakes that would fit the wheels he planned to use on the Reliant.

"I asked Robby if he would be interested in designing a set of disc brakes for a one-off deal for a 1934 Stinson. It took him about a year. I shipped one gear to him and he designed the brakes for the weight of the airplane and made new axles, thrust plates, and rotors to go with his stock wheels. You never see them but they're very well done."

Ultimately, Harry's goal was to make his father's SR5A as perfect as he could. "There were absolutely no corners cut. If we could do something a better way, we would do it a better way."



“Miss Scarlett” flies beautifully

All told, the restoration of Harry Ballance Sr.'s Reliant took 13 years. It's now one of only four airworthy SR5s. In 2019 his son, with more than a little trepidation “after all that effort”, took his father’s airplane, dubbed “Miss Scarlett” by his wife – for its first post-restoration flight.

Happily, “Miss Scarlett” flew “beautifully.”

“I don't think it's an airplane for beginners,” Ballance Jr. notes. “But it's a very honest airplane.”

“I've flown other airplanes from the time, a Staggerwing and some cabin Wacos, but this airplane flies great. And it's very comfortable. My wife has flown back from Oshkosh twice in the back seat says it's more comfortable than riding coach on an airliner. You have leg room, you can roll the windows down or listen to music if you want to.”

At some point in its history, the SR5A's original 245 hp R-680 was replaced with a R-680-13, a 300 hp variant that powered later Reliants and became a popular upgrade for earlier SR5s.

The more powerful radial gives the restored classic a 120 mph cruise according to Balance, who adds that

artfully hidden cylinder head temperature, exhaust gas temperature, and fuel scan readouts allow him to lean the engine out, yielding a fuel burn of just under 12 gallons per hour with a comfortable 2.5-hour range.

“It has a pretty benign stall flaps up and flaps down,” Harry reports. “It has a little adverse yaw. So when you roll into a turn you have to lead it a good bit with the rudder and the same thing when you roll out. But it flies so smoothly, even in turbulence.”

Aside from the restoration and the newer engine, the only other change Ballance Jr. has made that his father wouldn't recognize is converting the airplane's heel-actuated brakes to more conventional toe-brakes, a concession to Harry's switching back and forth between the Reliant and his other toe-brake equipped aircraft.

Ballance Jr. has flown the SR5A to Oshkosh twice, to Sun 'n Fun and even to Cape Canaveral, but finds he enjoys smaller fly-ins most.

“I'm beaming when I fly in to a new airfield or a show. It's a thrill for me!” ✈