

He Flies With A Dummy As Copilot

Ground controllers hold AOPAer Edgar Bergen's flying skill in high regard, but antics of his right-seat 'helper' leave them scratching their heads in amazement or doubled over with laughter

by DONALD CHASE

Copilots, as a group, feel that they're among the most maligned group of individuals in the world. And there's no more complaining co-pilot than a brash, gabby, monocled little guy who flies right-seat in a six-year-old Piper Apache, N2210P. You've never heard a copilot complain until you've heard copilot McCarthy.

Copilot McCarthy is the kind of a guy who'll pick up the microphone and say, "If you hear me, wiggle the tower"; or, "I'm up here so high that I've run out of gravity."

Aircraft commander for this fantastic copilot is, of course, Edgar Bergen (AOPA 31800) who this year, like AOPA, celebrates his 25th year in aviation.

"Actually, I took a little dual instruction in OX-5 biplanes in Kentucky and Kansas during the days of vaudeville, but I never stayed in one town long enough to solo," commented the world-renowned ventriloquist. "It was only after I settled down in Hollywood with a weekly radio show that I was in one place long enough to learn to fly."

What Pilot Bergen didn't say, but the record book does, is that his CBS radio program was the biggest show with the highest rating of all time. It started out as number one and remained number one consistently for six years. The show was in the first five nationally as long as it was on the air and, after 20 years of radio, it still ended up as number one on CBS.

The veteran entertainer took his first continuous dual instruction from stunt pilot "Tex" Rankin at the Grand Central Air Terminal (now a manufacturing area) in Glendale, Calif. He soloed in a Stinson 105 after additional dual with Al Lary.

In talking about the old days with Rankin, Bergen tells this story and swears that it is true:

"Seat pack parachutes were required in those days because, when you flew with Tex, you did your share of aerobatics and spins. One day two rather elderly ladies asked us, 'What's that cushion you have strapped on used for?' Tex explained that it would save our

lives if we had to bail out of the airplane.

"Then the ladies asked, 'But how can you be sure that you'll land on the cushion?'"

Almost immediately after solo, Bergen purchased a Stinson 105 and went to the factory in Tennessee with Instructor Lary to pick up the plane.

"I'm not really superstitious," said Bergen with that famed sparkle in his eyes, "but I've had Charlie's profile painted on the side of every one of the seven airplanes I've owned, starting right out with the Stinson."

Then, almost as an afterthought, he added, "Oh, yes, I guess that I do have one other superstition about aviation. I don't believe in flying under ladders."

"As you will remember, the Stinson 105 was a bit underpowered and we had our share of troubles getting over some of the mountains near El Paso on our flight west."

Twenty-one years later, Lary did the stunt flying for a series of TV comedies, starring Mortimer Snerd, for the Coca Cola Company.

In the past 25 years, Bergen has owned the Stinson, two 4-place Fair-

childs, a Fairchild PT-19, Vultee BT-13, a Navion and now the Apache. He estimates that he's pushing 4,000 hours in the air.

"And most of that time has been with Charlie as copilot," he commented.

The most hazardous situation the entertainer ever encountered in flight was caused by his inanimate copilot. When Charlie is not at work, he resides in a fiber-board box. While landing at a ranch flight strip, during the annual Rancheros Visitadores celebration in Santa Barbara, Calif., Charlie and his box slid forward in the copilot's seat and jammed the controls.

"That happened 14 years ago, but I still remember it vividly," said Bergen. "I really had my hands full for a minute and I could almost hear Charlie calling from inside, 'Hey, you big knucklehead, get me up off the floor!'"

In his quarter-century of flying, Bergen had never scratched an airplane, until recently. While on a flight into Mexico with Domonic Frontiere, musical director and associate producer of the TV series, "Outer Limits," (Frontiere is also a pilot and AOPA member 154707) Bergen was all set to land at Ciudad Obregon, South of Guaymas on the West Coast of Mexico.

"We cleared the border at Hermosillo, planning a stop in Guaymas," explained Bergen. "The airport officials advised us to overfly Guaymas, because of recent rains, and go on to Ciudad Obregon. We did, and we shouldn't have."

"What they neglected to tell us was that a new airport had been built 12 miles out of town. We blithely circled the old airport and it looked fine. There were hangars, a windsock, two planes on the ground and no 'X' marks on the fine, grassy runway. We touched down, rolled about 300 feet and the plane sank into the mud. The nosegear buckled and we bent both props."

