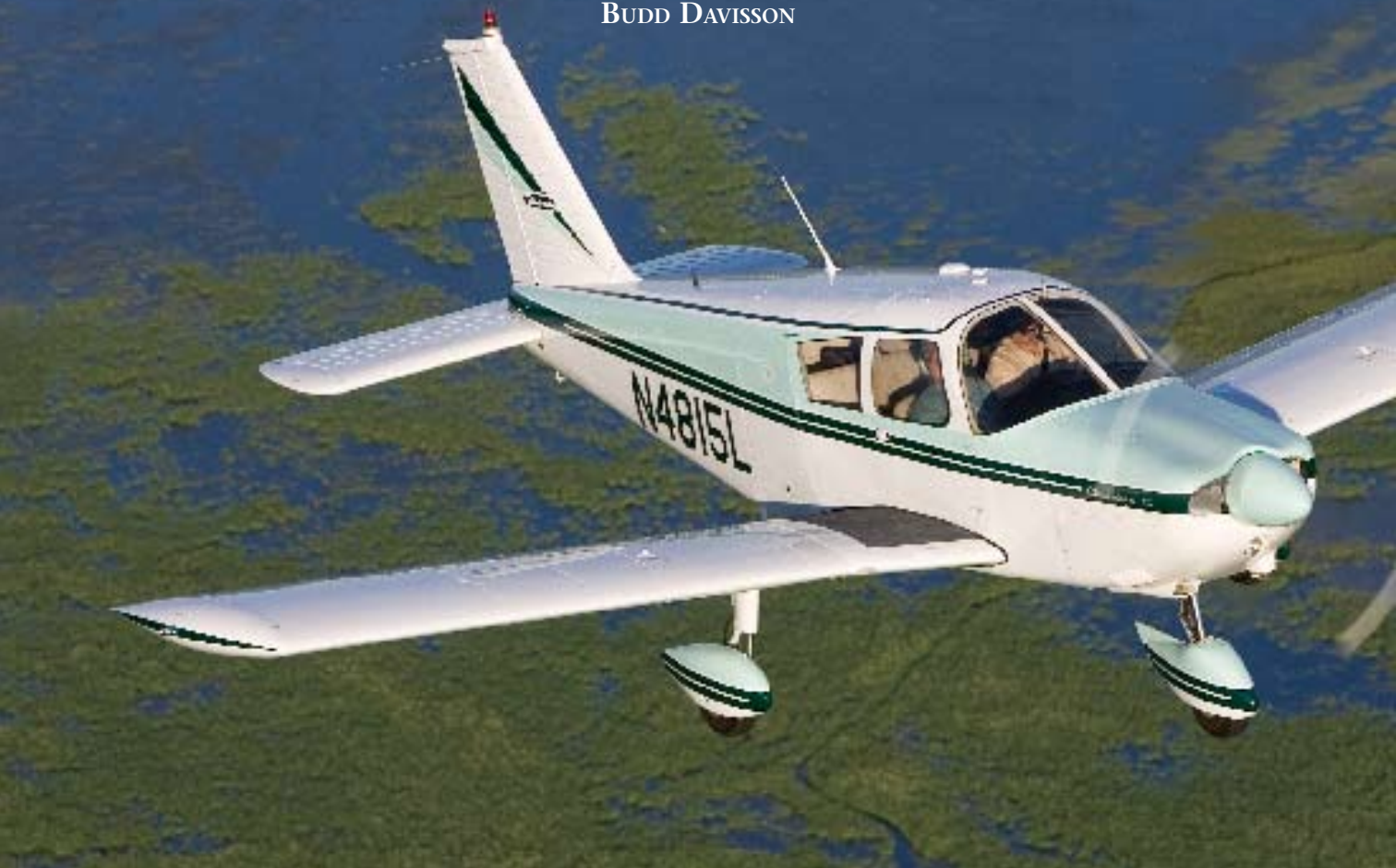


T-Hangar Treasure

Getting excited about a contemporary airplane

BUDD DAVISSON



As Naomi St. Julian visited her friend's T-hangar, she couldn't help but notice that the hangar next door didn't look as if it was opened often.

"Hey," she asked, "what's in the hangar next door?"

"I dunno," her friend answered. "Some sort of old airplane. Hasn't flown for years and years."

The easily excited Ms. St. Julian got excited. "What kind of old airplane?"

"Dunno, take a look."

Naomi quickly inserted as much of her face as she could in the narrow gap between the doors and tried to make out a vague outline in the gloom beyond. Whatever it was, it


was covered in plastic, and even in the semi-darkness she could see the outline of a low-wing airplane that hadn't moved in a long time. It was every vintage airplane buff's most cherished dream: the abandoned-super-rare-airplane-in-the-barn was a reality. Now, if she could only figure out what it was.

