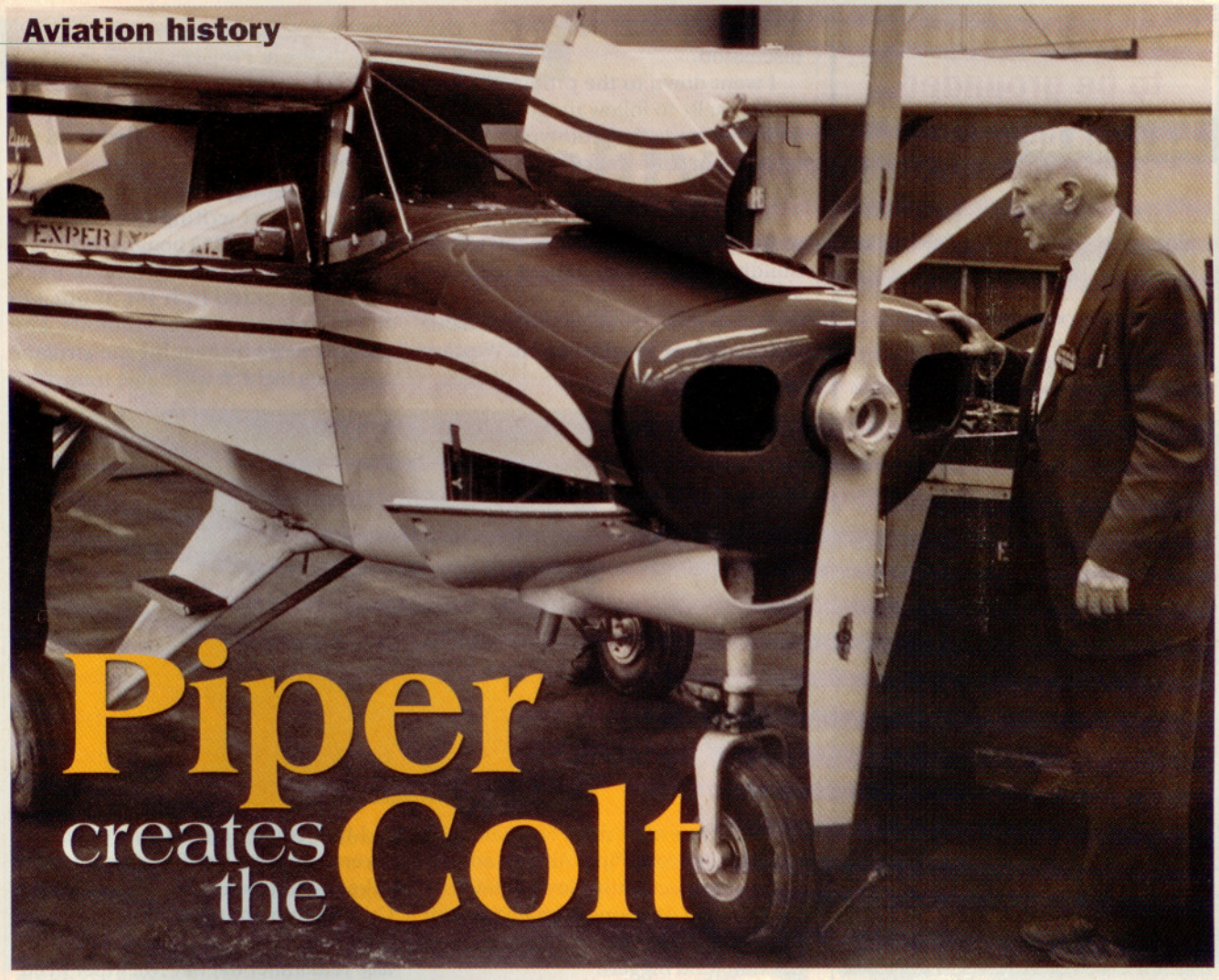

Piper creates the Colt

It's 1961, and we need a new airplane

BY WILLIAM K. KERSHNER

In the early 1960s the Piper Cherokee (built in Vero Beach, Florida) was falling behind in production and Piper Aircraft needed an interim two-place trainer.

