





# THE FROG PRINCE

*One man's trainer is another's magic carpet.*

BY MARC E. COOK

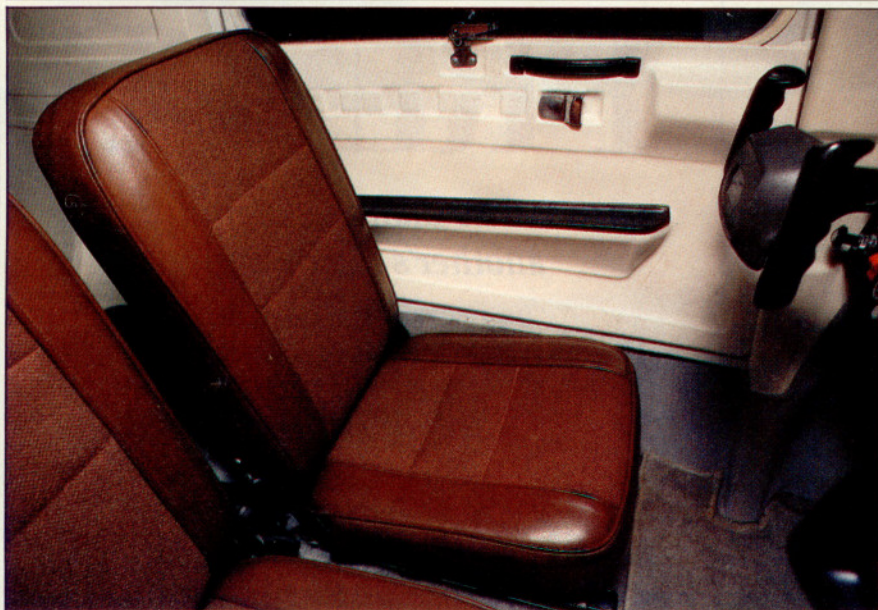
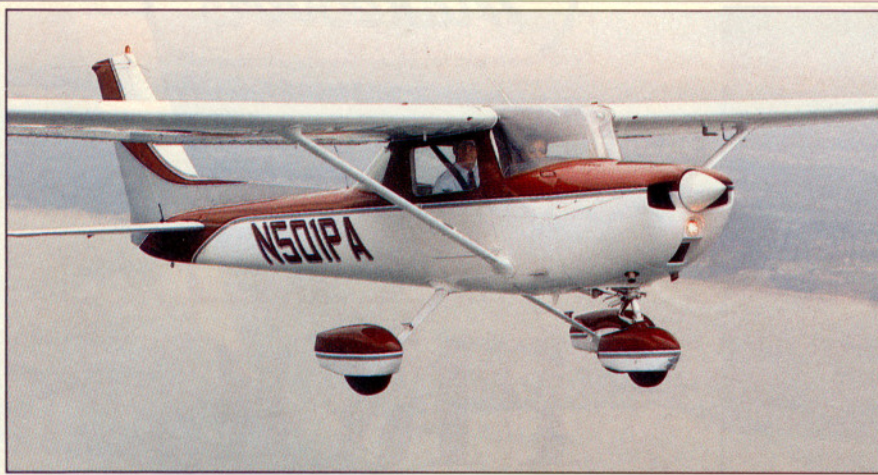
**Y**ou hated it. For the first dozen hours, this skittish, temperamental little airplane foiled your every attempt to tame it. The airplane stalled fiercely and slammed through turbulence the way a New York cab hammers along 42nd Street; it took every ounce of wherewithal just to cram yourself and an instructor into the strait-jacket-size cockpit.

Ah, those were the days. Plying the skies in a Cessna 150, learning, sweating, pressing on. In that airplane, you gained knowledge, formed an intimate relationship with the little airplane. Yet like most pilots, you probably moved on to larger, more useful airplanes after earning the certificate, to conveyances with a purpose beyond that of education. That's a shame.

