



ADVANTAGE

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EMBRAER QUARTERLY
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LIVING THE DREAM

Motivated by a childhood dream, entrepreneur Jonathan Spano used his Phenom 300 to pursue a passion project filming action sequences for the 2022 summer blockbuster “Top Gun: Maverick”



Above: Owner of the Phenom Camera Ship, Jonathan Spano spent about two years in engineering, design and development to modify his aircraft to carry a camera system

Right page (top): The speed and the agility of the Phenom 300E allow for advanced aerial filming, such as diving behind an F-18 while filming for “Top Gun: Maverick” (2022)

Right page (bottom): The Phenom Camera Ship is the only FAA-certified civilian jet retrofitted with a gyro-stabilized camera system that creates a unique filming experience

What inspired you to take flying lessons?

I was one of those kids that built gliders and hung model airplanes from the ceiling. I loved airplanes, and of course, I loved the first “Top Gun” movie. I grew up dreaming of flying, but as life went on, I convinced myself it was not economically feasible, so I gave up on the dream.

As a teenager, I started a business with my brother, and many years later, we developed a successful company providing traffic management solutions. One of our notable projects included the now-famous 12-mile final journey of Space Shuttle Endeavour, from LAX Airport to the California Science Center, which took five weeks of planning and 400 personnel to orchestrate.

One day, our controller suggested we buy an aircraft. So, I went out and did a couple of lessons, liked it, and we bought a plane. In the beginning, we only had two offices in California, one in Sacramento and one in Los Angeles. I already had my private pilot’s license when we got our first aircraft. Since

I was studying for my Instrument Flight Rules (IFR) and building time, I would often fly to the Sacramento office, so it became a fun thing to do that was also good for the business.

As a successful entrepreneur and a pilot, what role has business aviation played in your company operations?

It is not uncommon for us to take off in the morning, fly to Denver and Chicago, and then fly to Detroit all in one day. Then, the next morning we’ll get up and go to Columbus, D.C., and Philadelphia. Once you start putting four or five executives in the aircraft, your cost-benefit increases tremendously because now you’re moving several people to all these locations.

The more I grew and expanded my experience as a pilot, the more the Phenom 300 stood out, in my opinion, as the best single pilot jet you could get. As a pilot, it was something I aspired to have, which motivated me to expand the business. We currently have two Phenom 300s, and as we’ve grown, it’s been hugely beneficial to have access to all of our locations. We only had two offices when we started; now, we’re approaching 50 locations throughout the U.S.

Can you tell us about the process of converting the Phenom 300 into the Phenom Camera Ship?

I wanted to get into the aerial cinematography business, so I partnered up with Fred North, who has extensive experience in the aerial cinematography space as a helicopter pilot and aerial coordinator. He would utilize my helicopter, mounting cameras on it, providing me with the opportunity to work for Hollywood, television and commercials.



About five years ago, he came to me and said they're making another "Top Gun" in a couple of years, and the studio was looking at different types of filming platforms. He knew I had the Phenom 300 and suggested we look into what it would take to modify my aircraft to carry a camera system—if I did, there was a good chance I could participate in the film.

It was an incredible opportunity but also stressful. I assumed all the risk and did the conversion of the aircraft with no commitment from Paramount Pictures that we would even get to participate. The process included rigorous safety standards and testing to gain full FAA certification for the two 300-pound camera systems attached to the outside of the aircraft. Once that was complete and we were approved to begin shooting, I felt genuinely excited. In the end, the risk paid off, but we spent about two years in engineering, design and development.

What was it like filming the action scenes for "Top Gun: Maverick" and flying with the U.S. Navy?

It took me back to my childhood, watching the first "Top Gun" and other similar films. It was a dream come true to work with the pilots, see what they do, and participate in that world.

I was awestruck by the skill and accuracy of the pilots and impressed with the Navy in general. As a civilian, you would never get within miles of an aircraft carrier underway, and the opportunity to watch an entire squadron of F-18s land on a moving carrier with zero radio communications was just mind blowing.

Which film sequences took advantage of the aircraft's unique performance capabilities?

All of them! Nothing in that film was CGI. Besides the occasional explosion or duplicated image, everything you see on camera is real and filmed with my Phenom, a helicopter and one other aircraft, the Cine Jet.

While shooting, I flew with the Aerial Coordinator, Kevin LaRosa, a seasoned and experienced stunt pilot. However, I still had to receive training and get certified for acrobatic maneuvers and flying in formation because everything was done by hand. Autopilot was not an option, so the aircraft's maneuvering, stability and hand-flying capabilities were critical to our ability to capture the sequences. We put the aircraft in positions you never would as a general aviation pilot, operating in canyons, tight maneuvering and doing high-performance climbs over peaks.

Most of the flying was done at the bottom end of maneuvering speeds for the F-18, between 250 and 300 knots.

But we constantly pushed the limits of the Phenom Camera Ship, and despite the considerable weight and drag from the two exterior cameras and the weight of the crew, it kept pace with all those high-power military planes. I don't know how a lesser-performing aircraft could have done it.

What is your favorite style of aerial videography, and have you done any other projects since filming the movie?

As the CEO of a company, it's challenging to put in the time to work on these projects. "Top Gun" set the bar high; I love filming air-to-air because, as a pilot, you don't get to fly in formation often, and the ability to capture beautiful footage of another aircraft is pretty exciting. I can't do it all singlehandedly, so we use a few other pilots with the right experience. Ultimately, it is something I'm passionate about, and I love flying, so whenever possible, I make time.

In addition to working with the U.S. Navy, the aircraft's FAA certification opened up many opportunities for where we can fly. I've worked with SpaceX, the Air Force, National Geographic, and NetJets, and we have a couple of Netflix shows coming up as well. Recently, my aircraft flew to Florida to film the Artemis rocket launch for NASA. ←

