

AOPA

The Debonair Sweepstakes



Debonair debut

AOPA's fires up The Debonair Sweepstakes project

BY THOMAS A. HORNE

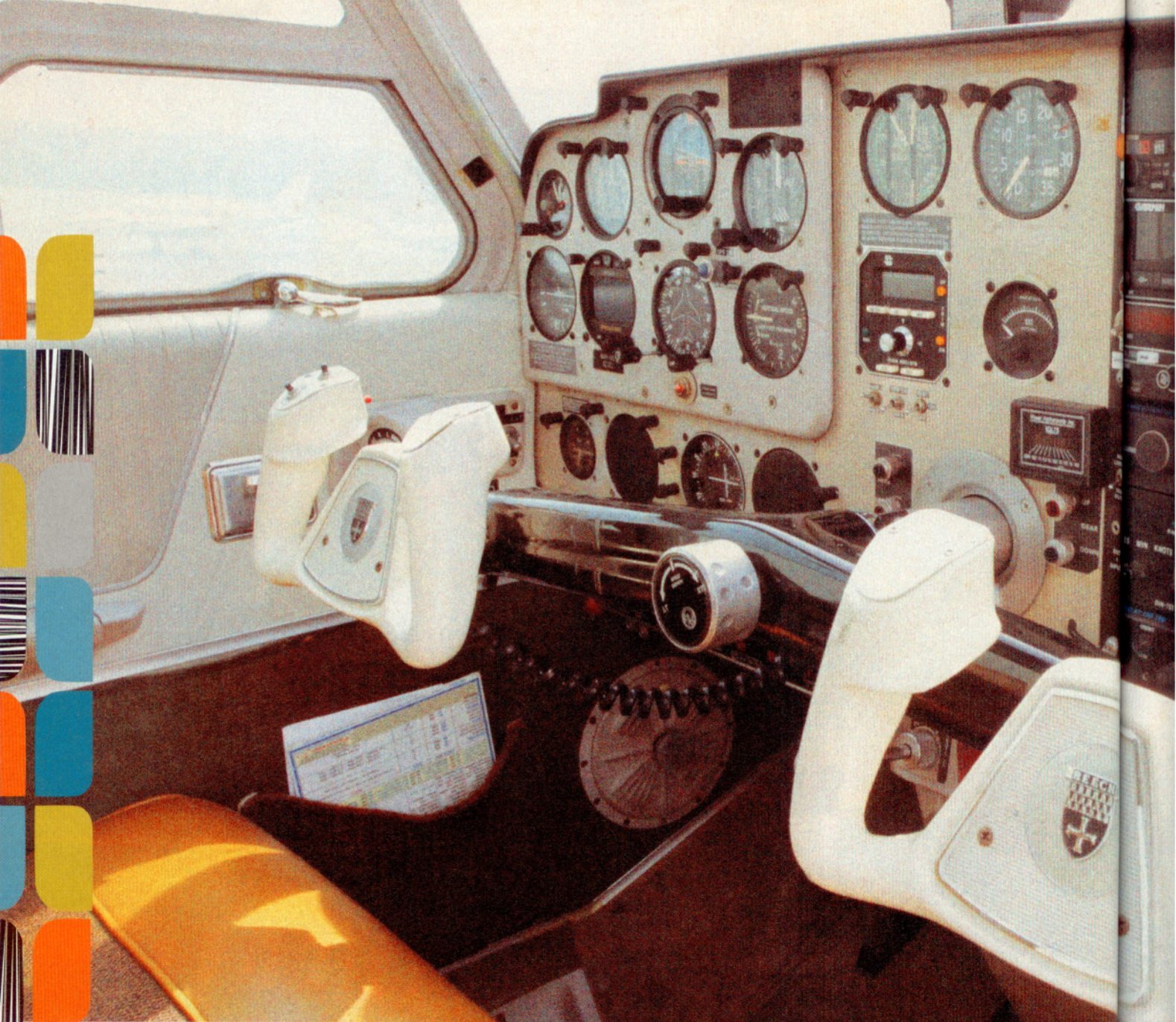
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS ROSE



The Tornado Husky has exited the stage, and the curtain now rises on AOPA's next sweepstakes airplane. This time, the prize will be—drum roll, please—a fully restored 1963 Beechcraft Debonair! For those who may not be familiar with the model, the Debonair series was built between 1960 and 1972, and are sometimes known colloquially as “Baby Bonanzas.” Basically, Debonairs are scaled-down versions of the many variants of their larger and more powerful stablemates, the V-tailed model 35s and the straight-tailed model 36s—of which the latter are still in production today.