"We found some wonderful English-speaking Mexicans who arranged to guard the plane until we could get it hauled off the field. Then a mechanic

All is not harmony in the Bergen Apache as the renowned comedian-longtime AOPA member and his copilot disagree over chart matters. Charlie, of course, looks to his photographer audience for support





"Copilot" Charlie McCarthy has just delivered himself of one of his typical quips, judging from the expression of Barbara Shurburt, receptionist with Pacific Air-motive Corporation, Burbank, Calif., where comedian-ventriloquist Edgar Bergen hangs his Piper Apache, shown in background

Photos by the Author



Entertainer Edgar Bergen and the star of his shows admire the latter's likeness on the fuselage of Bergen's Piper Apache. The comedian became a licensed pilot the same year that AOPA came into being and was an early member

flew down from Tucson, surveyed the damage and had new props sent down. He 'jerry-rigged' the nosegear so that the plane could be ferried back to Tucson, gear down, for more repairs. Then I had it completely overhauled at Pacific Air-motive in Burbank."

It is natural that Bergen flies many entertainers as passengers in his *Apache*. One of the less enthusiastic air travelers is comedian Ken Murray. On a trip to Palm Springs, Murray gingerly climbed aboard and asked Bergen, "What's that instrument?" Bergen replied casually, "Darned if I know. The needle wiggles all the time and I've been trying to remember to ask someone about it." Later, in flight, Murray asked, "Isn't that Mt. Baldy over there?" to which Bergen replied

serenely, "I really don't know. It's not supposed to be there."

When Bergen first began flying, he helped finance young pilots to obtain airline positions. One day he saw a pilot working as a "grease monkey" at Grand Central Airport and found that the young man was trying to save up enough money to get an instrument rating. Bergen asked Tom Wolfe, then vice president of Western Airlines, why the airlines didn't have instrument courses for otherwise-qualified pilots. Wolfe answered that the airlines were already engaged in enough route and transition training, so the new pilots were forced to get the rating with their own funds.

Bergen supplied loans to 27 pilots at Grand Central and then moved his ac-

tivities across town to the East Los Angeles Airport, opened an instrument school and turned out another 75 graduates shortly before the beginning of World War II.

With all flight training taken over by military sponsored schools, Bergen turned his assistance to the help of student nurses. He established an organization to make loans to help young women attend nursing school. This fund has helped over 500 nurses in the past 23 years, and it's still going strong.

Everyone in the Bergen family flies. Mrs. Bergen, former model Francis "Candy" Waterman, soloed in an Aeronca as a birthday present to her husband.

Daughter Candice, in her first year

The flying Bergens are all avid lightplane enthusiasts. Mrs. Frances "Candy" Bergen (left) and daughter, Candice (right), are both flyers, and even 2½-year-old Kris handles the controls of the family Apache on occasion



"Master pilot" Charlie McCarthy stages a flightline performance for employees at Burbank, Calif., airport before flying to Palm Springs with his mentor



at the University of Pennsylvania, "does a good job of cross-country flying," according to her father. Even 2½-year-old Kris has handled the controls for a few moments at a time.

The Bergens have a summer home at Newport Beach, some 50 freeway miles from the comedian's Hollywood office. During the season, Bergen commutes almost daily in the *Apache*; 14 minutes flying time from Orange County Airport to Lockheed Air Terminal.

Recently Bergen has developed a 75-minute lecture for colleges and study groups on "The Importance Of Laughter" and "Our American Humorists." At the conclusion of the lectures, he will use his caricature figurines to illustrate the various points of the discussion. He uses the *Apache* extensively on his lecture dates.

"When I'm in a hurry—or it's really a long distance to a lecture, I'll go by jet. Otherwise, the *Apache* is just right for me," he stated.

Several years ago, Bergen and his wife were going to Palm Springs after dark in their *Navion*. An instrument failure affected the compass and Bergen asked permission for an emergency landing with a radar approach at what was then a Naval installation at San Bernardino, Calif.

"I told them that I was Edgar Bergen and that I'd bring Charlie and put on a show for them anytime they wanted me," said Bergen with a grin. "However, the operations officer had a set of regulations to live with. We managed to get further to Palm Springs without any undue trouble.

"I'd hoped to make at least one landing at a military base, particularly after all the shows I've put on at bases all over the country, but it just didn't work out."

Bergen does not have an instrument rating, but he's well qualified to make that 180° turn. When the comedian talks about flying and weather, he's completely serious—a veteran pilot who knows there's nothing funny about dirty weather.

"The first trip I made when I bought my *Navion* was to the races at Del Mar. When it was time to take off, there was a fog bank rolling in from the water, but I could see all the way to the coastline and it looked like there was plenty of room to remain contact and turn inland. So I took off and at less than 150 feet I was on solid instruments. Fortunately the stratus layer was quite thin and I kept the *Navion* straight and level to on top. What I hadn't realized was that the heat from the ground dissipates the fog right at ground level and you can't tell your distance from the cloud bank until you're almost in it."

