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ALL THOSE OLDER PLANES – CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Our general aviation (GA) fleet of aircraft by and large isn't getting any younger. With a few exceptions, new aircraft aren't coming out of factories at the rate they used to, which means many of us are flying older airplanes that keep getting even older. Before the major reduction of GA aircraft production in the mid-1980s, it was more common to find pilots flying aircraft that were less than a decade old. Now, at many airports, the number of airplanes that are less than one, two, or even three decades old is a small percentage of the total number on the field.

As owners and pilots of older aircraft, we are faced with some unique and new challenges, opportunities, and in my opinion, some level of industry stewardship at the same time. Let's begin by addressing some of the challenges.

PARTS AVAILABILITY The older an aircraft is, the harder it can become to get parts. When we are lucky, old parts' stocks or scavenged parts from wrecked airplanes can be sourced. When we aren't, it may mean making modifications and upgrades to a plane when a part breaks, replacing older parts with new compatible substitutes, and sometimes at the greatest difficulty and expense, fabricating replacement parts from scratch.

In the most extreme situations, buying extras of some parts can be an option for the most financially capable of owners. I am not saying this is mandatory, but if you have a Whiz Bang 37-C, and yours is the only one left flying and you happen to find a second one at a salvage yard cheap, it may be worth owning it for the extra parts.

MECHANIC AVAILABILITY As our airplanes get older, so do the mechanics that are familiar with them. In fact, many have retired and passed away well ahead of the aircraft themselves. This can make finding an experienced and qualified mechanic difficult. The good news is that many of the older aircraft are relatively simply built, so a good mechanic who is not necessarily familiar with the particular make and model may be able to quickly learn the intricacies of some of the older aircraft.

It also can mean that an owner needs to become very familiar with their own aircraft and sometimes serve as the resource for the mechanic who is working on it. This does not mean that owners have to do their own work, but knowing about resources for the aircraft (parts, manuals, service guides, etc.) can expedite the work of the A&P or IA that is working on the plane. In fact, I strongly encourage any aircraft owner to have either printed or digital copies of parts and service manuals for an aircraft they plan on keeping for any length of time.

Joining a type club can give you access to invaluable experience and resources from other members who frequently know your type of airplane inside and out. Don't be afraid to travel a little for maintenance to seek out

specific mechanics who are familiar with your make and model and that can keep it serviceable.

INSURANCE Getting insurance on some older aircraft can also be a little more challenging. Most are still very affordable to insure because as hull values decrease, generally premiums do, too. But, in some cases aircraft of extreme ages are getting even more challenging to insure. The reality for an insurer is that if the aircraft is damaged, the cost of fixing it is climbing due to lack of availability of parts. The chance that it will need to be “totaled” may increase. Work with your insurer to figure out the best options for your aircraft.

While these challenges may make some rethink owning an older aircraft, there are some definite benefits and opportunities in acquiring and preserving an older aircraft. I want to highlight some of the opportunities these birds afford. Many of these older aircraft are truly classics and can even be flying pieces of history.

Keeping these airplanes flying has a strong and long heritage. So, consider that next time you think about swapping out your 1960's V-Tail for a new aircraft.

AFFORDABILITY Many older aircraft offer similar performance characteristics when it comes to weight and balance, speed, and endurance as opposed to newer aircraft, and at a much lower acquisition cost. When upgraded avionics are installed, they can allow an owner to do most missions just as easily as a more modern aircraft. This makes ownership of these older aircraft affordable for more pilots, and as a result, more people stay active as pilots.

UPGRADES CAN MAKE THEM “MODERN” When it really comes down to it, a new engine, upgraded avionics, or a new interior can make many older aircraft just as comfortable and capable as new production aircraft and many times at a much lower cost. Putting a new engine and a new GPS into a 1960s Cessna 206 is less expensive than buying a new

from-the-factory Cessna 206, and it probably goes faster.

An older aircraft doesn't have to keep all of its old parts. We have a growing opportunity to upgrade older aircraft with modern avionics that allow the old bodies to be filled with modern “guts”. The wings and fuselage can be the vessel of new equipment and interiors that turn some of the most historic of aircraft into beautifully refurbished and upgraded modern versions of their former selves while still retaining their historic exteriors.

KEEPING HISTORY ALIVE My family owns a unique example of an older aircraft, a 1941 Meyers OTW bi-plane. From what we can tell, of the 102 that were built, there are less than 20 still flying, even fewer with the original Warner (a radial) engine. Having this plane in the family means we are now caretakers of one of the last examples of this aircraft. We are essentially living history managers with ownership and flying privileges of the aircraft, and with that we may be helping to keep it alive for another generation.

Becoming involved with some of these aircraft will change what happens to you when you arrive at a new airport. People will come to check out the plane you are flying as a unique example of our aviation history, not just another Cessna 172 that looks just like the last 15 of the exact same thing that flew into the airport in the same day. *I mean no offense, I fly 172s too.*

Keeping these airplanes flying has a strong and long heritage. So, consider that next time you think about swapping out your 1960's V-Tail for a new aircraft. If you don't keep it flying, will anyone else?

As our aircraft fleet in general aviation gets older, we are faced with challenges, and opportunities to consider. It's hard to keep an older aircraft flying, to be sure, but at the same time, it's potentially, a rewarding way to keep a part of our aviation history alive.

Jason Blair is an active single- and multi-engine instructor and an FAA Designated Pilot Examiner with over 5,000 hours total time and over 3,000 hours instruction given, and has flown over 90 different makes and models of general aviation aircraft. In his role as Examiner, over 1,000 pilot certificates have been issued. He currently works for, and in the past, for multiple aviation associations that promote training and general aviation. He also consults on aviation training and regulatory efforts for the general aviation industry. Jason Blair has published works in many aviation publications, a full listing of which can be found at www.jasonblair.net.