

OUR WINGS

Who among us in the pilot world hasn't at least considered buying an airplane? Probably no one topic has dominated more hangar sessions than the rationale for owning one model over another. Should it be a high-flying, turbocharged, and intercooled business machine or a nap-of-the-earth taildragger? Even those who already own sometimes think about moving up, down, or even laterally. The obvious truth is that no one airplane is the right one for every mission or role; each is a compromise.

Selecting one model over another or deciding whether to own at all is one of a pilot's most fun yet difficult decisions. To offer some counsel, we sought out owners of a variety of aircraft used a variety of ways. As you'll see, we didn't have to look far.

After some misadventures with renting, Steve Brown, AOPA's senior vice president of Government and Technical Affairs, and his wife, Cyndy, decided the solution was to buy a Cessna 150 that they knew would be reliable. Jerry Lawhon, acting executive director of the AOPA Air Safety Foundation, and his wife formed a corporation to buy a Piper Arrow, their third airplane. Jerry wings his way to the office in the Arrow a couple of days a week. *AOPA Pilot* contributor Richard L. Collins regularly crisscrosses the continent in his Cessna P210. As a longtime aircraft owner and very frequent flier, Dick shares his insights into the costs, trials, tribulations, and joys of having an airplane always at your disposal.

Maybe after reading these three odysseys, you'll believe that owning is the right move for you. If so, see "Buying In" (p. 57) for a detailed look at how to finance the adventure.

—The Editors





CURING THE RENTING BLUES

*Owner-assisted annuals and TLC
make for bargain-basement flying.*

BY STEVEN J. BROWN

Like most pilots who have rented numerous aircraft from FBOs, my wife Cyndy and I have wonderful memories of first-class, trouble-free experiences. However, we also have dark memories of unpleasant attempts at renting. We believe it's the collective frustrations from the unhappy events that drive many pilots to either stop flying or to purchase their own aircraft. • Because Cyndy and I both are pilots, we had

an option most prospective airplane buyers did not—each other as partners. After one particularly frustrating weekend with rental aircraft, we decided that owning would be a net plus—eliminate the unpleasant surprises encountered with rentals for a marginally higher cost in terms of both money and time. We assumed the expense of ownership would be the major obstacle to realizing the dream we each had harbored. In reality, once we defined what we could afford, the real obstacle was finding an aircraft that met our criteria.

Like many potential owners, we casually researched ownership and quickly determined that \$10,000 was the most we could afford to spend. And that was only an optimistic assessment of what we prayed our local banker would lend us during a weak moment, rather than a well-researched number.

After reviewing AOPA's aircraft purchaser's package, we began looking for the \$10,000-or-under aircraft that matched our criteria. In early 1986, we were very concerned about the continuing supply of parts for aircraft and, therefore, considered only models that had large production runs.

Given our financial limits, it was also essential that the worst-case, on-going maintenance cost be the lowest possible in the marketplace. Applying a little common sense, we knew that the older the airplane, the more expensive the maintenance would be. So without more research, we aimed at the newest airplane available for \$10,000 or less.

Our third requirement focused on what we actually used an airplane for *most* of the time. For less than \$10,000, we knew speed, range, and aircraft systems would all have to be at the lowest end of the performance scale. But to us, that was acceptable. All we really needed most of the time was a reliable VFR aircraft with two seats and enough useful load to make weekend trips of 500 miles or less one way. On the rare occasions when we needed four seats, serious IFR capability, high speed, or business-use reliability, we knew we would have to rent. But an honest review of our rental history revealed that 90 percent of our trips were fairly simple.

By now, you must have concluded that we purchased a Cessna 150. However, it may shock you to know that in 1986, we found a very reliable, appealing airplane for only \$6,700—less than the cost of a second car. Our 1969 Cessna 150J had 1,162 hours total time, of which only the first 300 had been in the initial flight training FBO/rental environment. The airplane had all original parts except for new interior upholstery and exterior strobe lights. We even had the original 90-channel radio that continued to work (with regular TLC) for the first five years. It's been replaced, but a second new 720-channel radio we added three years ago seems to always be partially inoperative. If it isn't the nav, the com has a bug in it. If it isn't the OBS calibration, it's a faulty squelch or internal part. We've spent nearly \$300 on 720-channel maintenance in three years and only \$140 on 90-channel maintenance in five years.

