



# Pig in a Poke

## How to maintain your objectivity when buying an airplane

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■ Most of us stumble into the wonderful world of airplane ownership with our eyes firmly shut. We kick tires, read *Trade-A-Plane*, browse along lines of airplanes until suddenly—Eureka! There in front of us is the plane of our dreams. It may be a pristine antique, a somewhat down-at-the-heels 15-year-old trainer, or a brand-new shiny Wichita Wonder. If your wallet can stand the new machine, read no further.

If your wife's future grounds for divorce is used, though, beware. There is an old saying about fools and their money, and it holds equally true for those of us who thunder through the sky in our trusty, winged steeds.

The fact is that many of us, regardless of flying time or business acumen, are babes in the proverbial woods when it comes to selecting a good mount. Even the man who takes his time, compares, checks prices, and approaches the whole affair carefully, too often gets burned. There are probably more fancy paint jobs sold each year than there are airplanes.

The scenario usually runs like this. You've decided the type you want. You follow *Trade-A-Plane* for a month or two, getting an idea of what's available

and how much it's likely to cost you. Then you see the ad—it sounds almost too good to be true. A fresh annual, new tires, maybe even a new interior or paint, but the price . . . There must be a mistake, but so what—how much can a phone call cost?

You call the owner. Sure enough, over the wires comes a glowing description. So, Saturday morning you trundle on over to the field, and lo, there it is—and it's beautiful. The paint smiles at you in the sunlight, the upholstery glows quietly in the well-appointed cockpit. Perhaps the radios are a bit old, but after all, at *that* price?

The odds are pretty good you won't even ask to fly it, but if you do, why sure . . . see how responsive it is? And fast—why, it's five miles an hour better than the current model.

All that remains is a loan from the bank, which obviously wouldn't lend money for a bad investment, and a few papers.

Your new pride and joy is just what you had hoped it would be. You fly the family to Florida for a vacation, you take friends up to see the neighborhood, maybe go on a fishing trip. The bird runs like a top.

Finally, though, the brakes need re-lining, or perhaps a whole year has passed and the ship is up for annual. So into the shop it goes. And then, a day or two later, comes the phone call. Well, yes, it would probably be best if you stop over to the field . . . we've found a couple of pretty major problems . . .

Out you go, with a sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach. There must be some mistake. The wrong airplane or something—but there isn't. As you walk into the hangar, there lies your plane—cowlings off, panels open—a pretty depressing sight. And it gets even more depressing. Two cylinders hold only 40 pounds of air out of 80 going into the compression tester. Bad rings? How much is that going to cost? Suddenly, the cost per hour for the past year's flying skyrockets.

And a day later, when the cylinders come off and prove to be out of limits, it skyrockets again. Replace both cylinders? Congratulations, you have just joined the ranks of the \$1,000 annual.

You flew the bird 100 hours that year, not enough to push a good cylinder out of limits. Slowly it dawns on you *why* the plane was sold with a fresh annual. You've been had.

The above is fictitious. And, of course, there are many exceptions. I bought my own first airplane, a 1937 Aeronca, in precisely this way many years ago, and I am still totally satisfied with it. The fellow put a fresh annual on it not to hide anything, but to make sure the ship was in first class shape when I got it. Many others tell similar stories. Unfortunately, though, in seven years as an A&P mechanic and a couple as an IA, I have seen variations on the theme of my illustration far too often. The saddest part is that most of them could have been avoided by following a few simple rules.

The first few are obvious, and pretty well known. Look around. Have some idea of values. Try to resist, or at least control, the love-at-first-sight syndrome.

There are others, though, not so evident. Perhaps the first one should be made before you even start looking. Your choice of type is going to relate directly to your satisfaction with the new bird. We all sum up our needs and desires—speed, load, comfort, or whatever—beforehand, and then settle on a specific machine or at least a general category that fills the bill.

Remember, though, that nothing is free. For example, you want a four-placer, low-wing, and speed. A Bonanza would be your first choice, but these are expensive. Still, what about that slightly decrepit old "C" model out at the field? It hasn't flown in at least two years. Well, the odds are you can pick it up fairly cheap.

But once you've got it, you have to





A good walkaround can eliminate airplanes with obvious faults. For others, follow up with a flight test and inspection of logs.

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support it. Maybe the magnesium in the control surfaces is corroding, or the engine is marginal, or the prop is feeling tired, or all of the above. Putting a hangar queen into shape is an expensive proposition, and it becomes more so as the size and complexity of the machine increases. There is probably a reason why the bird is so ratty—usually because the present owner can't afford to put it in shape either. So choose realistically.

