

Buying A Used Plane?

Tips on what to look for and how to make purchases

are given by pilots who have bought used craft.

Care is advised in all steps of transaction

To get information on buying used airplanes, I interviewed a cross-section of pilots who had purchased used craft and were currently flying them.

The first person I talked with was a private pilot with 1,400 hours. He is in the mortgage and loan business—but wanted a plane for a second business, aerial advertising. “I bought a Cessna 172 over the phone—no deposit, no down—from a dealer in Pittsburgh, Pa. Had it laid into Omaha. The general condition of the plane was as represented, with new engine overhaul. There were a few minor things wrong, which were fixed up. I didn’t steal anything. The dealer didn’t give anything away. I didn’t pay a new airplane price for a used plane. I knew and got what I wanted. No regrets.

“If a person likes the looks of a plane, and it is a licensed, flyable craft, buying it is mostly an agreement on price.”

Next I talked with Tyrone Meier, who has a private certificate, with 160 hours. “Ty” is an airline engine mechanic, but he was a tyro at buying and flying a plane when he purchased a Stinson *Voyager* three years ago.

“I just wanted to own an airplane, fly for fun, pile up hours, and obtain my license. I read articles on used planes, became interested in three makes of craft, got hold of people who had flown them, got their opinions, and narrowed the field down to the Stinson, an *Ercoupe*, and a Cessna 170. Since I decided I wanted to carry two or three passengers, that eliminated the *Ercoupe*. I chose the Stinson over the Cessna for financial reasons.

“I checked the engine over myself, then had experts check the hull and log books. The plane had been re-licensed a short time before.

“I bought from a private party, flew with him for an hour, then took over. Actually, I hadn’t soloed yet,

so I got an instructor until I did. I didn’t have enough first-hand knowledge about the plane. It would have been wiser had I waited until I obtained a license. By owning the plane, the cost per hour was less, but the cost of the plane, upkeep and maintenance has been more than if I had rented a plane. Besides, if I had had a certificate, I could have tried any number of planes before I bought. I think it is good dope to get the feel of different planes. I might have picked my Stinson anyway, but I would have been more confident in my own judgment.

“I did try to protect myself by checking the owner’s figures—against manufacturer’s performance figures. If a seller claims the airspeed of a plane is 10 m.p.h. faster than it is, you know he’s unreliable. I think it’s a good idea to check a seller’s references, his figures, and his selling price to avoid misrepresentations.

“The cost of a plane narrows your selection. I paid \$2,700 for the Stinson, which was in line with market prices. It was in average condition, but I knew I would have to put some money into it. How much a guy should spend on additional costs depends on him. If he knows something about engines, and can do the overhaul himself, he’ll save some money. Otherwise, he’d better have a mechanic check and tell him how much the overhaul will be. In my case, I guess I made out as well as could be expected.”

Then I talked with A. L. Puddy (AOPA 180628), a commercial pilot who has 2,000 hours. He’s a construction

superintendent, an old hand at buying used, single-engine aircraft. His ninth and latest purchase is a Piper *Super Cruiser* which he uses for pleasure, and for amateur aerial photography.

“I shop around, determining what I buy by how it is priced. I bought the *Super Cruiser* from an aircraft mechanic. It had been ground-looped; the wing had been knocked off, but it had been fixed up. Buying a wreck doesn’t bother me, as long as there is no indication of mal-rigging, which is pretty apparent.

“There’s an art to buying. You can get skinned real easy. There are lots of pigs around. The biggest share of planes on the market are sadly in need of repair. A beginner should take the advice of a man who has owned and operated airplanes. Otherwise, buying may end up a gruesome experience.

“Too many aircraft are misrepresented. Work is in the log book, but badly done. Don’t buy a pig in a poke. Get an A&P mechanic and have him check everything. Punch the fabric, run a differential compression check, look at the oil screen, hunt for loose fittings, and anything improperly repaired. A certificate of airworthiness doesn’t mean the plane is in good condition—only that it meets minimum standards.

“First you should know what you want to buy. Are you buying a plane for pleasure, business or both? How are you going to use the plane? Short jaunts? Long trips? Fly at low or high altitudes? Go light or carry a load? Are you going to fly it from a pasture or an improved airport? Do you want high wing or low wing? Conventional or tri-gear plane?

“You must consider price. I paid \$2,200 for the 1948 *Cruiser*, with primary panel. I have put in \$800 since buying it. Financing is easy, almost to

by HOWARD E. JACKSON

the point of being dangerous. Figure payments, plus cost of flying time, plus maintenance, plus tiedown or hangar costs. You may have to compromise. If you would be pushed to pay, you'd better drop to a lower priced plane!

"Insurance should be considered. Beginners' flying insurance rates are high, so if they buy a cheaper plane first, it holds down rates. Later, after they have 200 hours or so, rates lower. Then they can buy a more expensive plane.

"Even though the old license hasn't expired, get a new one. You want that annual inspection, so get an A&P or FAA designee you know, to make it!

"If a buyer hasn't flown the type plane he wants to buy, he should have someone go along to check him out. Even if he knows the type plane, but hasn't flown it in some time, he should be checked out.

"One other thing. Never buy in the spring, when everyone else with itchy feet is doing so. A good time to buy is from just before Christmas until income tax time."

Next I corralled Patrick Lowery (AOPA 234844), who has commercial, single- and multi-engine, land and water ratings, 1,700 hours. "Pat" is a meat cutter who has purchased a dozen single-engine used aircraft, and who recently purchased a twin, a 1943 Cessna UC78-C "bamboo bomber," used for instructing bomber pilots during World War II.

"Buying a multi-engine plane isn't basically different from purchasing a single-engine job, except it has one more engine.

