## Dealing With The Inspector

Maintenance and inspection bills may hurt,

but they needn't confound the

aircraft owner who follows four simple rules

A n owner who didn't gripe about the cost of aircraft upkeep would be a saintly man. The fact is he probably doesn't exist. And though most persons would admit that high costs are at least part payment for the mechanic's personal responsibility discussed on this page by AOPA's Washington counsel, the mechanic who has the privilege of conducting periodic inspections is sometimes the butt of heated criticism.

"I don't understand why the FAA protects these outlaws they call authorized inspectors," an irate owner recently complained to AOPA. "Just last week, I was talking to an airport operator in New York. He had an Aeronca *Champ* and an *Ercoupe* relicensed and it only cost him \$369 to get them out of hock though both ships had just been gone over by an airframe and powerplant mechanic."

Besides what some owners think are exhorbitant prices, there is the vexing matter of inconvenience. It's hard to locate an authorized inspector (AI) in some areas, they'll say. Or, if you find one, he may not be willing to inspect your aircraft unless he gets to perform all repairs—maybe in excess of what you think is required. Again, if you find one, he may not be willing to work on your aircraft at all, no matter what blanket authority you give him to go ahead.

One owner recalled this problem: "We finally located an AI," he said, "and asked him to come and inspect several of our ships, among which were a couple of sailplanes. He said he couldn't because he didn't want to come into somebody else's territory, just as he wouldn't want another AI coming into his. He finally agreed when we told him there was no one with inspection authorization in our locality. What goes on here? Is FAA dividing the country into territories for the AI's so they can really sock us?"

That this criticism is symptomatic of real misunderstandings and real dissatisfaction nobody would deny. But it appears that as long as the present system of inspection authorization continues, and until the number of general aviation aircraft requiring service increases many times, difficulties will remain. FAA maintenance people think if owners understand better what the difficulties really are they will be in a better position to protect themselves.

Since July 17, 1956, periodic or progressive inspections of general aviation aircraft have been conducted by A and P mechanics who qualify and have applied for appointment as authorized inspectors, by FAA certificated repair stations or by manufacturers holding the

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## The Inspector

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type certificate for the aircraft.

FAA gives inspection authorization to any applicant with an A and P rating who meets certain other qualifications and passes a written examination. Once he receives this authorization, he performs a job for the aircraft owner required by FAA, but he is still in private business. He is not an FAA designee nor does he work for FAA.

Said an FAA official recently: "We don't set any limit on the numbers of AI's and there is no limit to the number of AI's who may work in any given locality. Any qualified applicant is acceptable."

The trouble is that AI's are not vying with one another to service general aviation aircraft. It is—and this is partly explained by the size of the industry itself—a seller's market. On April 27, 1960, there were only 2,307 A and P's with inspection authorization in the United States to serve the some 76,000 active general aviation aircraft. When the plan was dreamed up five years ago, CAA officials expected that there would be 5,000 AI's by 1960. Thousands of A and P's have the technical qualifications to become AI's, according to FAA, but they don't bother to apply or, perhaps, they don't want the responsibility.

Not all of these 2,307 AI's are available to the public nor are they distributed with any geographic equity. This is not the result of conscious Government policy, but at least in part the inevitable effect of economic supply and demand.

FAA personnel will admit they have sometimes been approached in a backhanded manner by an established repair station or mechanic seeking to keep another man from getting inspection authority.

Usually this attempt to influence FAA takes the form of questioning the new AI's qualifications. Such a transparent attempt to limit competition wouldn't affect the decision on an application, it is said.

The regulations permit an aircraft owner to have his maintenance work done by an A and P who is not an AI. Only the inspection need be made by the man with inspection authorization. The owner—and FAA knows this—may have to hunt around before he will find an AI willing to make the inspection.

"It is in the repair job itself that the AI makes his money," an FAA official told The PILOT. "Aircraft owners have to accept the consequences of this fact as the price of flying. If an AI charges what seem to be higher prices, he undoubtedly justifies these charges on the basis of his proficiency, his need to have special and expensive equipment, and—this is important—the risk he runs by assuming the legal responsibility for certifying to the airplane's airworthiness."

Another reason why some owners may have difficulty locating an inspector is that not all the 2,307 AI's work for

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the public. Some are employed by private firms who may even require them by contract to perform no outside inspections.

