

Baja Pioneers

Sebastián Romo-Santillan “CAPI ROMO”

This aviator left an indelible mark on Baja Sur

-by Michael Koehn | photos courtesy of Santillan Family-

Cabo Living has had the privilege of meeting and documenting the stories of many of the people who came to southern Baja before there was much here at all and who were instrumental in developing the area into what it has become today. From Abelardo “Rod” Rodriguez to Luis Bulnes and Luis Coppola to Marco Monroy, each of these pioneers left an indelible mark on the local landscape.

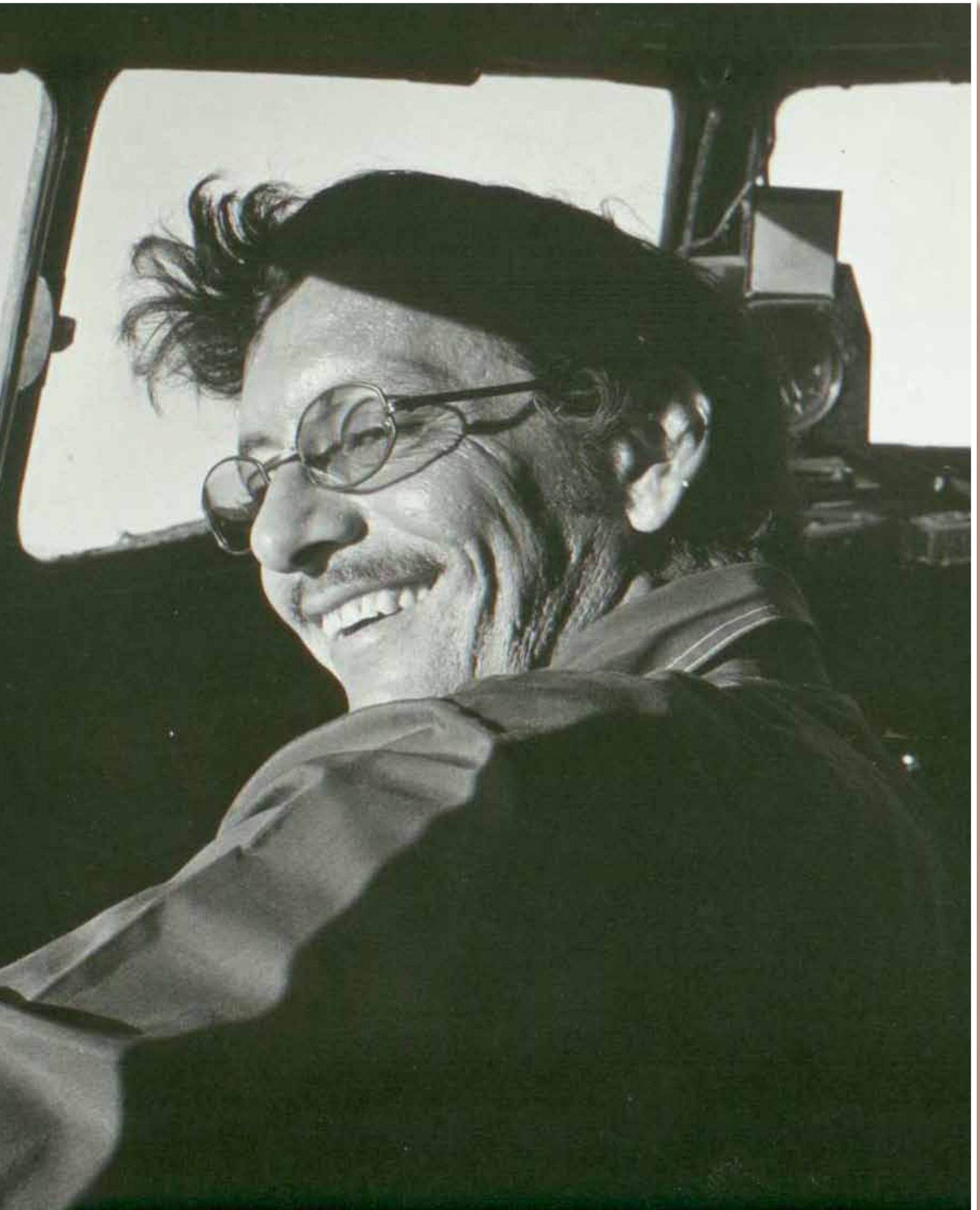
It was in meeting these people and hearing their stories that we sometimes discovered other names, people who were also part of the history of Los Cabos and were connected to Cabo’s pioneering legends. One of these names was that of Sebastian Romo, known in this community as “Capi Romo,” an aviator whose passion for flying and Los Cabos made him one of the key players in the area. We recently had an opportunity to meet with his son, Eduardo Romo, a local architect in his offices at the Plaza Pioneros in central Cabo, and our meeting, as he unfolded the story of his father’s life, gave us a unique perspective on the way things developed in the early days of Los Cabos.