Later, as they gained entrance to the hangar and pulled aside the plastic covering, she realized it was even better than she had hoped for. It wasn't some rusty old Cub or cherry Staggerwing. No, this was a treasure that seemed destined specifically for her and her husband, Randy. It was a 1967 Cherokee 180. They had struck pay dirt.

Now, before any of you gray beards start sticking your nose in the air and uttering things like, "1967? Hell, I've got socks older than that! A Cherokee 180 ain't no vintage airplane. It's a used airplane," let's talk about this a bit.

For one thing, it would help if we all checked our calendars. 1967 was 38 years ago, and anything made that long ago may not be truly vintage, but it's a lot older than used. In fact, it would be the equivalent of restoring a Cessna 140 in 1988, and we certainly didn't consider those used airplanes at the time. They were classics then as they are now.

More importantly, to an even



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PHOTOS PHIL HIGH



larger (and younger) portion of the population, something like the St. Julians’ found Cherokee 180 is this generation’s classic and represents an affordable portal into aviation. For the St. Julians, who describe themselves as “just normal folks and far from rich,” finding the Cherokee was the answer to a long-held dream, but we’re getting ahead of ourselves.

Randy is a switchgear specialist for General Electric, and Naomi is a legal secretary. Their paths wouldn’t have crossed if her son hadn’t been dating Randy’s daughter. She was dropping her son off at Randy’s house, and he noticed, with more than a little interest, that she was

wearing a glider club jacket. That was reason enough to ask the obvious question, “Do you fly gliders?”

When the answer was in the affirmative, the next line was equally as obvious, as Randy had been flying power planes since he was a ramp rat as a kid, “Do you want to go flying some time?”

They were married shortly thereafter and decided they had two goals. One was to remedy Randy’s renter pilot status by getting an airplane, which would achieve the other goal of getting Naomi her power certificate.

Naomi says, “We found a Cessna 150 and were getting ready to buy it, but there was some sort

of misunderstanding. We figured it needed over \$2,000 worth of work, and we thought the seller had agreed to reduce the price that much, but that turned out not to be the case.”

Randy picks up the story, “The owner called his wife and they wouldn’t budge, but we wanted that airplane. We were right up against the wall financially, and Naomi finally told him we’d pay it, but we’d have to take the money out of her daughter’s savings, at which point her daughter broke into tears and started sobbing. It was as if we had planned it because he relented.”

They started flying the wings off



The Cherokee 180 was first introduced in 1962 and became one of the most popular of the early fixed-gear Cherokee series. For all practical purposes, the 180 was the first of the Cherokee line that allowed all four seats to be filled while allowing for a reasonable fuel load.

the little airplane, and Naomi got her power rating in it. However, at some point they realized their goals had changed. Now they wanted a cross-country airplane and instrument tickets. Besides, the C-150 was just too small.

“Many of our friends were on Atkins diets,” Naomi says. “We thought about losing weight, if nothing else because we’d fit in the airplane better. Then we said, ‘Nah, let’s just get a bigger airplane.’”

We like their way of thinking.

It was right at that juncture that Naomi saw the seemingly abandoned Cherokee in the hangar.

“The airplane wasn’t actually abandoned, but it had not flown for six years. The owner was Meigs Adams, a well-known local Ninety-Niner who had owned the airplane for 27 years. We called, and while she hadn’t thought seriously about selling the airplane, she’d at least let us in the hangar and talk to us about it.”

Before going any further, it’s important to know something

about Naomi St. Julian. She is, shall we say, excitable. With just a hint of drama. And we would have given a hundred bucks to be standing in a corner of the hangar, watching as they pulled the plastic off the Cherokee. There’s no doubt that her reaction had more than just a little to do with Meigs Adams’ decision to sell them the airplane. To say her excitement is infectious is an understatement.

“This was the perfect airplane for us simply because, even though it needed work,” Naomi says, “for what we could afford, it was as close to perfect as we were going to get.”

Randy says, “It hadn’t turned a blade in six years, but it only had 1,300 hours on the engine and airframe. It would have to be gone through, but at least we were starting with something really good.”

“The panel was basic,” Randy says, “but still IFR, and the interior was, at the very least, usable. So, we could concentrate on the engine and forget about the rest for the time being.”

Naomi was only half-listening to

Randy talk about the engine, because at the moment of discovery, they weren’t sure whether they’d have to repaint it or not.

“The airplane was really dusty,” Naomi says, “but as soon as we started washing it, I began to get excited (*oh, gee, we’re surprised*) because the paint was in terrific condition. And it was an interesting color because Meigs had it repainted in 1991 using the original scheme.”

As an afterthought, she says, “She was named after the airport, you know.”

Dormant engines are best left sleeping, so rather than taking the chance of damaging it by flying it, Randy says, “We did the engine almost immediately, and I have to admit that when the engine came back, after being overhauled, Naomi was really afraid something would happen to it. In fact, it was in the back of a pickup going to the airport, and Naomi drove 30 feet behind it all the way, ready to put her car in front of anything that looked as if it might hurt our motor.”



