THE CLIPPER

BY

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In the late ‘40s, Piper built a little 2-seat ragwing plane called the Vagabond. In 1949 that model was enlarged into a 4-seat jobbie with an electrical system and a bigger engine that they called the Clipper. The next year the Clipper was given an even bigger engine, one of those steering wheels in the shape of an inverted “D” and flaps, and that aircraft was known as the Pacer. In the ‘60s, some aeronautical genius discovered that nosewheel airplanes were easier to learn to handle on the ground than were their taildragging forbears, and the Tri-Pacer was born. This model was similar to the Pacer, but it had a still bigger engine and a nosewheel. The whole collection of these short-wing Pipers shared a close family resemblance. They all had a welded tube structure covered with fabric. The four-seat models had a front door on the right side and a rear door on the left.

The first airplane I owned was a PA-16 Clipper, also known as a paper clipper or a paper Piper clipper. It resembled one of those little stick-and-paper model airplanes that were in vogue before the invention of foam and plastic. My friend Harry discovered this little bird sitting in a T-hangar in Houma, Louisiana. The owner was evidently one of those characters who liked to piddle around with the machine rather than flying it. So he had disassembled it just enough so that he never had to

take it off the ground, leaving himself with a machine with which he could tinker to his heart's content.

Harry was a licensed mechanic. When he got the machine out of the hangar and washed the dust off, he discovered a very attractive little package awaiting some minor work to get it airworthy. We got a third member involved in the enterprise, and soon we were the proud new owners of the Clipper.

There was nothing sleek about this machine. It looked boxy, and it waddled around on the ground like a puppy just getting its legs under control. The paint job was either an off-white or a very pale brown, with dark brown trim. Somebody remarked that it looked like a peanut butter sandwich. It was about as exciting and sexy as a peanut butter sandwich, as a matter of fact, and soon we all started calling it "Peanut Butter."

The little bird was pulled along by a Lycoming engine that claimed to put out 108 horsepower, and it cruised through the air at very close to 108 miles per hour, so that was an important number for us peanut butter pilots. The little mill burned about 8 gallons per hour, not very efficient, but typical for the low-compression engines that powered most little puddle-jumpers of the era.

It had a fuel tank in one wing and another one in the nose, just forward of the firewall. A little valve selected the wing tank, the nose tank, or the "off" position, actuated by a tubular shaft that extended back from the firewall to a handle on a bracket at the bottom of the control panel. The front end of this shaft mated to a little square nub that protruded from the firewall and was secured to the nub with a cotter pin.

The electrical system was also rudimentary. “Crude but effective” would aptly describe this array. There was a generator turned by the engine and a mechanical voltage regulator resembling an old Wheatstone bridge. The ship was equipped with an R.C. bottle that could be used to tap on the voltage regulator when it would get stuck. For some reason, an R.C. bottle worked better than other implements that we tried. There were running lights, and the previous owner had installed eyebrow lights to illuminate the various instruments on the Clipper’s panel. I think there was even a rheostat to control the brightness of these instrument lights. And of course there was one of those little venturi tubes on the side of the fuselage to provide vacuum to the gyro instruments. Crude but effective.

The master switch and the starter button were located in a metal box under the front left corner of the pilot’s seat. You flipped the switch from the neutral “off” position to either of the “on” positions, then fumbled for the button at the bottom of the box that you pushed upward to activate the starter. The reason the master switch had two “on” positions was that there were two master fuses protecting the circuit. If one were to blow, you simply flipped the switch to the other position, running current through the stand-by fuse, allowing activation of the starter. If both fuses were inop, it was a simple matter to flip the propeller by hand to get her running. Changing these fuses was an awkward process, and I doubt anyone could have performed such a change in flight; so it was fortunate that we had the stand-by fuse, just in case.

The radio was a little Narco device that had a VOR receiver and several transmitting frequencies. It had a transmitting range of about five miles, just enough to get us within shouting

distance of control towers when we wished to enter what we now call “Class D” airspace. The VOR, likewise, had a maximum range of between five and ten miles, but it seems to have served our needs, as I never remember feeling short of navigational information. Sectional charts were cheap in those days, and our magnetic compass was right on the money.

The seats were rudimentary, just like the rest of the machine. But they were relatively comfortable, and on several occasions I hauled four souls aloft without any problem. There was only one seatbelt that ran clear across the front seat. A tab on one side was inserted into a locking mechanism on the opposite strap, much like the seatbelts of the old DC-3s and other passenger aircraft of the period. Crude but effective. Following a nose-over at the end of a forced landing, some friends of mine who were occupying the front seats walked away without a scratch. I’ll tell you about the forced landing in a minute.

