



Aviation's "Grand Old Man," the late William T. Piper

A TRIBUTE TO A GREAT MAN

The loss of William T. Piper will be felt not only in aviation but by the entire world which he had led to the threshold of air transportation opportunities. The present and future achievements of mankind in its quest for communication and transportation for all people are the legacy of this great man. He was a pioneering genius. His vision defined the potential of air transportation; his dedication forged the foundation for fulfillment of that vision.

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■ ■ The "grand old man" of general aviation is gone.

Death claimed William Thomas Piper (AOPA 50445) at Lock Haven, Pa., on Jan. 15, just one week after his 89th birthday.

While mourning his passing, the general aviation industry paid tribute to a man who—perhaps more than any other person—made it possible for the "little guy" in aviation to own and fly his own airplane. To AOPA, his death not only marked the passing of a great champion of private flying but also took away the Association's only life member. The AOPA board of trustees, by special resolution, voted him that honor in August 1961, in recognition of his contribution to the progress of general aviation. It was the only time in AOPA's 30-year history that such board action has been taken.

The company developed and directed for almost 33 years by William T. Piper first became known throughout the world as the manufacturer of the famous Piper *Cub*, the only model made by the Piper Aircraft Corporation during its early days. Mr. Piper's vision, manufacturing genius and dogged determination, in the face of adversity, enabled his company to win a place among the world's greatest general aviation aircraft manufacturers.

During his lifetime, Piper Aircraft built nearly 85,000 aircraft, ranging from the early *Cub* to specially designed agricultural aircraft and the sophisticated six-to-nine-place 247 m.p.h. twin-engine *Navajo*.

The company now markets 17 models of aircraft, employs about 4,400 persons with a total annual payroll of about \$30,000,000. Last year it produced 4,077 planes and established a company all-time record dollar volume of over \$100,000,000.

Born at Knapps Creek, N.Y., Mr. Piper did not become identified with the aviation industry until he was almost 50; he was 45 before he took his first airplane ride. But once he got into the flying business, he went at it in earnest. He learned to fly in a *Cub* at the age of 50. When Piper introduced the twin-engine *Apache* in 1954, Mr. Piper quickly qualified for a multi-engine rating—he was 73 years of age at the time. He told friends that if he were going to sell multi-engine planes he certainly should be able to fly them. When he started producing twins, Mr. Piper devoted the same energy to producing fast, modern planes that enabled him to fill the skies with bright yellow *Cubs* years earlier.

Mr. Piper entered the aviation business practically by accident in Bradford, Pa., when C. G. Taylor moved to that city from Rochester, N.Y., to begin production of a two-passenger airplane known as the *Chummy*. Mr. Piper, who had gone to school in Bradford, returned there after college and after 11 years as a construction engineer in various parts of the country. He was a partner in a small oil-producing company when the Chamber of Commerce, whose members had subscribed \$50,000

William T. Piper, 1881-1970

to help finance the new industry, asked him to become a member of the Taylor company's board.

The \$4,000 *Chummy* was barely airborne when the Depression struck and the bottom dropped out of the nation's economy. The plane's sales dropped to almost zero. Instead of withdrawing from the young company, Mr. Piper began to invest in it more heavily and take an active interest in its development. Taylor's next project was a powerless glider, which in 1930 evolved into the first *Cub*. The E-2 *Cub* was certificated on June 15, 1931. It was powered by a 37 h.p. engine. Sales were slow—22 in 1931, 22 in 1932, 17 in 1933. Seventy-one were sold in 1934, 200 in 1935, and the *Cub* was on its way. More than 500 were sold in 1936, the year that the plane was given a closed cabin and a new model number, J-2.

Mr. Piper bought out C. G. Taylor in the spring of 1936 and continued production in the Bradford plant. The new owner became president, treasurer and board chairman of the company. Mr. Taylor moved to Alliance, O., and established the Taylorcraft Corporation.

A year after the rearrangement, fire razed the Bradford factory, a severe blow to the new company. After a search for a suitable plant, Mr. Piper bought an abandoned silk mill at Lock Haven and then devoted his full energy and all of his funds to getting production of the *Cub* started again with a minimum loss of time. Despite the fire and the move to another city, *Cub* production set a record in 1937: 687 planes were built. Shortly after the move, the company was re-christened as the Piper Aircraft Corporation. In 1938, the J-3 *Cub*—which was to become known as the "flivver of the air"—was introduced. The *Cub's* fame spread as increased numbers of the plane were produced.