There are some repair shops that may have all the business they can handle without taking on the job of inspecting a stranger's airplane. An FAA official attempted to survey the availability of AI service within a 100 mile radius of a large metropolitan area. One place he stopped was a repair shop at a wellrun medium sized airport. He was unknown to the mechanic who told him, "Sorry, we just can't take you." The repair station had all the business it could handle, and that was that. The FAA official said: "These men are private businessmen who can't be compelled by us to work."

FAA maintenance personnel believe that most of the misunderstandings between owners and mechanics could be avoided if pilots were as careful to reach proper understandings with the AI or A and P before work starts as they would be with the garage mechanic who works on their automobiles. They offer these four suggestions:

1. Do business with a reliable firm. The aircraft maintenance field has its share of poor businessmen, irresponsibles and sharks as does any other business. The pilot who wants to avoid trouble will consider the reputation of the mechanic with whom he deals.

You will of course find that prices vary among reliable firms. There are large shops with high overhead costs, which won't look at a loose bolt without slapping a \$5 or \$6 charge on you. On the other hand, by flying a few miles into the country you may find a reliable mechanic with lower overhead who will give you good, and possibly more personal, service for less.

Even so-called reliable firms may differ in the quality of their work. The regulations fix certain minimum standards. One mechanic may be willing to adhere to this minimum. Another may feel that his reputation and personal standards require him to go farther with preventive maintenance. Some owners find that though they have passed several inspections satisfactorily without major charges, the next time they may be hit by a \$700 or \$800 "inspection" bill.

Naturally, it is then not the "inspection" that costs so much but major repairs that may have been necessitated by the owner's failure to pay the price of smaller "preventive" measures along the way. FAA believes you must make up your mind how much of a quality job you wish done on your plane.

2. Find out precisely what the AI will do before you leave your aircraft, for the main cause of misunderstandings is absence of any understanding at all.

The owner of an *Ercoupe* recently left his aircraft with an AI for inspection during which it was discovered that the stabilizer spar was broken and had been patched with a piece of tin.

"What are you going to do about it?"

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an observer asked the mechanic. "Fix it. The guy wants his airplane to pass," was the reply. Cost of doing the job came to around

Cost of doing the job came to around \$800 and, according to reports, that was the bill the surprised owner received when he returned for his plane. This is an extreme example of an all-too prevalent failure of owner and mechanic to agree how far the latter is to go. The AI mechanic may consider that not only is the owner's neck at stake but his own reputation and, in case of legal difficulties, possibly his company's purse.

3. Always ask for an itemized invoice of charges, and find out whether you will be charged a flat rate or hourly rate for the work to be done. You may find that mechanics are reluctant to be ther with the bestkeeping

You may find that mechanics are reluctant to bother with the bookkeeping necessary to itemize your account. Insist on it. It is fundamental to a good relationship between owners and mechanics as well as for your peace of mind to get things in writing. In addition most reliable firms will be glad to give you a written warranty for work performed.

work performed. 4. Take into consideration that the cost of your inspection and repair work may be directly related to the mechanic's familiarity with your particular airplane or equipment.

To cite an exaggerated but illustrative example: A businessman was able to get an excellent bargain on a prewar twin-engine aircraft. It was priced somewhat under \$10,000. When the time came to get it ready for inspection, the new owner took it to a mechanic who had previously worked on his small single-engine aircraft. The mechanic, so the story goes, was delighted to have the opportunity to work on a larger airplane so he accepted the job. He went to work. A month passed, then two. The airplane was still not ready. There was no indication that all this time he was not "hard at work" on the airplane, but the trouble was he head to hear the open the area hear her the open the

then two. The airplane was still not ready. There was no indication that all this time he was not "hard at work" on the airplane, but the trouble was he had to learn his way through it. There was a time when only a tool box was needed to keep an airplane in shape but what was true for a *Cub* is not always true today for more sophisticated airplanes. As difficulties of maintenance and repair increase, so do costs of the work.

not always true today for more sophisticated airplanes. As difficulties of maintenance and repair increase, so do costs of the work. As owners of surplus aircraft have learned to their chagrin, cost of maintaining bargains may be more than you bargain for. There will be a similar problem for many persons who upgrade their aircraft equipment from the used airplane market. The light twins and other more sophisticated airplanes which become increasingly more available on the used aircraft market at prices persons of moderate income can afford are not cheap to maintain. Periodic inspections are part of the cost.

afford are not cheap to maintain. Periodic inspections are part of the cost. FAA doesn't patrol the prices or work load of its AI's, so the owner must depend on himself to see that he knows what he is getting and gets what he wants. You are stuck with the system but you needn't be stuck with maintenance bills you don't understand. END