"Basically I was looking for something like the Beechcraft P-18, and put out the word. I always start from



John Kupka, head of a company dealing in used aircraft, is inspecting an Aero Commander he is about to buy. Dealers have to watch what they buy just as do the users of aircraft, he says

there—to find out where planes are, and what their condition is. I buy only from individuals or dealers.

"One of the first things I do is look up the logs, because they are an indication of the care the craft has had. If there are broad gaps, I pay an A&P mechanic to look over the whole plane, the engine, the hull, the works, then have him go over it with logs in hand, checking off the bulletins point by point checking off modifications point by point. Paying the mechanic \$15 may save me \$1,000 later on.

"Get a disinterested mechanic, not a person on the field who might have a personal interest in looking over the plane. And get an A&P who knows the characteristics of the plane, that he can pass on to you. Each plane has a weakness, where there is potential maintenance. You should know or have someone point this out to you.

"The second thing to do is make a personal, visual check of the aircraft's physical appearances. Make sure it isn't an all-nicely-painted-up job just

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Photos by the author

A. L. Puddy, a California construction superintendent, with his ninth used plane, a Piper Super Cruiser. He contends that there's an art to buying used aircraft

◀ Patrick Lowery, a meat cutter, has purchased a dozen single-engine used aircraft. He recently bought this Cessna "bamboo bomber"



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to sell. If it's fabric, insist on a punch test. The \$10 will be well spent. I do it, unless the log shows recover in the past year. If two or more years, I have a test made. I did on the multi-engine Cessna. The log stated it had been covered two years ago—and it punched top green—so I knew it was okay.

"There is a considerable amount of wood in the 'bomber,' but all bulletins and modifications had been complied with. Wood had been taken out of the fuselage and replaced with metal by a reputable flying service. The work was signed off by an AI (aircraft inspector).

"After I satisfy myself that everything has been thoroughly checked out, I insist on a test flight. Some people have mental blocks about fast-landing speed, or too severe a stall. They may not like the way the plane handles, or even the visibility. I go with the dealer. If I am not competent in that plane, I pay someone to fly it for me. I did on the Cessna. Actually at that time I did not have a multi-land license, but I did have the feel for flying heavy aircraft, having owned and flown an AT-6. I went with this multi-engine-land pilot for three hours, then decided I could fly the twin. I don't recommend anyone else doing that, however. A guy should have enough instruction and time on a twin before he sets out on his own.

"After satisfying myself that the plane met all requirements, that the craft was certificated, in license, and I had made up my mind to buy it, I had AOPA run a title search. I do this before I buy. It is money well spent.

"I got an airworthy plane, fairly well equipped, with the best engines and hull that could be had for \$3,500," Lowery concluded.

I also interviewed "The Flying Ten," a combination school and club which has purchased and uses six used planes, all Cessnas. The policy and decision for buying the craft rests with a four-man board of directors, all experienced pilots. Barney Glaser, board member and treasurer, was my informant.

"We decide beforehand just what we want and need to fit our program.

"We buy all our planes through dealers, figuring they can get us the specific plane and equipment we want. They will take out, or put in, equipment. Since it is difficult to break down cost of radio equipment—then subtract or add to selling price—our planes are purchased with required equipment. One plane was bought without needed radio equipment. We found out it was more costly to buy it later. Instead of one payment we had three!

"We think it is worth paying a dealer's commission. A dealer covers a broad field, does the footwork and saves shopping around.

"The FAA has things well tied down, to protect individuals. If you check all paper work, see it is up-to-date, and

there is a good set of books, as a rule the airplane has been taken care of and that is your greatest concern—airworthiness.

"We buy no planes over two years old. We feel buying low-time aircraft or demonstrators helps protect us.

"Moreover, the planes are checked over by our mechanic and test flown by board members before purchase.

"Our buying method assures us of good used planes," Glaser said.

For a last quote I pigeon-holed John Kupka (AOPA 91599). He heads Nasco, a company that buys between 200 and 300 used airplanes annually, for inventory and resale. Kupka holds a commercial license, single- and multi-engine, fixed-wing, and helicopter, plus instructor's rating, and has 9,000 hours. He has been in the used airplane business for 10 years.

"We as purchasers are in the same category as a retail buyer. It behooves us to get the best for our money. We buy planes which don't need extensive repair. This eliminates excess maintenance which would cut profits.

"We do have a high exposure factor in our favor. We 'see' many planes in a month, get to know the market, are aware of buying problems. We stay current on each model, relevant to manufacturers' bulletins. We check the weaknesses of each plane model, and can judge the condition of that plane in contrast to others of the same model.

"We have a standard procedure prior to purchase—to get an over-all picture. If the plane is fabric, always a punch test; if metal, check for internal corrosion. Engines get screen and compression tests. We check the history of the plane, so that when we make a representation we know what we are talking about. We check all paper work, and all logs, to make sure the plane is up-to-date as far as FAA is concerned.

"Also, before we buy, we run a title search through FAA in Oklahoma City. This eliminates the hazard of mortgages or encumbrances on the planes we purchase. We get a clear title.

"After we decide to buy a plane, we flight check it to see if equipment and accessories are in good working condition, in order to save possible repair costs.

"A careful buyer gets more for his dollar in the used market than in the new market. The depreciation factor has disappeared. If he buys with discretion he should get service equivalent to a new machine, and not suffer fixed-dollar depreciation.

"You buy 'as is' only from a private party. Most reputable used-plane dealers sell with a guarantee. We buy from individuals, dealers and distributors," said Kupka, "but we watch what we buy!"

All these varying ideas give the buyer something to think about. It is possible to get a good deal, sight unseen. Beginners should play it real cool. Don't trust anybody. Check before you buy. Buy exactly what you want. And consider which is better for you: to buy from an individual or a dealer? ●