THE DEBONAIR'S panel is a hodgepodge of original and 1980s and 1990s upgrades. The dual yoke is a plus, and so is the Continental IO-470's (below right) mere 85 hours since major overhaul. The original two-blade propeller (right) will be replaced with a three-blade Hartzell propeller.





The nomenclature gets confusing; our Debonair Sweepstakes airplane is technically a Model 35-B33.

Whatever its designation, the Debonairs lent themselves to a distinct market. They became popular as “entry level” airplanes aimed at those wanting to move up to a more powerful, complex airplane. And a better-looking one, too. But time has taken its toll, and finding a Debonair suitable as a candidate for a complete refurbishment is a tough job today.

We picked the Debonair because it’s a classic design with good performance, good looks, and is eligible for a raft of modifications and the 1963 model turns 50 next year—a testament to the model’s enduring appeal. We wanted a 225-horsepower, Continental IO-470-powered model because it has great fuel economy and yields 75-percent-power cruise speeds around 155 KTAS while burning just more than 13 gph.

Our quest began this past summer, and included searches of all the popular listing sources for used aircraft: *Trade-A-Plane*, *controller.com*, *aso.com*, *barnstormers.com*, and others. We even had one owner contact us, on the off chance that we might consider a Debonair as a sweepstakes choice. Little did he know how close he was to the mark.

What we found was a split in the Debonair market. You either paid \$60,000 or less for a pretty beat-up Deb, or north of \$90,000 for a nice, well-equipped airplane with more up-to-date avionics. Both our budget and our mission dictated the less-pricey option. So the job became to find a fixer-upper with a good, basic airframe that we could build up—and not a corroded junker that would require a full-blown restoration effort.

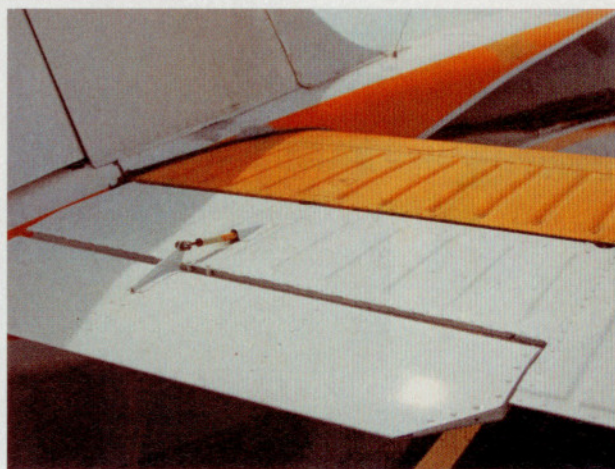
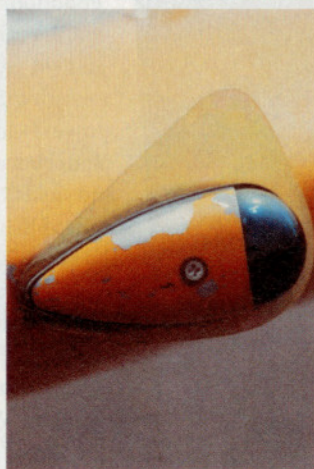
It was a tough job. In all, we checked out a half-dozen Debonairs. Some we rejected over the phone. Three we chose to visit personally. Helping us out was veteran prebuy inspector Don Sebastian. We used Sebastian before, to help us winnow down the candidates for AOPA’s 2011 Crossover Classic sweepstakes Cessna 182. If there’s anything wrong with an airplane, Sebastian will find it.

Everything old, broken, obsolete, or generally unappealing will be replaced with the latest and greatest equipment, upgrades, and renovations.





COSMETICS are not this airplane's strong suit. Check out the cracked dorsal fairing for the vertical stabilizer (right) and the original nav lights (below right). One big advantage is the aluminum-skinned elevators (below far right).



CHECKING THEM OUT. The first airplane we visited in person was the one whose owner contacted us. His report was glowing, and his price was right. But Sebastian's painstaking examination of the airframe and engine logbooks elicited some puzzling conclusions. There was an engine overhaul at 600 hours. Why? The logs didn't say. Was there a gear-up landing that required an engine teardown and revealed internal damage? Again, no mention. So with 3,295 hours total time on the airframe (TTA), Sebastian deduced that the engine (a 225-horsepower Continental IO-470-K) could have as much as 2,695 hours on it. In other words, 1,195 hours past its recommended time between

overhaul (TBO) of 1,500 hours. Yes, the cylinders were replaced in the past, but apparently no work was done to the engine's bottom end (crankshaft, connecting rods, and associated bearings). And as for the propeller, there were no entries stating it had ever had an overhaul, so the two-blade McCauley could well have been the original from 1963. Since this prop's TBO is 1,200 hours (or 60 months, whichever occurs first), the propeller could have been at 2,095 hours since TBO.

