

Lou Drendel

A Lifetime of Interest in Airplanes

By Sallie Caddell

Aviation artist Lou Drendel has experienced more in his 60-plus years than many can claim in an entire lifetime. This renowned artist, author, former paratrooper, skydiver and pilot is admirably humble when he speaks about his past experiences, which quickly and easily roll off his tongue as if they had happened only yesterday. These varied (and thrilling!) experiences Drendel has encountered in life and at the controls of a diverse group of aircraft pervade his art, allowing him to paint many different airplanes to the utmost of perfection.

The lone artist in his family, Drendel's talent emerged early in childhood and was further enhanced by his father's construction of solid models of combat airplanes during World War II. "Today I would consider my father a home improvement hobbyist; during World War II he built scale model airplanes of solid wood. He'd start with a block of wood and then would whittle away at it until it was perfect; and so I wouldn't destroy them, the finished airplanes—mostly military airplanes—were hung from wires that crisscrossed the ceiling of my bedroom. Falling asleep and waking up underneath those classic airplanes has definitely led to a lifetime interest in airplanes," recalls Drendel.

Drendel, who has early memories of drawing and painting airplanes at the age of five or six, is also an avid reader of military history. A reading of Ross Carter's *Those Devils in Baggy Pants* (a tribute to the 82nd Airborne Division) while enrolled at a military high school inspired him to become a paratrooper with the 325th Airborne Infantry Regiment. After serving his tour of duty, Drendel decided not to make a career in the military and enrolled in The American Academy of Art in Chicago. "I can't tell you how it happened, but I also got involved in sports car racing at that time. After I met and married my wife Carol, I couldn't afford to sports car race but I still thought I could jump out of airplanes!" he says.



Drendel, along with his wife, joined the Midwest Skydiving Club in 1963. "Late that summer I separated my shoulder on a parachute jump, but lucky for me, the pilot who was flying the airplane on that jump was a college student at Purdue who was pursuing a degree in Aeronautics. He had just earned his instructors rating and said he'd teach us to fly the following summer. I remember thinking that maybe staying in the airplane was a better idea than jumping out of it," laughs Drendel.

Drendel earned his private pilot license in 1965 and earned his commercial license the following year as well as aerobatic instruction. By 1968 he had logged more than 500 hours.

Drendel began painting airplanes more seriously when he entered back into the world of flying. "When the Vietnam War picked up, the *Chicago Tribune Sunday Magazine* published an eight-page feature on a series of paintings I had done depicting the Air War in Vietnam. I sent this supplement to aviation author and publisher Len Morgan, who suggested I write and illustrate a book on Vietnam and he'd publish it. I published my first book, *The Air War in Vietnam*, in 1968, and it was followed by *Aircraft of the Vietnam War* in 1970."



An A-7A Corsair II in the groove for landing on the USS Ranger (CVA-61) in the Gulf of Tonkin.

After Morgan sold his publishing company, Drendel began working with his current publisher, Squadron/Signal Publication—a relationship that has lasted since 1972. "My first book for Squadron/Signal was *F-4 Phantom In Action*, which was published in 1972, and I haven't counted, but I'd say I've written more than 70 books for their company to date," says Drendel.

In addition to his work for Squadron/Signal, Drendel, a founding member of the Lima Lima Flight Team, the original six aircraft civilian formation aerobatic team, has also coauthored a significant formation flying manual that was eventually adopted by the civilian warbird community.

Inspiration for each of Drendel's paintings is drawn from the particular book he has agreed to write for Squadron/Signal. "I consider myself more of a draftsman than an artist," he admits, "because I want the airplane to be as absolutely perfect as it can be. That trait definitely comes from my father—he was a perfectionist as well. He built those airplanes just so."

To achieve perfection, Drendel researches and draws for approximately three-quarters of the time he spends on any one painting. Though he considers the Internet a great resource, over the years Drendel has interviewed many significant military aviators and has amassed a large library of research materials. He has also had the rare opportunity to fly in many of the modern Military aircraft he has painted: the F/A-18, F-101, F4, F15, F16, B1 and B52, among others.

"In terms of aviation art, you see artists that are more concerned with atmospherics. They approach the painting from the standpoint of the landscape or the cloud formations around the airplanes. Though they do a wonderful job, to a trained eye, something just doesn't seem quite right: the planes are in a different spatial relationship and you can't help but think, 'the airplane couldn't or wouldn't do that.' Being a draftsman, I always want to portray the airplane in the correct atmospheric venue; I want to make sure I don't portray the airplane doing something it couldn't or wouldn't logically do in that particular situation," Drendel says.

He continues, "The painting is the easiest and most fun part for me. It's the drawing that's the most tough: getting the rivets and panel lines in the right place and putting the aircraft into the proper perspective is the hardest!" Drendel's attention to detail is certainly paying off. A doctor who recently purchased his art deemed him the Frank Netter of aviation art. Frank Netter—the artist who has drawn all of the illustrations for medical textbooks—is known as the Michelangelo of medical art, and to be compared to such a talent is a great compliment to Drendel, and one he takes to heart. ■

To view Lou Drendel's artwork or to request an original painting of a favorite airplane, visit www.aviation-art.net or call 941-408-5347.

Photo by Lou Drendel

www.autopilotmagazine.com



The Lima Lima Flight Team at the 1997 Chicago Air & Water Show opening; Drendel, flying the #5 position, had a camera mounted on the glare shield with a cable release running to his throttle hand.