BONNIE BARTEL



Naomi and Randy St. Julian, proud owners of N4815L, winner of an Outstanding Piper PA-28 Cherokee plaque in the Contemporary judging category.

PHIL HIGH

One advantage to working with an airplane like Meigs' Cherokee is that there is none of the three-steps-forward-and-two-back process that haunts most airplane rebuild projects. First of all, even though the airplane had a lot of years on it, at 1,300 hours total time, it had not spent enough time flying to be exposed to hard times. Plus, not only had it almost always been hangared, but also, as the second owner, Meigs obviously loved the airplane and kept it protected. So, there was no critter damage (mice, birds, etc.), and it had been kept totally dry, so there was no corrosion to worry about. Because of the way the airplane was cocooned and stored, it was something of a time capsule, since all of its systems worked. Only the engine had the potential of suffering from the lack of use, and Randy cured that by having it overhauled.

"When we finished hanging the engine," Randy says, "I took a CFI along on the break-in flight, which turned out to be so uneventful

that it was actually a boring two hours. Which is a good thing.

"After the break-in we started working toward our goal of both of us getting our instrument tickets in the airplane. While just about everything in the airplane worked, we still had to go through everything, making certain it was appropriate for instrument flying in this age. The first flight after engine break-in was to Carroll County, Ohio, to have a new IFR-certificated Apollo UPSAT GX-60 GPS installed and the pitot-static certification. We installed an alternate static source, digital clock, audio panel, and a four-place intercom. We kept the VFR Apollo GPS as a backup system.

"As we started bringing it back to life, an extensive annual was done, including complying with all applicable ADs, replacement of all hoses, tank drains, tanks screws, battery, turn-coordinator, flashing beacon, steering horn and stops, new O-rings in the brake master and wheel cylinders, new tires and tubes, cable tensions. Rigging was checked, and then we started on the project of pulling the fuel tanks."

Naomi chimes in, "There had to be a thousand screws holding those things in, and it was a lot of work getting them all out. Then, when we thought we were home-free and ready to take the tank out—we were initially worried they'd fall out when the last screw was removed—they wouldn't

budge. Randy was beating on them very carefully, and they just wouldn't come out. It was ridiculous. So, I went down and talked to our A&P who was helping us throughout the restoration. His suggestion, to my surprise, was, 'Get a bigger hammer,' so we did. Thankfully there were no leaks, and we changed the hoses and fuel sender gaskets while they were out."

The airplane has flown more than 100 hours per year almost since the day they got it, and it has all been fun, although Naomi says there were some tense moments.

She says, "I really struggled with the whole IFR thing. I was studying like crazy for the instrument written and wasn't sure I'd be able to do it. Then, right out of the blue, Randy decided we'd take the test at the same time. I did well and would have been proud of my 96 percent if Randy hadn't walked in cold and walked out with only one wrong." She laughs.

Naomi took her checkride first and busted it and says she just couldn't get it together, but that cured itself.

"When I went the second time, everything just sort of fell into place, and I found it was the best rating I ever got," she says.

Several years after buying the airplane and many hundreds of hours of flying later, they decided the original interior, although not in terribly bad shape, had to go.



As they cleaned up the treasure they found in the T-hangar, the St. Julians were pleased to discover that the previous owner, Meigs Adams, had the airplane repainted in an accurate reproduction of the original paint scheme.

“We were starting to fly it on a lot of cross-country flights, and the seats were uncomfortable,” Randy explains. “The covering was starting to show some wear, but mostly it was that we’d get out of the airplane and hurt. So, we had an on-site aircraft interior restoration shop rebuild the cushions and stitch up an interior for the entire airplane. Now we can sit in there for hours on end with no problem. And we often do.”

Naomi says, “It’s important for everyone to know that we wouldn’t have this airplane if it wasn’t for a lot of people being very nice to us. We couldn’t afford it otherwise. Our mechanic, Chris Hopkins, has worked with us every inch of the way, and without his time, effort, understanding, and help, it would have never happened. We have so much to thank him for.

“Also, our flying friends (fellow EAAers and accomplished builders) have helped and offered their expertise and advice, as well, for which we owe a huge thanks.”

“Meigs, of course, has to be thanked. She made it easy for us to buy the airplane, and she loves having it near to her. We feel as if she is part of our flying family and take her up in the Cherokee as often as we can. There is no way the airplane won’t always have a little bit of Meigs in it.”

Naomi sums it up for the two of them when she says, “We love this airplane. We simply love it, and we fly it every chance we possibly can. In so many ways, we just can’t believe it is ours. This year we were so proud to have it parked in vintage aircraft parking at Oshkosh. Then, to our surprise it won the Outstanding Contemporary Piper PA-28 Cherokee award!”

There are people in the world who think airplanes are mere inanimate objects, but when an airplane answers as many dreams as this one has, it gains a soul and becomes part of the family. We certainly hope this Cherokee knows that.

PHIL HIGH

