

AIRPLANE OWNERS I HAVE KNOWN

BY

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Owning an airplane means different things to different people. While working at a Fixed Base Operation in the '60s and '70s, I encountered a variety of owners who based their planes at our establishment.

One guy had bought a Cessna 180 from one of the local oil companies. This outfit would purchase an airplane new from Cessna and then disassemble it and customize it to their own standards, usually with amphibious floats. They'd corrosion-proof the thing, add a seaplane kit, and install the avionics their operation needed.

They'd give it superb maintenance during its working life, then they'd restore it to wheels and sell it at a very reasonable price, way before it got old and worn enough to cause them any problems.

This fellow had bought one of those planes. He based it in our hangar. We stored it at the back, behind the other planes that would have to go in and out. The reason was that this particular plane seldom went flying. In fact, the only time I saw it go out was right after its annual inspection every year. The mechanic would show up and take off all the cowlings and inspection panels. He'd change the oil, pull a differential compression check, and perform whatever routine maintenance items he felt were needed. I guess he'd charge the battery too.

When this inspection was complete, the owner would show up and go flying. I watched him come in for his annual landing one day. He was extremely high on his approach. But he got it down before he ran out of runway, bouncing several times and swerving just a bit.

He taxied in to the ramp and told the crew to put the bird away. I didn't know this gentleman, but I introduced myself and asked him if he'd like to take some dual instruction in his Cessna.

He drew himself up and sneered down at me, saying, "Do you think I need it?" clearly insulted at the very notion. If it had been a Victorian novel, it would have been one of those scenes that begins, "... 'Sir, said he,' casting upon me a look of severe disapprobation..." That was the last conversation I ever had with the gentleman. This conversation took place before the days of biennial flight reviews. I guess he risked only his own life and property, flying once a year, so the careless/reckless law would not apply.

Another guy who based with us owned a Bonanza. It was his baby. He'd come out and wash it and wax it and clean out the interior, whether it needed it or not.

It transpired that this gentleman, for some reason, sold a half-interest in the bird to another fellow. I don't think it was his idea to do this. Reading between the lines, I'm suspecting that his wife may have had something to do with this sale. It certainly must have cost a bundle to own and operate an airplane, even back in those days, especially without the financial backing of a partner.

When the partner would go out on a trip, this guy would come out to the airport and fidget. Somebody once commented that he was “nervous as a dog shittin’ razor blades.” When the plane would get back, he’d supervise its return to its place in the hangar and would fuss over the thing until the partner went home. Then he’d break out his cleaning stuff and work on his prize possession until it was back squeaky clean.

If I ever saw someone who shouldn’t have a partner, it was this guy. I think he finally ended up selling the thing. He just couldn’t take the strain of sharing his baby.

In later years, I flew with a gentleman who might be categorized as “concrete-sequential.” In other words, he was an extremely organized, neat-and-tidy kind of fellow.

I worked with this guy on his instrument rating. He bought the book that gave all the questions that could possibly be on the written exam – I think there were nearly a thousand of them – and went through the questions in every subject area. He’d start in on each section and answer questions until he was convinced that he understood the subject. Then he’d move on to the next section. If he missed a question, he’d put the book aside and research the subject until he thought he had it mastered.

This poor guy finally took the test and made a grade of 98%. It like to tore him apart. I tried to explain that it was a pass/fail test, that anyone who made 70% or better passed – that he had actually wasted 28 points. To no avail. The guy was genuinely devastated.

During one cross-country training flight, we got into a little light shower, down around Thibodaux, Louisiana. My student,

the owner of a cherry Cessna 172, was flying under the hood. I thought he was kidding when he started expressing alarm over the raindrops hitting his beautiful plane. Come to find out, he was serious. I heard from some of his fellow ramp rats that he spent the next day with some touch-up paint, fixing what he considered the damage done by the raindrops.

For the record, I once flew a Cessna 180 through a hailstorm. It didn't do any damage to the paint. In fact, it took the bug stains off the leading edges of wings, tail, and struts. It turned out to be a fine way to clean the plane, for someone whose nerves could stand the stress of stumbling into a hailstorm.

The Cessna 172 guy would also come out to the airport after work (He was a C.P.A.) and open the doors, even if he didn't take it up for a spin around the pattern. He claimed that he needed to air it out every day to prevent the possibility of mildew starting in his carpets and seat covers.

This like-new airplane was sitting in its tiedown location, minding its own business one afternoon, when a freight dog in a Twin Beech came roaring up to the ramp, doing about 30 miles an hour. One of his brakes failed about the time he reached the flight line, and the monster twin ended up wiping out several of the parked airplanes. Guess whose plane was one that got obliterated.

This fellow took the insurance money and bought into a little Grumman single with some other folks. I understand that he drove his partners nuts, trying to keep it neat and clean to his high standards. Have I mentioned that some people shouldn't try to go partners in an airplane?

