

# BELLANCA



**S**ome airplanes seem to resist being rebuilt. You get a start on them, things look as if they're going along smoothly, and then something happens and you back up two paces. Move ahead, and then back up again. The entire project has a sawtooth progress pattern. The only thing that is a given on those projects is that if you don't keep pushing, they aren't going to happen. If you don't believe that, ask John Morrison about his Bellanca 260.

14 MARCH 2007

First, it's a straight Bellanca 260. Not a 260A. Not a 260B. A straight 260, the first of the 260-hp, nose-dragging, triple-tail speedsters from Bellanca. Second, you need to ask John how far he can throw his complete toolbox when things go very wrong. But, we're getting ahead of ourselves.

John came into aviation honestly—he was born into it. His dad flew P2Vs as a Navy reservist when he wasn't shepherding an American Airlines bird around. Plus, his maternal grandfather was associated with the

Granville brothers of "Gee Bee" fame to the point that the grandfather and John's great uncle owned and raced a Gee Bee Model "E" Sportster (the same airplane that Zantford Granville was killed in) for a short time in the early 1930s.

"Dad would take my brother and me down to LaGuardia or JFK; this was during the early 1970s, long before 9/11 and the TSA. We had the run of American's 727s, 707s, BAC-111s parked at a gate or in the hangar," John says. "I spent a good deal

# 260



## John Morrison's Triple-Tail Love Affair

BY BUDD DAVISSON

of my childhood building model airplanes and reading just about everything that had to do with aviation. I also had a strong interest in taking things apart to see what made them work. Sometimes I'd even put them back together.

"I started flying when I was 16. The official lessons were in a C-152 at Waterbury/Oxford, Connecticut; the real lessons were in a 7DC Champ at a grass strip called Candlelight Farms. I suppose that is how the bug for older airplanes bit.

"I attempted to major in mechanical engineering and fly at the same time. Flying eventually won out over engineering, so I transferred to Southeastern Oklahoma State University for its aviation program. My first real aviation job was as a lineman for Southeastern's FBO, refueling and tending to the college's airplanes. I did some flight instructing as well while I was at Southeastern. By the time I graduated I had added CFII and Multi-I to my tickets."

John graduated from college and

like every other young pilot, found that both his first job and lunch money were illusive.

"I picked up a job with a flight school/FAR 135 operator in Laredo, Texas, doing flight instructing and air taxi flying. I was hoping after college to fly with the Air Guard, but this was 1982, and there was a glut of airline pilots on furlough going back to Guard and Reserve units due to the PATCO strike, early effects of deregulation, Braniff shutting down, Frank Lorenzo, oil embargos, so after about eight months of long days and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, I was able to go active duty Air Force and right into pilot training.

"I went through T-37s and T-38s at Vance Air Force Base, then transitioned into the KC-135. I always thought it sort of ironic that I refueled little airplanes in college, so what did the Air Force have me do? Refuel bigger airplanes while doing 400 knots."

The measure of whether or not a pilot is truly an av-junkie is whether he gets too much flying on the job and then doesn't need it on the side. In this case, John is definitely hooked.

"While I was stationed at Griffiss Air Force Base in New York, to keep myself in touch with my roots, I bought a Cessna 120 that we nicknamed 'The Paul Poberezny Special' because it was painted in the EAA paint scheme. The little airplane followed me around for the rest of my Air Force career and to FedEx.

"Even though I was flying in the Air Force, I kept my CFI active and gave a lot of civilian flight instruction when I was off duty, including some ATP training for my fellow USAF colleagues."

Fortunately the airlines started a huge expansion in the late '80s when John's initial USAF commitment was up. "The military flying was rewarding, but my heart was really with the airlines. So I took advantage of those SAC alert tours to prepare my résumé and send out applications to the airlines.

"American Airlines had a nepotism rule, which was a bummer be-

JIM KOEPNICK



**Stuart, John, and Seth Morrison after diverting to Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, while en route to EAA AirVenture 2005.**

COURTESY JOHN MORRISON



**The tall instrument panel of the low-wing Bellanca and its later cousin, the Bellanca Viking, means there's plenty of room for a modern avionics and instrument suite.**

JIM KOEPNICK



**The distinctive triple tail of the Bellanca 260.**

international routes, and flying night freight became more appealing to me. So, I sent them my résumé, interviewed, and was offered a job! I have been with them nearly 17 years now, most recently as a captain and check airman on MD-11s.

"I married and was expecting our first child early in my FedEx career. It wasn't long before the old C-120 wasn't going to work as a family airplane. It just so happened that a ratty-looking Cessna 170A that I knew about became available. So, I rationalized the need for a back seat and bought it. I flew it exactly once before deciding some of the wiring needed work and the panel needed rebuilding. And—well, you know the rest. One thing leads to another, and I found myself 'refurbishing' the entire airplane.

