

A WINGED SPORT/UTILITY VEHICLE

The airplanes we own say more about us than we'd probably like to admit. Some owners choose airplanes that allow them to fly close to the earth—aerial pick-up trucks with big engines and little tail-wheels, caked with mud; others must own the latest low-profile, high-flying plastic airplane with fine Corinthian leather and a glass instrument panel. I'm a mud-and-low-altitude kind of owner.

Having been the proud caretaker of an ancient Cessna 180 for several years (See "Jack of All Trades," October 1994 *Pilot*), I began to want more: more payload, more IFR range, and better short-field perfor-

**Skywagon:
Cessna's three-
quarter-ton
aerial pickup**

BY MICHAEL MAYA CHARLES

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FIZER





mance from high-altitude strips. A little more speed wouldn't hurt, either. After an agonizing and wide-ranging search, I finally set my sights on the Cessna 185 Skywagon. It offered everything that I loved about the 180—and more.

Now, when people (many of them professional pilots) ask what kind of airplane I own, their reaction is often "Ahh, a 185; that's my dream airplane." Why is that? What is it about the 185 that elicits such longing?

Well, the airplane will go just about anywhere you have the guts to take it—and on those excursions will carry most of what you own. Skywagons haul the oil barrels, hunters, machinery parts, and caskets on work days; or the camping

A Cessna 185 will go almost anywhere you have the guts to take it.

gear, cooler, and mountain bikes on days off. This aerial pick-up comfortably hauls nearly three quarters of a ton of stuff; in my airplane I can fill all four seats with 200-pounders, add a full tank of gas (88 gallons), and load more than 175 pounds of baggage. Airplanes able to do that comprise a very short list.

Although certified as a six-place airplane, few 185s have all six seats installed. Most owners have removed the third-row "kiddie seat" bench, suitable only for very short people and very short sit times—they're miserable seats for normal-sized folks.

The Cessna 185 first appeared in 1961 as an evolutionary follow-on to the popular 180. It's basically a beefed-up 180 with a 260-horsepower fuel-injected Continental IO-470. Adding 30 more horses to the proven design immediately won the attention (and affection) of charter operators needing additional power for floatplanes, high-altitude flight, and heavy hauling.

Within a couple of years of its intro-



duction, Cessna offered Continental's 300-hp (285 hp continuous) IO-520 as an option and, not surprisingly, the deeper-voiced 185 quickly eliminated its weaker sibling on the Pawnee assembly line in Wichita.

For the most part, my 1979 model 185 has proven to be a gas 'n go airplane. It's a simple, rugged design that requires very little unscheduled mainte-

**A Skywagon's
characteristics
challenge you
to fly the
airplane.**

nance. I've found the injected engine even more reliable than the carbureted Continental in the 180 I used to own—and fuel injection eliminates the threat of carburetor ice, always a prime consideration. The only downside is starting the injected engine and 28-volt system with a dead battery; it's a lot easier to prop a carbureted engine—and finding a 12-volt truck, tractor, or automo-

bile to jump-start a 12-volt airplane in the boondocks could mean the difference between go and no go.

Although many Skywagons are equipped with a three-blade prop, most floatplane operators opt for the 88-inch two-blade propeller; its greater disk area provides more thrust for pulling a heavily laden floatplane out of the water. But the *blat* of those long, supersonic prop tips on takeoff is downright obnoxious. My 84-inch three-blade prop, which became standard in the last years of production, is quieter, although it still draws a lot of attention when I leave my home airstrip. If load and conditions allow, I pull the prop back below the 2,850-rpm maximum to be a better neighbor.

The Skywagon is not a hard airplane to fly, but it does require the usual attention of any fairly heavy taildragger. It feels a bit more truck-like than the 180; the ailerons are a little heavier, as is the elevator because of its added down-



spring. Control feel is not so lethargic as to make it unpleasant, though. The Skywagon is Cessna-stable, although laterally it's a bit more neutral than, say, a 172 or 182. These characteristics subtly challenge you to fly it, part of the airplane's allure. Remember, this is a pick-up, not a sports car.

I regularly see 150 knots true airspeed with my airplane at about 75-percent power, although that is a bit above



book promises. For example, the pilot's operating handbook says that on a standard day at 8,000 feet, the airplane will true at 141 knots on 14.6 gallons per hour at 70-percent power. With 88-gallon (84 usable) wet wings, I plan on six hours to dry tanks; real-world range with no wind is about 600 to 700 nautical miles with reserve and alternate fuel. There are several supplemental type certificates (STC) available to

add more fuel. A time or two I have longed for these range extenders when the weather is ugly and alternates are distant.

Many STCs are available to increase the 185's performance and utility. One allows the installation of larger 8.50 tires, another is for replacement of the engine with the 300-hp Continental IO-550, and one is a "speed mod" with fairings and fillets. As mentioned, there are a couple of internal fuel tank options; there also is a cargo door modification, and even a turbo normalizer that claims to raise the cruise speed of the Skywagon to 185 knots at high altitude.