See, the Cessna 150 can be, when your mission or pocketbook demands, an outstanding personal airplane, a willing traveling companion for short, low, and slow hops. It won't dazzle you with speed: Cruise velocities are near 100 knots, fuel burn about 6 gallons per hour. With 22.5 gallons aboard, no-wind range works out to about 275 nautical miles with an hour's reserve. Not exactly impressive, but you'll spend far more than 15 percent more money for the 15-percent speed increase a Cessna 172 brings.

That kind of economy is what makes the 150 a good buy for those with limited travel plans. Used prices, although they have been on the rise even for the early models, start at a paltry \$8,000 for a 1959 model, according to the *Aircraft Bluebook-Price Digest*. In fact, a 1977 150 (the last year they were built) averages \$13,500 on the used market. To put that in perspective, a 1959 Skyhawk sells for about \$13,000 while a 1977 model runs \$26,000. If your needs include hauling only one other body, the 150 could prove





*Priester Aviation's refurbished 150 includes a fresh instrument panel and upgraded avionics.*

as economical as a dormitory supper.

The 150 treads lightly on your finances with regard to maintenance, too. A review of recent service difficulty reports of Cessna 150s and 152s shows that landing-gear troubles head the list of maintenance headaches, including damaged main-gear/fuselage structures and nosewheel shimmys. A large number of these resulted from crash-and-go student landings, though, so an airplane subjected to personal use solely should fare better. Otherwise, the 150 airframe has proven stout, no small feat considering the pounding it gets with a student at the controls. The airplane shines in the safety category, too; in a survey of Federal Aviation Administration accident and incident reports from January 1987 to December 1989, the vast majority of Cessna 150 accidents were related to training—usually hard landings, botched takeoffs—and few were fatal.

Though designed to use 80-octane fuel, the 150's Continental O-200 tolerates 100LL avgas if you lean aggres-

sively, or it can use autogas to do away with the lead menace altogether. Owners report good results using auto fuel. Post-1968 models have one annoying and expensive recurring problem: the starter adapter. These adapters fail frequently and cost nearly \$800 to replace; early airplanes, with pull starters instead of the key-operated variety, aren't troublesome. Like the airframe, the 100-horsepower mill is proven and rugged.