JIM KOEPNICK



**The 260, which includes a cozy back seat, is a comfortable ride for four.**

cause flying for them was my dream. I was the one they said couldn't be hired because my dad worked there. I hadn't given much thought to Federal Express because it was a relatively

new airline, but since we were spending our days off in Memphis, I began to notice this purple air force morphing there. Couple that with its recent acquisition of "Flying Tigers" and its

"I was really close to having it flying again when another FedEx pilot walked up with a check and said, 'I want your 170,' and I flinched. I tried to go a year without another airplane, and should have looked for a 12-Step Airplane Junkie Recovery Program."

John had already decided he needed another four-place airplane, but this time he decided he wanted something that was faster but still had a little character. Speed wasn't everything.

"I was enamored of the triple-tail Bellancas, especially the 14-19-3s. I flew one while I was in college and

was in boxes. However, a lot of new ECI parts were included.

"The airplane had some modifications, such as aux fuel tanks in the wings, main gear doors, and a new instrument panel. The good part was that I could get a look inside the wings and see that the wood was in excellent condition.

"The seller was running an FBO that he was trying to make into a repair station specializing in Bellancas and said he'd bolt it together and I could fly it out of there in short order. I should have known that nothing goes that easily. But we made a

deal, and I gave him 50 percent to get started on the airplane."

John waited a few weeks, and then a month. Then, at six weeks, when he hadn't heard anything from the seller about progress on the airplane, he made the call.

"I had a little trouble getting through, but when I did I found the IRS was shutting down the FBO. I weighed the options: wash my hands of it and stand in line behind

the IRS in bankruptcy court for maybe 10 cents on the dollar or pay off the existing bank lien on the airplane and take the project on myself. I decided to do the latter, and that's when Jim and Rosie Stark came into the picture.

"I heard about Jim through the grapevine. He was reputed to be a great wood and fabric guy. He had just finished up a Stearman project and was looking for something else to try. So I ran up to Milwaukee to visit with him. I was really impressed by the workmanship on the Stearman, as well as his Steen Skybolt project with a 200-hp Ranger. He also was a partner in a Viking, so he had some knowledge of Bellancas. Jim agreed to take on the Bellanca project, which was a blessing, as my wife and I were now expecting our second child.

"I got a phone call from Jim a few

days later letting me know that he already had the airplane in his shop in Sullivan, Wisconsin. I commented that was quick, but he said he was worried about the IRS seizing everything at the FBO, even though I had cleared up the bank lien and had title to the airplane."

When John was able sit back and study the airplane he realized that maybe he'd done okay, despite the aggravations he'd just been through.


"The previous owner used the airplane to commute between his businesses in Birmingham, Alabama, and Minneapolis. He was the one who had the aux wing tanks and gear doors installed. Plus he jammed a lot of stuff into the panel. Unfortunately, between the time I first looked at the airplane and Jim moved it to his place, several of the radios, including the Stormscope, disappeared. However, I figure that for a little more than the going price of a flying 260, I now had known quantity with good spars, fresh fabric, and a fresh engine."

Even though a lot of work had been done on the airplane, there was still a lot to do, so John and Jim went to work. The Morrisons decided that the airplane might as well have a proper rebuild, not the bolt-it-together-and-fly-it concept that started the ordeal.

John says, "From the onset, Jim wasn't very pleased about the tapes on the fuselage, so he redid them. Then to make matters worse, he was spraying and sanding the finish when he found static electricity or something had sucked the fiberglass insulation up, and it was stuck to the back side of the fabric. That wouldn't be a big deal, but you could clearly see in the outside surface where it was stuck to the inside. Jim finally got that straightened out, but not without a lot of sanding and elbow grease.

"If we had it to do over again, we would have been better off stripping the fuselage and starting over. We also redid the panel and yanked out a lot of the extra gauges and radios. At the same time we installed a GNC-300 to replace the missing DME and ADF."

As the airplane was going together,



## "I WAS ENAMORED WITH THE TRIPLE-TAIL BELLANCAS"

—John Morrison

fell in love with them. Even though they are a nosedragger, they are still a Cruisemaster.

"Looking through *Trade-a-Plane*, the few available seemed to be running \$20,000 to \$30,000, but they were then 35-year-old airplanes with the original fabric, run-out engines, and obsolete radios. No one to my knowledge had yet to thoroughly restore a 260."

In the course of his searching, he contacted the Bellanca-Champion Club. And one of its members said he had a 260 project he might be willing to sell.

"I jump seated up to Milwaukee to look at it, and it was definitely a project, as it was taken completely apart. Whoever had owned it before had stopped partway through a total restoration. The fuselage had been recovered in Poly-Fiber, and the engine



**A pair of under-wing fairings that are vaguely reminiscent of the landing gear fairing pods on the Curtiss P-40 hide the actuating mechanism for the Bellanca's retractable landing gear.**

JIM KOEPNICK

John had to do something about all those boxes with engine parts in them.