The stopping power was provided by hydraulic expander tube brakes. One of these devices worked fairly well, but the other one leaked some, and we carried a squeegee can of brake fluid to pump it up as a routine part of the preflight activities. We learned never to count on having both brakes working at peak efficiency. The bird had a low landing speed, and it was easy to let it roll to a stop on its own, in most cases. If worse came to worst, an intentional ground loop might have been in order, but I don’t remember ever having to resort to such a drastic measure. Taxiing downwind sometimes required a crewmember to get out and hang on to the back of the fuselage, right in front of the tailfeathers. Otherwise the little bird would make like a wind sock and try to turn back into the wind.

The tailwheel presented us with the one problem we were never able to solve, as long as we operated the Clipper. It was a Scott tailwheel, a retrofit that somehow never belonged at the rear end of our little bird. The thing would shimmy, making like the wheel of a grocery cart, no matter what we tried to fix it. It seems that the geometry of a tailwheel, in relation to the rest of the airplane, is critical in some designs. We readjusted the thing, changing the angle of dangle and trying various combinations of bearings and springs to make the thing work right. We even bought a heavy-duty leaf spring off some old car, probably a Model T Ford, and machined it to fit on the tail mount, thinking that this would provide a more stable mount for the tailwheel structure, but the thing still shimmied.

The only thing we could come up with for a partial solution was to make tail-low wheel landings, in an effort to minimize the ground speed when the tailwheel met the tarmac. That sort of worked and sort of didn't. Tailwheel tire salesmen used to rub their hands together when they saw us coming.

After we had sold the bird, a friend of mine told me about another solution to the shimmying tailwheel conundrum, one we never got to try. That was to replace the springs attaching the little bellcrank on the rudder to the steering arms of the tailwheel with mismatched springs. The theory was that, if one spring were stiffer than the other, the difference would damp out the oscillations. I sure wish we could have tried that one. If it had worked, it would have added a lot to our enjoyment of this strange little machine.

We soon discovered that three people were insufficient to fly the plane enough to keep it in good running order. So we

invited the friend of one of our partners to use the Clipper to get his private pilot certificate. This fellow learned his takeoffs and landings in crosswind conditions. I don't think we ever did any work in the pattern when he didn't have to contend with some degree of crosswind, so he got pretty good at landing in a slip. One day after he got his private ticket, I happened to be slumming up in the control tower when he taxied out for some touch-and-goes. On that particular day, the wind was blowing around ten knots, exactly down the runway.

I told the controllers to watch. This was going to be good. As he lined up for his first landing, he tried a left slip, then a little to the right. He futzed around, back and forth, finally getting it on the ground, zigging and zagging, trying to figure out the wind drift. It was the first time in over fifty hours he had ever landed without a crosswind.

Unfortunately, this gentleman had a nervous wife. When he loaded her into the airplane for their first trip together, I think she had managed to infect him with some of her anxiety. He became obsessed with switching gas tanks every fifteen minutes.

The result was that the cotter key that held the end of the shaft to that little nub on the back of the firewall got quite a workout, and it finally sheared, leaving the fuel selector inop.

When the tank ran low on go-juice, this gentleman was frantically trying to get a set of vice grips on the little nub to switch to a tank with fuel in it. He kept at this task way too long, and soon the engine quit. Instead of picking a good place for a forced landing and concentrating on an organized return to *terra firma*, he had his arm way down underneath the panel, trying to grope for the tiny fitting.

By the time his brain finally accepted the fact that he was going to have to land, he was so low that his options were severely limited. He put it down in a field, but ended up in a culvert at the end of his last-minute landing area, tearing off one of the main landing gears, denting the engine cowling and dinging one wingtip. But that was okay, since he and his wife both were able to walk away none the worse for wear. Seems as if that one-size-fits-both seat belt, even without the metal-to-metal catch, held them in place and saved their bacon.

While that was going on, I was down in Houma breaking my right tibia in three places in a parachuting mishap. We probably should have checked our horoscopes that morning and stayed in bed.

So our partner Harry, the mechanic, showed up with a tow hitch behind his pickup truck. He took the wings off the Clipper and lashed them to the sides of the fuselage, then attached the tailwheel to the tow hitch and took it to Houma for repairs. We flew it some more after that, but it was never exactly the same. We finally sold it to some oilfield workers who used it to commute to work once a week.

So that's how our affair with the Clipper ended. I subsequently got into partnerships in a bunch of other airplanes with a bunch of other people, but that first one was the most memorable, in many ways. I'll always have a little bit of a soft spot in my head for that little airplane named Peanut Butter.