The elevators were another issue. No doubt original, they had magnesium skins, and there were spots of corrosion here and there. If we bought the airplane the skins

would have to be replaced—an expensive proposition. Too bad the owner hadn't covered them with aluminum skins under the provisions of a supplemental type certificate.

There was one more problem: the airplane was eight years out of annual. That's right, eight. If we had an annual performed, it would no doubt reveal a raft of maintenance issues—especially compliance with the many airworthiness directives aimed at Debonairs over the past 50 years.

Our budget didn't provide for buying a new engine or overhauling an old one, so we passed on this airplane. But cosmetically it was a beauty for its age. The owner was a great guy and we enjoyed our time with him.



Another Debonair—a 1960 model—was also given some scrutiny. Its total airframe time was 2,594 hours, it was powered by a 285-horsepower Continental IO-520 engine, and it had a three-blade Hartzell propeller—big upgrades in the power department. But Sebastian’s squawk list reached 45 problem areas, the airplane was out of annual (by just a year—is this a trend?), there had been two gear-up landings, and many ADs had not been complied with. So even though the ship had many STCed modifications we decided to walk away.

BINGO. We were beginning to think that no 50-year-old Debonairs could meet

our requirements. It seemed as though deferred maintenance became forgotten maintenance. And notice how low time the airplanes were. I mean, 3,000 hours in 50 years? That’s 50 hours a year. By the 1990s annual flying times on these airplanes dropped to an average of 20 hours as their owners’ ages rose to “senior” status.

Then I came across a posting in *controller.com* by Marks Aviation. Broker Adam Marks was representing the owners of yet another 1963 Debonair. Based at Hartford, Connecticut’s Brainard Airport, this airplane was rough. But as a sweeps candidate it had a lot going for it: A 225-horsepower Continental IO-470 with just 85 hours

since major overhaul (SMOH); corrosion-proofed interior skins; no damage history; a working S-Tec 50 autopilot; the aluminum elevator skin STC; long-range (74 gallons) fuel tanks; no hail damage; no hangar rash; and logbooks properly documenting ADs and other fixes. And its annual inspection was current! At \$55,000 the price was right, so we moved on it. We finally found our sweepstakes in the rough!

Yes, Sebastian’s squawk list was 45 items long, but there were no show-stoppers. And all will be addressed in the coming months during the refurbishment process, giving this 50-year-old airplane a truly golden makeover.



ADAM MARKS of Marks Aviation brokered the sale of the 50-year-old B33.

FIRST STEPS. Those of you who have been following our previous sweepstakes restoration projects know what will happen over the coming months. In a word, *everything*. Everything old, broken, obsolete, or generally unappealing will be replaced with the latest and greatest equipment, upgrades, and renovations.

The Debonair transformation began with a stop at D'Shannon Aviation at the Buffalo, Minnesota, airport. D'Shannon holds a record number of STCs for Debonair, Bonanza, and Baron modifications—and we'll be getting some of the most popular. To start off, D'Shannon tip tanks, windshields, and aileron and flap gap seals will be installed.

Then it was off to AOPA Summit, where the Debonair will be on display. After that, there's a stop at Santa Fe Aero Services at the Santa Fe airport. There, the old panel and wiring will be yanked—and replaced with all-new avionics. That means Aspen Avionics' all-glass primary flight display and dual multifunction displays, and a center stack dominated by Garmin's new GTN 750, complete with ADS-B functionality via Garmin's GTX 33ES remote transponder. Yes, this airplane will have traffic, weather, electronic charts, terrain avoidance, and much, much more. And that's just the start.

As usual, we'll be keeping you abreast of the project as the upgrades progress. Look for more reports in these pages and via our many online venues, including the Reporting Points blog (www.aopa.org), feature articles and photos on AOPA's homepage, and periodic briefings in AOPA's weekly *ePilot* and *AOPA Live This Week*. Stay tuned because there's a new twist to our sweepstakes project, giving you a better chance to be a winner. There's a lot to look forward to, and we'll give you a front seat to the action. **AOPA**

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