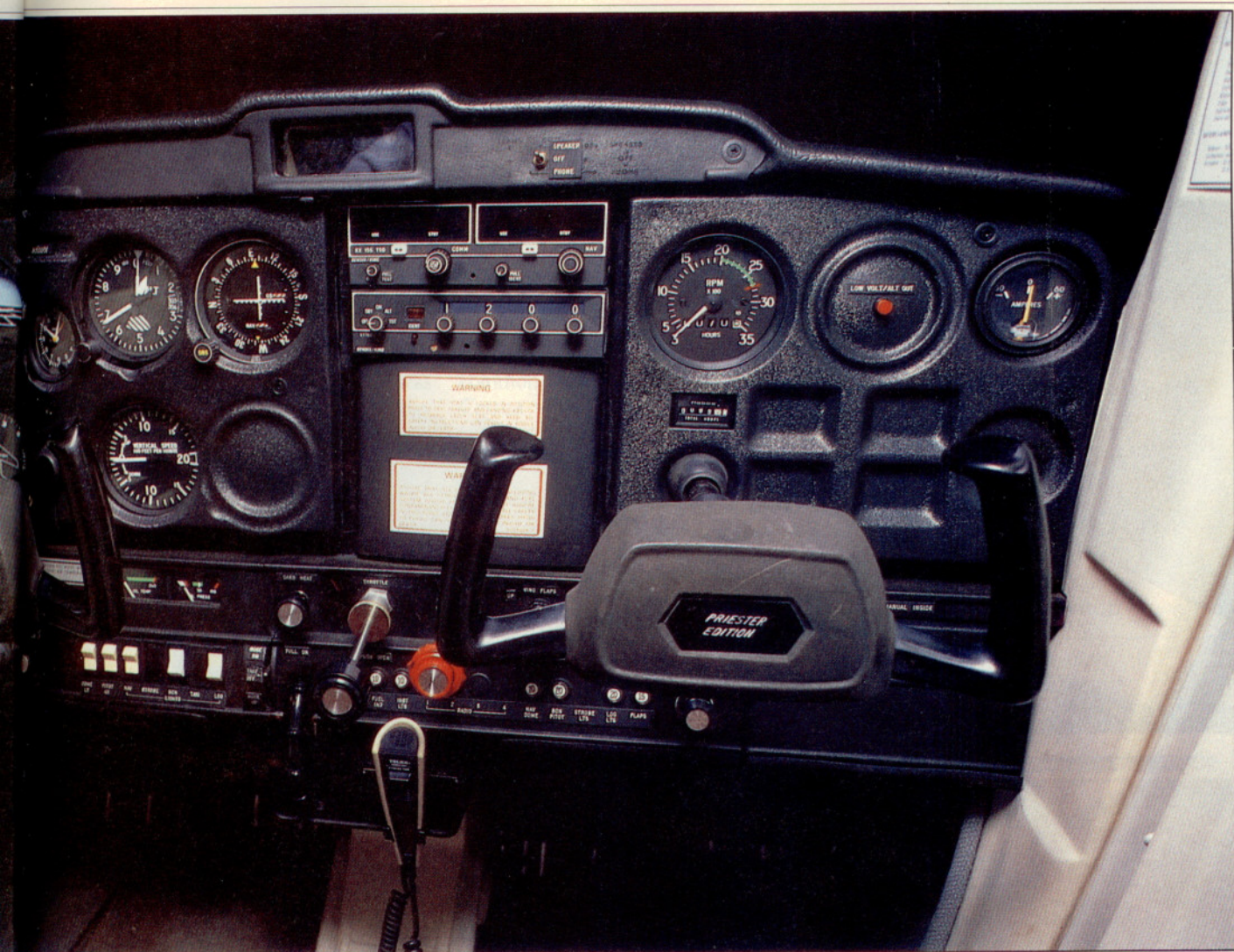
The engine should be proven, having been aboard the 150 from 1959 until 1977, when the 152 was introduced. During that 18-year span, the 150 evolved steadily, if somewhat slowly. The original, with its straight tail and fastback fuselage, resembled the 140 from which it was cloned; manual flaps, a modest 100-hp powerplant, a smattering of instruments, and cozy side-by-side seating completed the austere package. Today, owners consider these airplanes classics, and many early 150s receive care only afforded more substantial and supposedly more prominent

neo-antiques.

Fastback styling survived through the 1963 model year. (The 150 was the last to receive many of Cessna's across-the-board improvements. Skyhawks and Skylanes received swept tails in 1960 and rear windows in 1962.) In 1964, Cessna trimmed the empennage and fitted the much-hyped "Omni-Vision" rear windows. In 1966, a swept vertical tail was grafted onto the airplane, the cabin doors were enlarged, and electric flaps replaced the floor-mounted bar with a natty little switch. Sales boomed that year, from 1,637 in 1965 to 3,087, thanks in part to a 10-percent price cut.

After these basic airframe changes, the 150's profile would remain essentially the same until production (then in the form of the 152) ceased in 1985. Cessna tweaked the basic design through the 1960s and 1970s, ultimately rechristening it the 152 in late 1977. The big change in the 152 was the switch to a 110-hp Lycoming O-235 powerplant. Eighty-octane avgas was staring extinc-





tion in the eye when Cessna made the change; the Lycoming engine, with a compression ratio greater than that of the 150's Continental, should have handled the four-times-greater lead content of 100LL. It didn't. Lead fouling was as common as hard landings in the 152, and students were introduced to the arcane art of leaning early in their careers. Lycoming and Cessna came up with a fix in the later models, but few of those airplanes—with 108-hp Lycoming O-235-N2C engines—were produced.

Overall, Cessna built more than 28,000 of the airplanes before the line shut down. The majority, more than 22,000, are 150s. A handful (about 10 percent of the fleet) are Aerobats; though certainly no Pitts, they are capable of completing basic maneuvers—or at least those not requiring much horsepower or inverted flight capabilities.

