Navajo

Flight Check: Piper's **Navajo Chieftain**

How do these bigger birds fly? 'Like a dream,' says our man, who was especially interested in learning how the average multi-engine-rated pilot would fare in flying them alone

by MAX KARANT / AOPA 18

t's to Piper's credit that they've quietly pushed their way out of the traditional taunt that all they do is 'make Cubs.'

That derisive sneer doesn't come from the general aviation industry nearly as much as it does from the general public. It's still fairly common to see newspaper articles that refer to anything smaller than a DC-9 as "a Cub." Just about every general aviation manufacturer has been accused of building Cubs at one time or another, and it's a mark of a problem that still plagues much of the industry

Yet Piper, the parent of the Cub, is today building a whole family of planes, ranging from a variety of Cherokees, agplanes, and several light twins, all the way up to modest airliners. Not too many years ago, no one-particularly the general aviation industry itselfwould have believed what Piper is producing today. The Aztec is about as high as anyone would give them credit for, yet they're producing a variety of much larger Navajo models, up to and almost-ready-to-include a turboprop version

Quite a few AOPA members own and operate twins ranging from Aztecs on up. Of nearly 1,000 Navajos now flying, a substantial percentage of them are owned and/or flown by AOPA members. Navajos range in base price from just over \$125,000 to \$209,000, and there's no price yet on the even more expensive turboprop.

But such costly and exotic models are well above the AOPA norm: the "typical" member who flies, say, a Cherokee or a Cessna 172, or a Stinson Voyager. While the great majority of AOPA members are interested in knowing about expensive planes in passing, only a small percentage will ever own one.

So my approach to the Navajo family is a bit different from that normally followed by the more technical aviation publications. I'm not nearly as interested in all the intricate, complex, and technical details of the various Navajos as I am in whether an ordinary pilota typical AOPA member with, say, a multi-engine rating-can safely fly one of them. Period.

There are a lot of average pilots these days flying Aztecs, Cessna 310s, Twin Comanches, Barons, Senecas, etc., and every one of them at least harbors curiosity as to whether he could actually fly one of the bigger birds, if he had the money. That's the kind of look I took at Piper's new Navajo Chieftain [see also Nov. 1972 PILOT, page 64] and the pressurized Navajo P.

Fortunately or unfortunately, you don't go up to Lock Haven, get the ignition keys, and go. That's what we used to do for years, and Piper was famous for the extent to which they encouraged everyone to fly. The great emphasis was on simplicity and ease of operation. Sometimes it would backfire, as it did when Piper first went into twins with

the original Apache and turned pilots loose with too little training or checkout.

But the philosophy is still prevalent at both Lock Haven and Vero Beach. and it's had significant effect on even Piper's present-day "complex" models. I knew the original Apache was easy to fly-once you qualified in a twin and got your rating. And I doubt that there's a gentler-flying plane than the Cherokee or the by-now-legendary Aztec. So I mainly wanted to see if Piper could carry on in this tradition with modern, large models.

The first chance I got to see was back in September 1969, when I flew a standard Navajo from Gander, Newfoundland, to Shannon, Ireland. Looking at the Navajo from the outside, I was awestricken by its imposing size. I was apprehensive about flying it. In the cockpit, however, it was quickly apparent that this was a typical general aviation twin, and that all I had to do was learn where the switches and dials were.

I was startled by the ease with which the Navajo could be flown. Landings and takeoffs were very much like those of the Aztec. Operation in the air was simply by the numbers. By the time I got to Ireland, I was enthusiastic.

I went through pretty much the same thing just recently, at Lock Haven. There stood a pressurized Navajo worth about \$290,000 equipped. Me fly a thing like that? Well, they didn't exactly hand me the keys and say goodbye, as they used to at Piper. But a quick check through the manual, and Bill Friedrich in the right-hand seat to nurse me, and I was flying a new plane Piper-style, 1973.

Of course, the instrument panel looked strange. And where was the master switch? And the clock? And how the hell does one operate that pressurization system? Turns out it's virtually automatic; all you do is set it on the ground, then leave it alone.

But how does such a costly beast fly? Once again, like a dream. It's still as easy as an Aztec, and quite a bit easier than my Twin Comanche. I never made First aircraft flight-checked was this sleek Navajo P with radar in its nose—price, equipped, about \$290,000. Forward visibility from the cockpit is relatively limited because of plane's pressurization requirements (compare windshield with that of unpressurized Navajo Chieftain, page 76). Photos by the author



a bad landing in either the Navajo P or the bigger Chieftain, even though I flew them both for the first time that day. Yet I'm still about 50-50 in my Twin Comanche, and I've got 2,800 hours in it so far!