Although little known, Cessna built a special Skywagon between 1967 and 1973 for service in Southeast Asia. Called the U-17B, it was modified to carry four rockets under each wing and a gunsight on the cowling. Only 215 of the type were built; few survive today in this country.

In the last few years of manufacture, the Skywagon production numbers dwindled to a trickle: only eight airplanes were made in the next-to-last year; and 23 in 1985, the final year of production.

At a time when people are buying four-wheel-drive and sport/utility vehicles in record numbers (even if few will ever actually get their knobby tires dirty), the 185 seems to make a lot of sense. The Skywagon's pragmatic balance of capabilities, lack of complexity, and its record of doing the impossible—of getting the job done, come hell or high gross weights—will win lots of friends. □

For more information on the Cessna 185, contact the International 180/185 Club, 3958 Cambridge Road #185, Cameron Park, California 95682; telephone 916/672-2620; fax 916/672-2620. Information is also available from the Cessna Pilots Association, Post Office Box 12948,

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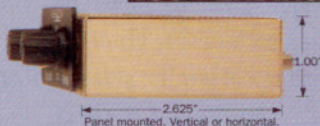
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box; that's where the spring-steel landing gear attaches to the airframe. As on most single-engine Cessna taildraggers, the gear box is a weak link. If the airplane has had a groundloop (or two), the damage will show up here first. Look for parts and rivets that have been replaced, wrinkled skin, metal filings, etc. Regardless of what the logbooks say (or fail to say), if the rivets are new, it's probably been repaired.

Also look for damage to the wing tips and the leading edges. I once inspected a "clean, no damage, all logs included..." 185 that had obviously

Wichita, Kansas 67277, telephone 800/852-2272; or the Cessna Owners Organization, Post Office Box 5000, Iola, Wisconsin 54945, telephone 800/331-0038.

FINDING A SKYWAGON TO CALL YOUR OWN

The Skywagons available today are mostly tired warriors; many have been operated by oil companies or FAR Part 135 charter operators in Alaska. Because of this kind of use (and abuse), many airplanes have high time; lots of dings and dents, hail damage or corrosion; and some pretty questionable maintenance—if the logbooks are even available. An airplane with no ground loops and that hasn't been on its back—or sunk—is a rare find. These airplanes are hard-working vehicles that just happen to fly. Low-time, owner-flown Skywagons, not surprisingly, demand a premium.

So how do you find a Skywagon of your own? Well, you have to first decide whether having a "colorful" history is important to you. Missing logs leave one big question: what are you missing other than the logs? Repairs beg still more queries: what was done, by whom, and why? If you are uncomfortable with these possibilities, it's best to hire an expert, someone who has spent time around these airplanes, to guide you through the inspection and sale.

Your search for a Skywagon is hindered by the fact that there are very few Skywagons on the market. A recent issue of *Trade-A-Plane* lists just 28 airplanes, ranging from an early 1962 model with 5,600 hours total time at \$82,500, to a pampered, 1,300-hour, undamaged 1981 model with a new engine at—you'd better sit down—\$175,000, firm. There's a world of difference between these two.

Once you've found a candidate that fits your budget and intention, the first place to look on the airplane is the gear

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been wrecked; when I pulled the plastic wingtip off to look in the wing, the outboard rib came with it—that rib is supposed to be riveted!

Find out what engine is installed on the airplane; the earlier IO-520s were allegedly prone to case cracking. Later "Phase II" or "Phase III" cases were less susceptible and are more desirable. Check also to see whether the VAR crankshaft airworthiness directive has been completed, a major expense.

Skywagons came from Cessna either corrosion-proofed or not. If the seaplane option was selected, the airplane's insides were automatically shot with zinc chromate primer; airplanes destined for export were often primed, too. An airplane that has zinc chromate only

Many of the Skywagons available today are tired warriors.

in some areas has been modified or repaired. Cessna didn't do it that way. It was all or nothing.

When looking for my Skywagon, I examined a lot of airplanes on paper, and many in the tin. None passed the test: I wanted a clean, no-damage airplane with good history and all records. That's like trying to find an old Jeep that has never been off-road. I was very fortunate to find my airplane after looking at many that were grossly misrepresented and had records missing, or damage that was not in the log books. I was about ready to give up on the Skywagon idea when I happened upon an ad in *Pacific Flyer* for a 1979 model with only 920 hours total time—and a fresh engine overhaul with chromed cylinders.

It was a little rough cosmetically but otherwise seemed to be as represented. Cosmetics are the easiest things to fix on an airplane. I bought the airplane and flew it home.

Two years and 300 hours later, I've repainted the airplane, replaced the interior, and replaced many mechanical parts that atrophied due to lack of use. But I now have an airplane that is everything I wanted; it produces more smiles per gallon than any airplane I've ever owned. As an investment, it's better than any certificate of deposit I've ever had, too—and I can fly it. —MMC