"I took everything I could find that looked like it belonged in an engine over to Glenn Millard. The engine is an IO-470F and appeared to be in pretty good shape, which wasn't hard to see because nothing was assembled. So, Glenn spread everything out, did an inventory, then built me a new engine, which has been running great, so far. Also we've added GAMI injectors and an engine analyzer that shows that at 65 percent power, we're burning about 11 gallons per hour at 160 knots true airspeed.

"The fuel and hydraulic systems are pretty complex, so we called the Bellanca factory for some advice. We also needed their help in rigging the airplane. This was in 1998, and they weren't much help because they were barely staying in business. Now, however, the company is owned by several former employees. It is doing business as Alexandria Aircraft LLC, and they are great to work with.

"We should also mention Tom Witmer of Witmer's Aircraft Services in Pottstown, Pennsylvania, who provided a lot of assistance and is a goldmine of knowledge on these airplanes.

"I was never a fan of the original 1960 factory paint scheme of red, yellow, black, and white. However, the factory schemes on the tail-wheeled

Cruisemasters really complemented the lines of the airplane. I came up a variation of that while on one of my 12-day FedEx trips through Asia.

"Jim introduced me to Randy Efinger at Center Aviation in Watertown, Wisconsin. His shop did the paint and upholstery, after Lisa picked out the fabrics. I went to the Superflight forums at Oshkosh, and Dip Davis showed me how easy it is to do a spot repair on Superthane, which is why I chose that paint.

"The internal antennas are from Advanced Aircraft Electronics. I wanted to put an ADC oil filter on it, but we weren't sure it would fit, so while we were at Oshkosh in 1998, Jim borrowed a filter from the ADC people at their booth, and we drove down to Watertown to see if it would fit, and it did.

"The airplane finally came to Memphis on Memorial Day of 1999. We took it to AirVenture 2000, but stayed only for the first four days of the fly-in. Jim and Rosie called me from the awards ceremony and told me that the airplane won the Reserve Grand Champion-Contemporary Award, which positively blew me away. I never expected anything like that."

Just because the airplane had been restored doesn't mean John either stopped learning about it or stopped working on it (unfortunately).

"After I started flying it, I found one of the airplane's two weak points is its 'Rube Goldberg' fuel system. It has 90 gallons spread among five tanks with two selector valves but only two fuel gauges: one for the main tank selected and the other for the aux tank selected. You have to be religious about managing the fuel. I wish there was a way to STC the MD-11's fuel system controller into it. In the meanwhile, the Masten engine analyzer with the fuel totalizer function and the clock will have to do.

"I had been flying the airplane a couple of years when I made a major 'oops' and discovered the other weak point. I had removed the copilot floorboard and was under the panel when I barely bumped the gear handle and the manual hydraulic pump handle. Just that fast the right main retracted and dropped the wing to the floor.

"I crawled out from under the airplane, walked around it once, turned around, and threw my entire tool chest out the door. I was not a happy camper, but the airplane wasn't done messing with me.

"As we were trying to jack the airplane up and get the gear leg down, the other one folded. My tools were already scattered around out front, or I would have thrown them again. It turns out  
*continued on page 40*

## BELLANCA 260

continued from page 18

the seats were worn in the hydraulic power pack. Also, the over-center adjustments on the main gear legs were out of tolerance, so it's nothing short of a miracle that I didn't have them fold on a landing. Or both of them could have folded while I was under it."

When he finally got the airplane back up on its gear, it was time to assess the damage.

"The right 'toilet seat lid,' the right gear doors, were damaged, as was the left aux tank vent. My IA and I were concerned with the attach points for the right horizontal stab, as that had a lot of weight on them. I called Tom Witmer and sent him some digital photos of the damage, and we determined that the airplane was ferriable. So, I flew it up to Tom's shop in Pennsylvania for him to do the repairs.

"Tom found that the horizontal tail spar on the right side was bent, which turned out to be a major deal. The spar is an oval piece of tubing, which was formed in-house by Bellanca and impossible to repair. So, we had to find another stab. Tom scrounged around and had to get two of them, as the first one had a deformed spar as well.

"Fixing the crushed tank vent was a trick, too, because the tank had to come out, which meant a lot of cutting, whittling, glueing scarf joints and a sizable amount of refinishing."

Now that the airplane is finished, even after all of this work, John still doesn't know the correct factory designation for it.

"These airplanes have a bit of an identity crisis: the sales brochures just say 260, and the dataplate says 14-19-3. Some literature refers to it as the last of the Cruisemasters. In 1964, when the airplanes got the single tail, the factory eventually labeled them Vikings. Of course, regardless of the factory designation, the jokesters refer to my airplane as a 'termite trainer' or 'cardboard Connie.' I refer to it as a '260.'"

Regardless of what's it's called, John's no-name airplane is a beauty, and hopefully, all of his aggravations are in the past. 