To try the pressurization, I climbed to 13,500 feet at just under 1,500 fpm. Normal ceiling with a full load (7,800 pounds gross) is 29,000 feet, and the cabin is at 10,000 feet. Once I'd played around a bit in the airlines' sky, I came back down at more than 3,000 fpm to "Indian country," as one sarcastic airline pilot put it, referring to Cherokees, Comanches and Aztecs. Whenever I get the chance, I thank United's pilots for letting me use their "friendly skies"; such exchanges are usually good for a mutual laugh.

Now I was interested in flight characteristics. Is it easily maneuverable? Must you be especially careful about something unusual? Does it have a hairraising stall? And so on. This time, I wasn't interested in documenting the fact that the specifications call for a cruising speed of 244 mph at 24,000 feet at 65% power. All I wanted to know was whether or not—in my personal opinion—an ordinary general aviation twin pilot could practically and safely fly this plane alone.

After lunch, I did the same thing with a still newer Navajo called the Chieftain. This is a stretched Navajo with 10 passenger seats. It's not pressurized, but the engines are turbocharged, and it has a service ceiling at full gross (7,000 pounds) of 27,200 feet; all you need is ample oxygen equipment. Again, I was awestricken. This was the biggest Piper of all.

This time Horace Wood, former Gillette corporation pilot and one-time manager of Page Airways at Washington National, was in the right seat. He had a prepared list of maneuvers he thought I should try, to quickly see what the Chieftain could do. That list ran the gamut from short-field landings to single-engine flights around the traffic pattern. At altitude, I flew it slowly with flaps and gear up and down, and stalled it the same way.

Again, as gentle as a lamb. My conclusion was the same as for the pressur-

Navajo P's stair door has a novel series of safety locks around the outer edge, easily holding in the plane's high (5.5 psf) pressurization and preventing accidental door opening.



Piper

ward the nose.

Lycomings that both rotate inward, to-

(Continued from preceding page)		Navajo Chieftain	Navaio P (pressurized)
ized Navajo: it's easily a one-man plane to fly. Though I'd only been in the plane a few minutes, I landed it easily and gently every time, again in sharp con-	Powerplants (2)	Lycoming 350-hp TIO-540; 350-hp LTIO-540	Lycoming 425-hp TIGO-541
trast to my Twin Comanche. The pressurized Navajo P has a light elevator early in the takeoff, and you hold the wheel back until the speed	Propellers Seating capacity	Hartzell 3-blade, constant-speed, full-feathering 2–10	Hartzell 3-blade, constant-speed, full-feathering 6–8
builds up. The Chieftain is a longer plane, and the elevator is normal throughout.	Fuel capacity (gal) Gross weight (lb) Emoty weight (lb)	192 7,000 3,991*	192 (242 with aux. tanks) 7,800
Base price of the Chieftain is \$141,- 900, and it's roughly \$190,000 with full avionics. Though it was originally de-	Service ceiling (ft) Max range (sm) Cruising range (sm)	27,200 1,225 1,080	4,842 29,000 + 1,485 1,345
signed to meet a commuter airline re- quirement, only about 20% of the 200 Chieftains Piper plans to sell this year	Max speed (mph) Cruising speed (mph, at 24,000 feet, 75% power) Stall speed (mph, gear and	270 260	280 266
are for commuters. They say they're sold out through August, and 70% have been sold to individuals or corporations	flaps down) Rate of climb (fpm) Takeoff distance (ft, over	85 1,390	83 1,740
(mostly with staff members to fly them). The Navaio P has 425-hp Lycoming	50-ft obstacle) Landing distance (ft, over 50-ft obstacle)	2,490 2,725	2,960 2,700
engines, both of which rotate counter- clockwise. The Chieftain has 350-hp	Price (standard) * Standard empty weight includes nace	\$141,900	\$216,000

propellers. Does not include oxygen system.

Specifications And Performance

Newest Indian in Piper's twin lineup is the Navajo Chieftain, a stretched version of the Turbo Navajo, with 10-place capacity. Stretched cabin permits a variety of loading and seating options for corporate, commuter/charter, or cargo/mail missions.