Continuing about weather, Bergen said, "When I bought my *Apache*, the salesman told me that it had three radios and I'd have to be a pretty bad pilot to get lost. However, I did, and it was quite easy. I was flying over Pennsylvania when the weather began to get bad, forcing me to fly so low

that the omnis were of no value. A nearby thunderstorm made the ADF useless. I finally picked up a river and flew westward, away from the weather. Despite an economical cruise, fuel began to become a problem and I was beginning to look longingly at some cow pastures. Finally a little airport showed up and we sat down to wait out the weather."

Bergen has had his share of night flying and has encountered some of its problems. "I'd just had a new artificial horizon installed in my *Navion* when I decided to go to Las Vegas one evening just before dark. By the time I was through Cajon Pass, it began to get really dark so I turned on my instrument lights. Nothing happened! I found out later that the lead-in wire had been cut during installation.

"I told myself that this was no problem and turned on the cabin light. It flicked once and blew out. Still 'no sweat,' although now I carry a spare bulb taped inside the light housing. Confidently, I reached into my map case and pulled out my flashlight. It was very dim, flickered a few times and went out.

"If you've never flown over the desert on a moonless night, you can't realize how black that void can be. I could see an occasional set of car lights which told me which way was down. Finally, I figured that the road below went between Daggett and Needles. I didn't particularly want to go to Needles, but those were the only lights in sight so that's where I went.

"Of course, the best answer for a weather problem is a 180° turn before you get into the stuff. I recently read what I thought was a fine comment on this problem: 'Don't forget that weather comes in sideways.'

"I either stay overnight or come home by rented car several times every year, and I'm not a bit ashamed of it," concluded the comic seriously.

During this PILOT interview, Bergen was on his way to Palm Springs to spend the next two days writing a new act scheduled to open shortly in New Orleans. (The weather "socked in" and he returned from this junket by rented car.)

"I'm going to write myself as the oldest living pilot in Sweden (his parents both came from Sweden in their teens). The costume will include helmet and goggles and a cane," said Bergen with youthful enthusiasm. "Then I'll take the audience on a tour of America and have everything go wrong. It should be fun to do."

What next for Bergen? "I'm scheduled to do two films in the next few weeks," he said. "I'll play a 'wino' in 'Ding Dong, The Wine's All Gone,' and then work in a modern western. After that, summer stock—and hopefully, the regular run of TV guest spots.

While we photographed Charlie McCarthy and his mentor on the flightline at Pacific Airmotive Corporation, a group of line boys, gas truck drivers and standby mechanics gathered. Even though the daylight was almost gone

and he had some 50 minutes flying to do, the entertainer took five minutes with Charlie comfortably over his arm, reviewing a list of wonderful aviation gags. His audience—five men!

"Charlie, when's the proper time to make a line check?" (Answer) "Right after every accident."

When Charlie made a bad landing and cracked up a new plane, his comment was, "There wasn't enough mucilage on the fuselage."

Charlie, of course, is a fine instrument pilot—he spends enough time in that box. As he tells it, "The weather was so bad that I took off one day under a 30-foot ceiling. Of course, it was better when I got out of the hangar."

Since Bergen has been flying for 25 years, it was logical to ask, "What do you expect to take place in aviation in the next 25 years?"

"Oh, there'll be a lot of activity with turboprops for smaller aircraft," he said. "I expect that instrument competence will be needed by all pilots. I think the whole stature of flying is increasing rapidly and will continue to do so. Before World War II, pilots were usually considered a gang of wreckless thrill-seekers. We've outgrown that. Now a pilot is usually thought of as a fairly solid citizen. In the years ahead, I think that his stature will grow even more.

"When I fly—like this little hop to 'the Springs' this evening—I do it more for relaxation than anything else. It gives me a chance to get away from the phones, the agents, the bumper-to-bumper freeway and I can reach out for a proper perspective. Some of the best material I've ever written has been thought out while I was in the air, relaxed and unhurried.

"Flying is a great therapy for me."

As if entertaining, philanthropy and flying weren't enough for a busy family man, Bergen is also an expert photographer and a member of the select American Society of Cinematographers. He's an ardent amateur magician and also a bee-keeping enthusiast. In addition, he's a steam car expert and owns both a 1908 Case threshing machine engine and a 1911 White steam car.

Does Bergen want a new airplane? "I really don't know," he said thoughtfully. "The *Apache* and I sort of fit well together. The plane is over six years old, and I'm 61. If I do get another plane, it'll be a later model *Apache*, because I'm in no great hurry when I fly."

Then, with a knowledgeable look at the lengthening shadows, Bergen excused himself, stowed Charlie safely in the baggage compartment, climbed into the *Apache* alone, put on his glasses (for map-reading only), fired up the engines and taxied out. A not-so-new airplane and a veteran entertainer were flying alone.

But was he really alone? After all, there was also the graphic image of a sassy, wise-cracking copilot. And wasn't Charlie McCarthy making the flight too? Who knows which voice called the tower? ●