We only had one weak cylinder in the engine. All the others were and continue to be strong. In fact, our only complaint with the airplane is the original paint job. The paint has deteriorated so badly that we voluntarily take the parking space behind the last



row of hangars just to keep from embarrassing ourselves or friends and relatives who pick us up upon arrival.

We originally budgeted \$10,000 and spent \$6,700. Instead of spending the remaining \$3,300 on all the gadgets we wanted to install in a very Spartan, basic airplane, we elected to take a

long-term approach to upgrading.

During the first year, we simply invested in bringing what we had purchased up to the level of reliability and safety we desired. This was the primary reason we abandoned rentals. We wanted a virtual guarantee that, when we untied the ropes, we could be cer-



ART DAVIS

A desire for unquestionable reliability drew Steve and Cyndy Brown into the realms of aircraft ownership.

tain that the airplane would be reliable and safe. Our first annual inspection was performed by the same A&I who did our prepurchase inspection. We decided to assist in the inspection so that *we* could make the decisions on the items we wanted to replace—even though by regulation, the re-

placements might not be required.

During the first annual, only three months after purchase, we had a \$400 parts bill and much greater peace of mind. To make a long story short, we replaced some parts that we were not certain were aircraft parts. We replaced some hoses, clamps, and fasteners that could have gone a few more hours and readjusted to specifications many basic measurements like cable tensions, timing, and torques. Soon after the annual (or rather as soon as we had made the last payment on the credit card), we spent \$126.80 on IFR certification of the pitot-static and transponder systems. We wanted to have the assurance that, when we needed to take off on a return flight and punch through a few clouds or fog, we were legal and reading instruments that were accurate.

Over the past six years, we've had about one unexpected major repair bill each year. On average, it's been a \$400 to \$500 proposition—a new magneto, new attitude gyro, replacement radio, Mode C altimeter (regulatory repair, not wear and tear), new audio/intercom system, and another

“comprehensive upgrade” (tires, battery, brakes, light bulbs, spark plugs, and the like). However, these annual hits have not been a real problem for two reasons: our initial purchase price and philosophy of aggressive reserves. Because we did not spend all we could afford initially, we can afford immediate safety-conscious maintenance. Also, we charge ourselves a few dollars more than the market rate on a per-hour basis for the airplane and have accumulated a reserve to make unexpected repairs. We have found this discipline essential to overcoming the rental aircraft problem we originally sought to avoid, and it is preferable to forgoing food, housing, or heating in the monthly household budget.

Our six years of owning 60499 have been very enjoyable and affordable. We planned for the unexpected and, therefore, have not been disappointed. And we have had to rent an airplane only two or three times a year—just as predicted. Several times a year, we take the 150 out for a weekend trip of about 180 nautical miles to visit friends and relatives. Aside from that, our trips generally are just for the day or out to dinner.

Even with a philosophy of aggressive reserve accumulation, our \$48 hourly charge is only \$7 to \$10 higher than market rental rates—and we have a large portion of the engine overhaul already in the bank. We've flown the airplane about 200 hours, and it's now worth about \$11,000. If we had placed the \$6,700 and ongoing maintenance expenditures in the bank over six years, we would have a few thousand dollars in interest that we don't have now, but there are limits to rationality and disciplined living.

After about three years of owning the Cessna 150, I began to lust for a little more performance. What I really think I need is a fixed-gear Cessna 182—lots of horsepower, climb performance, and speed and a deeper, more authoritative engine sound. Fortunately, Cyndy keeps me sane (she pays the bills), and I can clearly see that 60499 is going to remain ours for a while longer. Maybe a new paint job and that new GPS/loran would . . . □

Cessna N60499 is Steve and Cyndy Brown's first airplane. They are both seaplane pilots, instrument flight instructors and holders of other advanced ratings.