I've seen a number of partnerships and flying clubs fail because of lack of organization. One recurring problem these enterprises have is that a partner will come out to the airport expecting to take off on a trip in the bird, and the plane is not there. One of the other partners decided, at the last minute, that he'd take it, and of course he wouldn't have time to check the schedule to see whether the plane was available. That kind of thing gets old fast.

Another common problem with partnerships is that they sometimes charge a nominal amount to stay in the group, but don't require the partners to remain qualified to fly the bird. There was a large group a while back that owned a plane and charged their members twenty-five dollars a month to stay in the partnership. They ended up with a whole bunch of partners, but only two of them ever went flying.

On the face of it, that sounds like a good deal for the guys who flew. The problem was that these other folks had voting privileges in the organization, and they'd seldom vote for spending money on their pride and joy. Sometimes the airplane would be down for maintenance or repairs, and they couldn't get it back airworthy because nobody wanted to appropriate any extra money to get the thing back to flying status.

The other problem with a setup like that is that you could get some occasional fliers in the group. They'd maybe come out once or twice a year, get some instruction if you were lucky, bat around the traffic pattern a few times, and then hang up their pilot wings until the next time the mood moved them.

The worst result of this practice I ever saw was when one of the partners in a Mooney, who hadn't flown for more than six

months, decided he'd take his family on a vacation trip. He came out the day before they were supposed to leave to "get current." He landed gear-up while he was trying to get in his three touch-and-goes.

When I would get involved in a partnership, I always tried to get all of the partners to agree to fly some minimum amount, and if they didn't, they had to pay for those hours anyway. This practice had the dual function of discouraging deadwood partners from staying in the partnership, and also encouraging all of us to stay current. The usual requirement was that each partner was to fly at least four hours a month. Usually, we had until the end of the year to fly up our forty-eight hours, and everybody's account would be zeroed out as of the first of each year. In addition to keeping us current, it kept a healthy cash flow moving into the bank account, making it less likely that there would be a financial crisis if something went wrong with the airplane requiring expensive repairs.

The fewest people I've ever been in a partnership with was three, and the most was five. Actually, when we had three partners we found that the airplane didn't fly enough to keep it mechanically healthy, so we took on another guy who wanted to learn to fly, but who was not an owner. Believe it or not, partnerships have more problems with insufficient flying rather than with too much.

I now own a Cessna 182 with four other people, and the operation runs smoothly. When people hear that five people are sharing one airplane they often remark that it must be difficult to meet everyone's needs with that many people. But I'm here to report that our baby spends most of its time sitting in its hangar.

We run the schedule online, using the Google calendar that we get for free. If a member logs on and sees that the bird is scheduled for a time he wants to use it, he usually calls up the other party and the two of them work it out. Most of the time, we try to accommodate one another's needs, since lack of cooperation in this area is a two-edged sword.

We have one member with school-age children, and he and they pretty much have to make trips during the kids' vacation time. My wife and I like to attend the Sun 'N Fun fly-in as often as we can, and we also rent a condo in Colorado every year for several weeks for late-summer hiking trips. Those kinds of things make you less flexible when others want to use the bird during times when you have it scheduled.

My partners and I discussed the matter at one of our monthly meetings. We decided that we didn't need another rule, but that we'd continue to deal with these conflicts on an informal basis. It has been working well, as far as I can see. Luckily, every member of this group is the kind of person who shares easily, and we are all anxious to make accommodations to the needs of our fellow owners, as much as possible.

The most obnoxious airplane owner, from the point of view the line crew, was a guy who owned (yes, you guessed it) another Bonanza. For some reason, our boss thought this airplane should be stored at the back of the hangar. Once in a while, the owner of this airplane would call the office to order his airplane hauled out in the late afternoon. We all groaned when this would happen, since we knew what was about to happen. He would come out and spend about half an hour inspecting the bird, then he'd get in and start her up. He'd taxi

out and take off. Then he'd shoot about three touch-and-goes and then taxi back in and shut down. Following this performance, the line crew, who was now about an hour late getting off work, was expected to put the plane back into its place in the hangar, then stack all the other planes in their usual locations before the hangar doors could be closed and everyone could knock off for the day.

The owner, supported by the boss, insisted that the airplane could not simply be tied down outside for the night. After all, he was paying good money to have his toy under cover when he was not out flying, and the airplanes would simply not fit in properly if they were not all in their accustomed locations.

This situation, of course, was not the fault of the owner. But it was one of the most irritating practices that the working men of the F.B.O. had to endure.

This is but a sample of the menagerie of airplane owners I have known. Most of them were well-meaning, high-achieving individuals who had personality quirks that colored their approach to airplane ownership. In this list of interesting personalities, I am probably the only totally normal person mentioned, the only general aviation owner who is totally lacking in personal quirks. And if you believe that, I have some nice canal bottoms you might be interested in buying.