It is estimated that over 75% of the U.S. flyers in World War II received their first training in Piper *Cubs*. The *Cubs* also saw front-line service as observation planes. A total of 5,673 aircraft of this model were delivered to the U.S. armed forces between Pearl Harbor and V-J Day in World War II.

After the war ended, another crisis faced the Lock Haven manufacturer. Like other lightplane manufacturers, Piper geared up for the expected big

demand for civilian aircraft. Some 8,000 *Cubs* and *Super Cruisers* were produced. The lightplane industry in the United States produced 30,000 planes, including the 8,000 built at Lock Haven. These, combined with 31,000 surplus military planes, were dumped on the market and chaos resulted. The big market failed to materialize. In June 1947, Piper Aircraft virtually shut down for about six months for reorganization. Adversity always seemed to spur William T. Piper to greater achievement. He came back about six months later with a budget-type four-place plane, the *Vagabond*. After that, came the *Piper Pacer*, the *Piper Tri-Pacer*, the twin-engine *Apache*, the agricultural *Pawnee*, the twin-engine *Aztec*, the *Comanches* (single-engine), the *Cherokees*, the *Twin Comanche*, and the twin-engine *Navajo*.

In the midst of Piper Aircraft's drive for its share of the twin-engine market, Mr. Piper did not forget his old friend, the "little guy." During his 80th year, he saw production start on the *Piper Colt*, which he described to a *PILOT* interviewer as a "cheapie" which would sell for less than \$5,000—a low price for 1961.

"We are going to build a new two-place 'cheapie,'" he told the *PILOT* representative shortly before his 80th birthday (Jan. 1961 issue of *The PILOT*). "Two of my sons were against the idea and the other one wasn't really enthusiastic, but we are going to build 500 two-place trainers that will sell on today's market for \$4,995."

The 500 planes, a stripped-down version of the *Tri-Pacer*, were built.

His three sons to whom Mr. Piper referred are William T., Jr., who succeeded his father as president of the corporation; Howard (AOPA 9735), now executive vice president; and Thomas F., vice president.

Mr. Piper became chairman of the board in 1968 and his son assumed the presidency. Last year, at age 88, aviation's "grand old man" resigned as director of the corporation and was elected honorary chairman and director emeritus.

During his last years as active head of the company, Mr. Piper spent most of his time filling speaking engagements. He literally stumped the country

in an effort to arouse communities to the need for more landing places for airplanes. He did not carry the message of the large, multimillion-dollar metropolitan airports. He told of the need for the building of small strips; his dream was to see every community with its own landing place, regardless of how small. He also sounded warnings of the threat of over-regulation of the general aviation industry.

His personal life was simple and modest—almost Spartan. He used neither tobacco nor alcohol, but was tolerant of others who did. He attended cocktail parties but drank nothing stronger than ginger ale.

Mr. Piper graduated from Harvard College *cum laude* in 1903. He played football there and was hammer-throwing star on the track team. He served with the National Guard during the Spanish-American War, and as captain in the Army engineers during World War I.

He was married to Marie van de Water of Buffalo, N.Y., in 1910 and they became the parents of three sons and two daughters. The first Mrs. Piper died in 1937, and, in 1943, Mr. Piper married the former Mrs. Clara A. Taber of Plano, Tex. In addition to his widow and three sons, Mr. Piper is survived by his two daughters, Mrs. John Bolles of San Francisco and Mrs. Thomas Harford of Spring Lake, N.J.

One of the finest tributes paid to Mr. Piper came in an official company announcement of his death to Piper employees by two men who knew him best: his sons, William T. Piper, Jr., and Howard Piper. The announcement, restrained in tone, signed by these two company officials, said in part:

"Mr. Piper had at all times great faith in aviation, particularly in that portion of the business dealing with small and private planes. He often stated that he considered himself fortunate to have lived in the years which saw the birth of the airplane and the tremendous growth which the industry has made. As a direct result of this one man's hard work, enthusiasm, and dedication, Piper Aircraft Corporation is a respected and world-famous organization and we all owe a great debt of gratitude to this grand old gentleman." □