Another variation is the oh-I-can-do-a-lot-of-the-work-myself type. Again, the airplane has fallen on hard times—bad fabric, minor damage, or just neglect. If you have the skill and enjoy the work—have at it. But don't expect that you'll wind up with a cheap airplane. You will have hours and hours of work in it, and at the end, remember, you have to get it signed off. The average mechanic is extremely loath to sign work he hasn't done himself, and with good reason.

There is an army of do-it-yourselfers out there, most of whom have not the slightest idea of what they're doing, and the mechanic has probably seen the results of their efforts. So don't be offended if he declines the honor, or keeps *very* close tabs on you. In short, expect to put in two or three times the amount of free labor you plan on, and bear in mind that you're going to have to pay someone to look over your shoulder every step of the way.

Hopefully, by now you have become terrified of the manifold horrors of the doghouse airplane. More insidious is the average-to-creampuff looking machine. It may be just what it seems—but again, it may not. So the question again becomes that of how best to cover your own six o'clock position.

A good walkaround will tell you a lot, but it's not a sure indicator. If it shows

a lot of discrepancies, you may want to hang it up right there, bid the seller good day, and look elsewhere.

If the bird looks good, you are entering the riskiest part of the whole operation. Even a test flight usually won't tell you much, although I once bought a Funk sight unseen that displayed an annoying tendency to flip inverted the first time I flew it. (In all fairness, it was the rigging, not the design.)

Your next step is the logs. You can sometimes tell a good bit from them yourself, although you're better off to go over them with a trusted mechanic, who will know what he's looking for—damage, recurring problems, time on engine, airframe, and components, even between-the-lines items, such as three particularly crucial pages I once found torn out of the logs of a Twin Comanche with a rather checkered history. (Too late, I should add; the client had already bought the ship.)

Major Repair and Alteration Forms (337s) are another source of information. Frequently, however, they are missing. Often all that will indicate a crack-up may be a logbook entry noting "installed new propeller and repaired left landing gear." You can't blame *that* on termites.

Accident damage itself isn't necessarily grounds to reject an airplane. Most times the effect will be negligible. It should be taken as a warning of what *may* be wrong, rather than as proof of an existing problem.

The most important step of all is the one least often taken. Whatever you do, get a prebuyer's inspection. It will cost anywhere from \$50 to \$200, and could be the best money you ever spent. Your mechanic will give the airplane a good, solid once-over which should reveal any problem areas. Many of these are impossible for you to check in a walkaround.

A compression check will tell him far more about the condition of the engine

than you can by looking at the thing, or even running it. He will check the condition of the fabric, whether the tubing is rusted, whether there is corrosion inside that nice shiny aluminum wing. And a raft of other things as well—existing problems and those likely to occur in the not-too-distant future.

He will *not* guarantee that nothing will go wrong, but if he gives his opinion that the bird looks okay, it probably is. If he finds serious trouble, the hundred bucks or so you pay may well save you several thousand, not to mention untold aggravation. If he gives your future pride and joy a clean bill of health, his fee will be a small portion of your total outlay, and can be viewed as insurance against any unwelcome surprises, come next annual.

No one with a good airplane to sell is likely to balk at such an inspection. If he feeds you the "oh-it-was-just-annualized" line, remember that it's still possible to buy a \$50 annual if you look in the right corners and aren't fussy about details.

I am not saying that his annual is a "Parker Pen Special"—it probably isn't. But if it's on the up-and-up, he has nothing to fear from a prebuyer inspection. The fact that you are spending money on his airplane is a pretty good indicator of your interest in it, and even if you should ultimately back out, he's gotten a free checkup out of the deal.

Occasionally, I meet someone with the right idea, but the wrong approach. This guy goes to the horse's mouth—he asks the mechanic who maintained the airplane. Whenever someone asks me for the "inside scoop" on an airplane I have maintained, I suggest that he take it to another shop for a prebuyer's inspection. This isn't a share-the-wealth conspiracy among A&Ps; it's common sense, really.

First, asking the other man's mechanic puts him between a rock and a hard spot. The seller has, in effect, supplied his paycheck in the past, and may again in the future. In addition, and more important from your point of view, a different mechanic is more likely to catch any oversights or discrepancies, since he will approach the airplane with a critical eye. He hasn't seen it before, and won't want to take for granted the quality of someone else's work.

There are innumerable pitfalls for the unwary when it comes to buying a used airplane, but a little bit of common sense can go a long way toward keeping you out of the gang P.T. Barnum was talking about when he said there was one born every minute. You are about to make what is probably the largest investment—outside of your home—you will ever make. Doesn't it make good sense to consult an expert?

The mechanic you choose will do much of the same work he would at the next annual, but with one vital difference. The problem he finds *before* you buy will save you money; the one you don't give him a chance at until next year, well, that one's a different story. The choice is yours. □