

High Profile: Jan Collmer

Executive's zest for life is grounded in his stunt flying



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Jan Collmer believes life is best viewed from upside down at 200 mph.

It is a symptom, he says, of a disease that drives him to spend weekends strapped inside a hot-rod stunt plane, looping, rolling and diving until the difference between up and down begins to blur.

At 66, the Dallas businessman and philanthropist is a leader in North Texas aviation circles, as well as a favorite on the national air-show circuit. Each summer, he and his red, white and blue Extra 300L buzz the crowds at major air shows across the nation. Most of his friends think he's crazy to take such risks, but Mr. Collmer says anything less wouldn't really be living.



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"To me, flying is spiritual," says Jan Collmer. The 66-year-old Dallas executive and civic leader, a nationally known stunt pilot, loves being at the controls of his aerial hot rod, the Extra 300.

"I love everything about it, and I have just as much fun flying today as I did on my first flight in 1954."

Mr. Collmer is president and CEO of Collmer Semiconductor Inc., a \$50 million-a-year high-

tech electronics company that employs about 120 people. He served two terms on the Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport Board and was active in the Greater Dallas Chamber of Commerce, including serving as chairman from 1988 to 1990.

He says he developed a love for aviation as a child, watching World War II airplanes fly overhead as they worked their way through the ferry base at Dallas Love Field. Determined to fly, he enlisted in the Navy. In 1955, eight months after his first ride in an airplane, he made six successful landings on an aircraft carrier.

For the next 12 years, as both an active military pilot and a reservist, he got a chance to fly some of the hottest jets available to U.S. fighter pilots.

Friends say there is nothing he won't try and little he can't do well.

"Most people know Jan as a superb pilot who is upside-down more than he's right side up, but that only scratches the surface," says Dallas investor Bill Cooper, a close friend. "I have known him for 40 years, and he surprises me every time we talk."

Friends and relatives say that Joseph Jan Collmer is both a dreamer and a realist, an accomplished artist with a near-photographic memory – and a born storyteller who can tell jokes for hours with the timing of a stand-up comedian.

He studies the smallest issues from every angle, yet he thrives on situations in which the outcome is a gamble.

His wife of 45 years, Suzanne Collmer, says her husband learned compassion from his parents, Joseph and Rosemary Collmer, while being reared as a devout Catholic in South Dallas. She says he most resembles his mother, who was gregarious and always positive.

"Jan loves being around people and is always trying new things," she says. "He feels strongly that he has a responsibility to give back to the community, so he spends a large part of his time volunteering for just about everything."

Mr. Collmer is president of the Frontiers of Flight Museum at Dallas Love Field, which he co-founded with Mr. Cooper and U.S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison. The museum is considered one of the best small aviation museums in the nation. He also is a dedicated supporter of the Pines Camp near Gladewater, Texas, as well as a number of other charities and educational institutions

Joseph Jan Collmer

Date and place of birth: Dec. 6, 1934, in Dallas

Occupation: High-tech executive

Family: Wife, Suzanne; daughters, Kathryn Scharplaz, Sheryl Collmer, Deborah Collmer; grandchildren, Tommy and Danny Scharplaz

Favorite movie: Searching for Bobby Fischer, Ordinary People, The Wizard of Oz, Dr. Strangelove

Favorite book: Last Days of Summer by Steve Kluger

My ideal vacation: Touring Ireland
I drive a: Cadillac

My hero is: Bill Cooper, Dallas civic leader and former World War II bomber pilot

The best advice I could give a 20-year-old is: Work hard, know computers, save 10 percent to invest - always

My last meal would be: Smoked salmon with bagel, cream cheese and all the trimmings

My trademark expression: "I'm rolling," or "You bet."

My worst habit is: Overcommitting

My best asset is: My wife, Suzanne

Behind my back, people say: I don't want to know!

Guests at my fantasy dinner party: Galileo; legendary aviator Glenn Curtiss; Winston Churchill

I wish I could sing (and dance) like: Gene Kelly

If I had a different job, I'd be: A test pilot

Favorite time of day is: Sunset

Favorite city outside Dallas: Santa Fe

I'm happiest when: I'm awake, more of the time. Flying.

"Jan Collmer is a very, very spirited person who really does make a difference," Ms. Hutchison says. "But I tell him all the time that he is absolutely stark raving mad to do the things he does in that little plane of his."

Favorite music: Classical
Favorite airplane: Extra 300L - best overall
Favorite jet airplane: F8 Crusader

Mr. Collmer sees nothing unusual in diving an aircraft straight at the ground. He officially opened the newest runway at D/FW Airport by cutting a ribbon with his propeller in a knife-edge pass just a few feet above the concrete.