Sebastián Romo was born in Mexico City on December 27, 1938. His father was a pharmaceutical chemist, and from a very early age young Romo showed a fascination with aviation. He was able to attend pilot school in his teens and obtained a license to fly commercial aircraft at the age of eighteen. Looking for work as a pilot, he was able to start flying planes that delivered agricultural fumigation in the state of Chiapas. He flew crop dusters for two years there, and that eventually led to more agricultural fumigation work in central Baja.

The first airline to service southern Baja California was Aeronaves de Mexico (Aeroméxico), which began flights between

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the mainland and La Paz in 1941. After World War II, Mayo Obregón, the son of former Mexican president Alvaro Obregón, established an airline called Trans-mar de Cortes, hiring pilots and using war surplus DC-3s, giving Sebastian Romo to an opportunity to move to La Paz in 1959 and work with Cap. Luis Coppola Bonillas, who, as it turned out, was living on the same block. Flying a fleet of Cessnas, Beechcrafts and DC-3s, Romo shuttled passengers and goods over key routes from Ensenada to La Paz and from La Paz to Mazatlán. At the time Baja California Sur wasn't yet a state; it was still a territory administered by an appointed governor.

It was while working for Trans-mar de Cortes that Romo met Elvia Carrillo in La Paz. She was the daughter of the well-known doctor Raul Carrillo Salgado (the community in Todos Santos gave his name to one of the main streets and the main hospital in San José is also named after him), and she and Sebastian Romo fell in

love and were married on August 8, 1960. He was twenty-one at the time, and she was just seventeen.

At that time tourism in southern Baja was very limited, but Abelardo "Rod" Rodriguez had already built Las Cruces in 1950 and Palmilla in 1958, and, working with Bud Parr, Hotel Cabo San Lucas at Chileno in 1961, which were joined by the Hacienda in Cabo in 1962 as the only tourist destinations along the tip of southern Baja.

With his connections in the federal government and relationships with local businessman, Rodriguez, who was also a pilot, had been able to get the routes to those remote properties, as people would fly down to La Paz from Los Angeles, and from La Paz take the short hops to the hotel airstrips that Rodriguez had built. 1962 Rod Rodriguez asked Luis Coppola Bonillas to fly for him on the routes to his properties, and they in turn invited Sebastian Romo to join them to form the small private airline servicing properties in southern Baja they called Servicios Aereos S.A. and was funded on June 17th, 1967 (the name changed to Aero California in 1982). Once the routes were established, they flew Cessna 185s, Cessna 206s, Cessna 402s, Beachcraft C45Hs, Aerocomander 560As, Douglas DC3As and Convair CV-340s to those southernmost destinations.

As more and more people began to discover southern Baja in the mid-sixties, business with the airline grew, and Sebastian

found himself spending more and more time in Cabo San Lucas. At the time the three airstrips serving the hotels were the only connections to the outlying areas, as there were no serviceable roads to La Paz. Romo decided to build a house in Cabo on Calle Cabo San Lucas, which became a popular stopover for pilots flying into the area, with a pool table, a bar and even a TV, and became known as the *Casa de Pilotos* (it's being used as a school these days). One of the few other landmarks in the area was the cantina on the outskirts of town called La Coyotera (it was prohibited then to sell alcohol within the town limits), and one of the first principal thoroughfares in Cabo was the path that extended from the cannery directly to the cantina on the periphery, a route that later became Calle Hidalgo.

In late 1976, Mexico's federal government became involved in developing the coastline in southern Baja, deciding to expand the marina and build an airport outside San José del Cabo. As the airstrip behind the Hacienda was in the way of the marina project, they decided to move the landing strip to another location and picked a site on the outskirts of town. The contract to create a new airstrip was given to a construction company Construcciones Baja Sur, who brought the first bulldozer and grader into the area (those two original pieces of equipment are now displayed on elevated pedestals in the parking lot of Plaza Pioneros).

(BELOW AND FAR RIGHT) | A young Sebastian Romo at his first communion. Sebastian after fumigation in Chiapas. "Capi Romo" at his commercial pilot graduation. In Mexico City, Sebastian Romo (far left), Luis Copolla Jr., Guillermo Salas and others met regarding the "Marlin Wars." An aerial view of the early Hacienda Airfield shows a place Romo frequented in days past.





In the very first month of the project, the construction company went bankrupt and the project was halted. Since there was no legal way to revoke the contract, the only way for the airstrip project to move forward was to have someone buy the company and ownership of the contract, and that's what Sebastian Romo decided to do in 1976. Now in his thirties, Romo bought out the construction company for a nominal fee, created the runway outside Cabo and closed the strip at the Hacienda.

But construction really wasn't the business he wanted to be in, and since the airline business now required him to live to La Paz, he sold his shares in Servicios Aéreos S.A. in 1982 (as it changed its name to Aero California), retired from the airline business and decided to work to promote tourism with the local hotels in the area. Honoring his career in aviation, the federal government gave Sebastian Romo a special recognition called "Emilio Carranza" for his outstanding commercial pilot career and his 15,000 flight hours in service to Baja California Sur.