For a knockabout sport airplane, the 150 excels. It feels half the weight of a 172, the controls are responsive, and it is demanding enough to keep you inter-

*"We took the airplane down to bare metal—and just went wild with it."*

ested without being unforgiving. The airplane is honest. It doesn't cover your mistakes, nor does it do anything you do not ask it to. It has some of the high-wing Cessna quirks, like pitching moments during flap extension and retraction and sensitivity to wind on the ground (especially on the earlier 150s with narrow, spring-steel gear; post-1970 models with longer, tubular legs are better in this regard).

About the only serious shortcoming of the 150, aside from its modest speed, is interior room. To put it bluntly, there isn't much. A pair of 200-pounders would be stretching not only the maximum weight limitations, but probably their friendship as well. Smaller souls

get on better, but you'll never mistake the cabin for a Skylane's. Appointments are sparse, too, with generous helpings of plastic, befitting the airplane's trainer role. Aftermarket interior kits are numerous, though; an owner can spiff up the cabin to the limit of his credit.

If you think that most 150s are dowdy little ex-trainers, think again. As an example, take Priester Aviation's project. What started as a continuing maintenance program for its flight school airplanes turned into an out-and-out restoration of one 1977 Cessna 150. According to Crew Chief of Recip Maintenance Robert W. Sommers, the refurbishing process began innocently enough. The company had grown tired of fixing the Cessnas at its Wheeling, Illinois, flight school piece by piece, making its fleet of 150s a patchwork quilt of new and old parts, when Sommers suggested they take one off the line and do something more substantial than as-needed repairs. The result, rolled out more than a year later,



was an essentially brand-new 150.

"We took the airplane down to bare metal—and just went wild with it," says Sommers. Indeed, the rework of the airplane was extensive. It was stripped, disassembled, cleaned, primed, and painted virtually everywhere. More important, Priester had the time and funds to take pains that would have been impossible—for reasons of time and economy—on the production line. For example, the insides of the wings and fuselage were painted with an epoxy primer to help ward off corrosion. "I was priming the inside of the fuel-tank bay and thought, 'Hey, if we're smart, we'll do this everywhere.' So we did."

Sommers employed all the tricks of his trade on the 150. "This thing should last forever," he says. In addition to the airframe overhaul, the airplane received a factory-remanufactured engine; Teledyne Continental no longer produces the 150's O-200A engine, so that was the best recourse. New avionics and instruments were also part of the package, in this case including a modest Bendix/King stack. New carpeting and uphol-

stery were also installed, as were the instrument panel covers (painted black). All systems were returned to as-new condition, control cables were replaced, and the airplane was painted.

The result of Sommers's work (and Priester's considerable monetary input) is really a better-than-new Cessna 150. It is better equipped than it was factory-fresh, and many small modifications have been made—like improved weather stripping around the wing-root/flap-fairing junction to stop the leaking so common there. "I believe this is how Cessna would have built the airplane had cost been no object," he says.

But for owners, cost is an object. Here the Priester 150's price reflects the care taken in its restoration. The company says that it would do the same job over again for about \$40,000, plus airplane. For those whose blood pressure just went off the scale, there is an alternative. "We don't have to do everything to an owner's airplane that we did to ours," Sommers says. "We did this to show what can be done."

Sommers also says he has gained

ground in two crucial areas: financing and insurance. Priester has talked with a handful of banks that would lend the money for the refurbishing, even though the basic value of the airplane before the work would be much lower than the cost of the job. Also, insurance companies are willing to value the completed airplane for more than they would a similar unrestored airplane, according to Sommers. Owners worried that, in case of an accident, they would not receive the value of the airplane.

While the Priester style of refurbishing might seem an expensive way of turning a somber ex-trainer into a pristine personal expression, it certainly gathers approving looks. The expression on most pilots' faces is something like: "Wow. You mean that's really just a little old 150 under all that?"

Which, of course, begs another question: What's wrong with that? □

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