There's always a chance, he says, of infecting someone else with the aviation bug. He relishes telling of a young U.S. Air Force officer who approached him a few years ago at an air show in Fort Worth. It turned out that a ride with Mr. Collmer had inspired him to become a fighter pilot.

"All I could say was 'Yes!' Nothing motivates me more than some young kid getting fired up by all of this."

He estimates that he has given more than 2,500 rides in his stunt planes in the past 15 years. He first takes passengers through basic maneuvers, such as loops and rolls. If they aren't already turning green, he will graduate to more complex and brutal ones, such as tail slides and a trick called a Lomcevak, in which the airplane simultaneously tumbles end over end and wing over wing.

"If I take a person riding in that airplane, one thing I can assure you is that he or she will never forget it. It's what I call a life experience," he says.

He says only a few passengers have gotten sick in flight. One was a Navy pilot who misanswered a series of questions that Mr. Collmer asks his passengers between maneuvers to size up their tolerance to the stress of aerobatics.

"I don't mind it if somebody has wobbly knees after we fly, but the last thing I want to do is make them sick," he said.

Mr. Collmer fell into aerobatics almost by accident in the late 1970s after watching an air show at Lancaster Municipal Airport. "Until then, I was thinking that I might get into flying radio-controlled airplanes. Then I thought, why do that when I could be flying the real thing?"

He purchased a fabric-covered single-engine Decathlon stunt plane in 1978 and took aerobatics lessons. He performed his first air show in 1980 on a 115-degree day in El Reno, Okla., and from there he was hooked.

Since then, he has owned three Pitts biplanes and his current airplane, the Extra 300, which he says handles like a fighter. He memorializes these and other aircraft in pen-and-ink drawings for a calendar that he publishes each year and sends to 10,000 friends and clients.

During a typical air-show routine, Mr. Collmer puts his airplane through a punishing series of maneuvers that begins with a snap-roll just after takeoff, causing gasps in the audience because it looks as if he has suddenly lost control.

After that, he performs an aerial ballet as close to the crowd as he can get. A favorite of audiences are torque rolls and tail slides, during which he makes the airplane climb straight up until it stops. It hangs by its propeller until the nose drops through and the airplane exits the maneuver in a screaming dive.

"I go anywhere from plus-200 knots, which is about 230mph, to minus 30mph in the tail slide," he says. He laughs. "God willing, I accelerate at the end."

Although he is not as famous as other air show performers, Mr. Collmer is considered by his peers to be one of the best.

"There are a lot of people who get into air shows because it's an ego thing," says three-time national aerobatics champion Patty Wagstaff. "But Jan is a great pilot and a gracious guy who is obviously out there to promote aviation."

Although friends say that Mr. Collmer and his wife love to spend time together, his biggest passion is her greatest worry. Suzanne Collmer opposes his stunt flying and wants him to retire. She refuses to watch him fly.

Over the years, they have worked out a truce in which she stays home when he goes to air shows, but he calls her after each performance to let her know he is all right.

Mrs. Collmer says that while her husband was still a young naval aviator, a pilot in his squadron crashed during an aerial demonstration.

"I was with a group of young wives, and half of us were pregnant with our first children," she says. "It was an hour and a half before we found out whose husband it was. I don't ever want to do that again."

She says she enjoys flying with him in his Cessna 210, which they frequently take on trips to Kansas to visit one of their three grown daughters and two grandchildren.

Ironically, Mr. Collmer says, it was a routine flight in the Cessna that gave him the greatest scare of his flying career. He and his mechanic were flying his daughter and grandson back to Dallas for Mr. Collmer's 60th birthday party in November 1994 when the engine blew over Oklahoma.

On cross-country flights, Mr. Collmer tries to fly at an altitude of least 7,500 feet for safety. This time it paid off.

"We had the altitude, so we glided about 12 miles to the nearest airport," Mr. Collmer says. "But the whole time, I was terribly frightened. There I was with my daughter and 13-month-old grandson, and I could not say for sure how the story was going to turn out."

Mr. Collmer says he is not oblivious to the potential dangers of what he does, but he deals with it by constantly reducing risks. In April 1996, longtime friend and legendary North Texas aviator Charlie Hillard was killed in a freak accident when his airplane flipped over while taxiing after an air show. Mr. Collmer immediately installed a roll bar on his Extra 300 that should protect him from a similar accident.

Still, he says, everything in life – from starting a business to tumbling through the sky in an airplane – carries risk.

"You just minimize the risks and move on," he says. "Otherwise, you haven't lived."

Mr. Collmer says he hopes he can remain active until he dies. He has no intention of slowing down.

Nor will he settle for tamer toys.

"If it won't go 200 mph or turn upside down, I won't have any part of it."