"Capi Romo" had a good relationship with the hotel owners, since he brought in their guests by air, but the owners themselves often were at odds with each other and the

infighting did little to help in the collective effort to promote Cabo San Lucas at large. There were also problems with the unions and commercial fishermen, and Romo stepped in and met with the hotel owners and convinced them to stop fighting with each other and work together in their best interests. And, with that initiative, he became the first president of the local hotel association and began dealing with the unions and other problems that the fledgling industry faced. Banding together, they created a core first-generation platform that would serve the growing needs of the area's hotel owners. In recognition of his efforts, the Los Cabos Hotel Association presented a very special diploma with merit to Sebastian Romo in 1983.

In those early days in Cabo, fishing was the key tourist attraction, and Romo had discovered that the fishing stocks and key billfish just offshore were being depleted by commercial Japanese fishing boats. Angered by what he saw as the poaching of the natural resources of the area, Romo, Luis Coppola and Luis Bulnes went to the federal government in Mexico City and got the Senate and Secretary of Fisheries Pedro Ojeda Paullada to pass regulations that

protected the fishery and local economy. With this action they were able to protect a five-mile marine area off the coast, designating it for sport fishing only. "Sport fishing will always be important to tourism here, as long as we take good care of it," Romo said. "Between Cabo San Lucas and the Revillagigedo Islands south of us, we have more striped marlin than anywhere in the world. That is a totally unique and irreplaceable resource. You can build a golf course anywhere, but these marlin are only here." As a by-product of that action, Cabo San Lucas found itself in the headlines of newspapers around the world for its pioneering efforts in fishery conservation.

With the area attracting attention for its fight in the "Marlin War," (which lasted from 1978 to 1992) there was also a movement to give this section of southern Baja a name, something distinct from a list of small towns in the area, and the name Los Cabos was chosen. As the Mexican government began to promote it, the designation made people more aware of the area as a tourist destination.

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(ABOVE AND FAR RIGHT) | *Sebastian Romo in Mexico City, receiving the Emilio Carranza Medal. Sebastian frequently flew DC3 aircraft. Captain Romo and Luis Bulnes, fishing with friends.*

With the political experience he had gained, in 1992 Romo was named to the local city council, where he took an active role in the transformation of the local government to meet the challenges that the community was experiencing. For his efforts, the Chamber for Industrial Transformation of Los Cabos and the state government gave him a special recognition for his work as a pioneer in the aviation business in 2004.

A sidebar story involving Hollywood is another indication as to how sometimes fate has a way of stepping in and assist an institution that otherwise might have slipped away. In 1975 a film crew settled into Cabo to shoot a movie called "Foxtrot," (later released as "The Other Side of Paradise"), with most of the film crew holed up in Luis Bulnes' new Solmar property. The movie starred Peter O'Toole, but the lead actress, Charlotte Rampling, who was staying at the Hacienda, got sick and had to fly home to recuperate. What they thought would take a few weeks took three months, and for that period the film crew had nothing to do

but eat breakfast, lunch and dinner and go through the hotel's cerveza and tequila stock as quickly as possible. That misfortune for Rampling and the film company turned out to be a huge windfall for the Solmar, which has yet to establish itself as a premium resort, and perhaps kept it from going under.

Encouraged by the growth curve he saw in Cabo, Romo purchased land in the center of town from the local Ceseña family and considered building a business class hotel that could accommodate local workers and visitors. But a strike at Hotel Cabo San Lucas changed his mind and he decided to build commercial space instead, including the Amerimed Hospital on Boulevard Lázaro Cárdenas working with son Eduardo.

But as Cabo continued to grow and evolve it also became more and more not to his liking, and Romo started taking trips to the outlying areas, one of which brought him to the small town of La Ventana south of Las Cruces on the coast opposite Isla Cerralvo. He fell in love with the town, which reminded him of Cabo when it was still a small, quiet fishing village, and decided to move to a beachfront property to make it his home and workshop.

In 2005, with the help of son Eduardo, he moved to La Ventana and began working in his shop almost around the clock. Despite all his accomplishments in aviation and tourism in the area, Romo now felt

he was finally free to pursue what he loved.

"He was very passionate about aeronautical design," Eduardo says, "He worked on countless designs over the final years of his life. We spent a lot of great times there together and he was very happy doing exactly what he wanted to do."

The early experiments began with wing design, finding ways to make them more efficient and stable, and also included work with prop designs and the conversation of wind energy. At final count, Romo and son Eduardo built some twenty wind turbines. They continued refining his designs until he passed away in 2012 at the age of 74.

Like many of the great men who came to southern Baja to carve out a life for themselves, Sebastian Romo never considered himself a pioneer. He simply spent a good part of his life trying to do what he thought was right for himself and the community. Aviation was the true love of his life and he was also positioned by circumstance to support and protect the developing communities of Los Cabos. He was passionate about that and everything that he did, and in his last days at La Ventana, there was finally the truest kind of passion in spending all his time doing sometime he loved, a pursuit that began when he was very young and kept him aloft for so many years of his life.

El Fin!