A meeting was called at the company's Lock Haven, Pennsylvania, executive offices in the fall of 1960, or maybe it was early 1961, to see about a trainer as a temporary fill-in.

At the meeting were William T. Piper Sr., his sons W. T. Piper Jr., Howard "Pug" Piper, and Thomas "Tony" Piper, Chief of Military Contracts Thomas I. Case, Company Comptroller Charles W. Pool, and me. At the time I was Piper's contract sales engineer and was included because of my flight instructing experience.

William T. Piper with the Colt prototype in 1961 (top). Piper called the Colt its new "compact of the air."

The meeting began in the morning and alternatives were discussed. Perhaps we could buy rights to manufacture the Forney Aircoupe (a modification of the original Engineering Research Ercoupe). There were other build-under-license suggestions and the arguments—well, *discussions*—continued throughout the morning.

After lunch, we were temporarily sidetracked when Pug brought out his drawing of a tri-engine Cherokee to be used as a bush airplane. I had never thought of a low-wing airplane being used in the bush and a tri-engine Cherokee was beyond my comprehension at that time, but Pug always had some good ideas, so we discussed it awhile. (I later saw a photo of the prototype. It did not go into production.)

During all this talking, the senior Mr. Piper sat as if asleep.

There was more discussion as different build-under-license ideas were brought up. Everyone had his own ideas—except Mr. Piper.

Late in the afternoon Mr. Piper looked up from his state of rest and said, "We're going to make a two-place version of the Tri-Pacer. Tony, you have

three weeks." That was the end of the discussion.

I went down to the production line occasionally to follow progress as Tony and crew made the prototype.

Three or four weeks later I flew the Colt.

At the time the pre-chosen name was the Pinto. I argued that Temco was building a jet trainer named the Pinto and Piper might have a problem. Someone then came up with the name Colt to follow Piper's Indian/Western naming of airplanes.

this to Pug Piper and the company lost all interest in Project Little Guy, which was soon submerged in the morass with a number of other failed projects. I wondered what the abandoned research had cost the taxpayers.

After I left Piper and came to Tennessee to start writing more aviation books, the local FBO bought a Colt and used it for Air Force ROTC flight training. I instructed in it for about 125 hours, soloing several students, and gaining more respect for the airplane with each flight. It was a fine trainer.

The Piper Tri-Pacer was introduced in 1951 and was the forerunner to the Piper Colt.

Some time after this I was named as a liaison between Piper Aircraft and the FAA in "Project Little Guy," a new FAA approach to developing an instrument panel set-up for all airplanes such as the Colt (and bigger).

I made several trips from Lock Haven to FAA headquarters in Washington, D.C. The illustrations of the instrument panel 40 years ago looked like something that would be up to date in the space shuttle today.

In effect, the government would design the instrument panel and other components and it was feared that soon the private enterprise of manufacturing airplanes and equipment would be overwhelmed by Big Brother.

Although the project was aimed primarily at airplanes with retractable gear and constant-speed propellers, the manager of Project Little Guy indicated that small airplanes (two place, fixed gear) also could be equipped with such instrument panels and equipment.

I asked him what the cost of the panel would be for an airplane such as the Colt. He replied that if mass-production was successful (a figure of 200,000 units sticks in my mind) the cost could be brought down to approximately $10,000 per airplane. The Colt (new) basic price was $4,995. I reported

I had earlier also flown the Colt's forerunner, the Tri-Pacer, using it to take parts from Lock Haven to the Grumman plant on Long Island, New York, where we had a subcontract. I also remember the day Mr. Piper needed to go to the North Philadelphia airport. I was to fly him, and started to get an Aztec ready but he said, no, the Tri-Pacer would be best for a short trip. And so we went in the short-wing.

I was (and am) a great admirer of the Piper short-wings but couldn't resist when later in Tennessee I was asked, as an expert on Piper airplanes (of course), what the glide ratio of a Tri-Pacer was, power off and with full flaps. I took time to apparently seriously calculate and as the questioner prepared to take notes, I gave my expert answer:

"The glide ratio of the Tri-Pacer under the conditions you have cited is exactly that of a grand piano coming from a third-story window."

And with that I departed hastily. AOPA

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