

That Navion Clan

Mass devotion to a plane sets Navioneers apart from other aircraft owners. They hold annual meetings, defend the honor and integrity of their pride and joy, and even drool, it's said, over phonograph records of Navion engines in action

by VALERIE KUHN GILL • AOPA 164588

Recently a Miami real estate executive sold his airplane but reserved the privilege of being present at its resale. As the plane dealer was going over the ship with the new owner the realtor appeared on the scene. He praised the plane's performance, explained its modifications and other equipment, and gave endless instructions on its care and feeding.

Completely exasperated by this walking-talking aircraft encyclopedia the buyer finally exploded, "Who the devil is this man anyway?" "Oh, I'm sorry I forgot to introduce you," the salesman explained. "Jim sort of comes with this Navion. He's its former owner. All Navion owners are like this."

Navion owners can recite their planes' "past" and succession of owners with greater accuracy than their own family trees. They discuss them with

a devotion in their voices that they never use when speaking of a human being (particularly if he owns any other make aircraft). These individuals work on their ships with industry rarely observed outside of the ant kingdom. A physician would identify their obsession as "monomania," an insanity in which the patient is irrational on one subject.

One of their favorite stories concerns a pilot who was undergoing psychoanalysis. During one of his soul-searching sessions he confessed, "I own a Navion. My wife says I lavish an abnormal amount of time and affection upon it amounting to a fetish. But it does something for me. When I work on it or fly it, I forget what my mirror and my family keep telling me. I feel young and carefree again. Doc, could this mean anything?"

The pilot waited for a professional

diagnosis. When none seemed forthcoming he turned from his position on the couch and faced his psychiatrist. He was astonished! The physician had undergone a complete personality change. His usually noncommittal and detached expression had come alive; his tired, lack-luster eyes had brightened and were burning with interest; his lips were trembling. Finally the doctor replied, "What do you know about tip tanks?"

The Navion "clansmen," as Editor Max Karant so appropriately tagged them in his "Product Report" on the *Rangemaster* in the November 1962 issue of *The PILOT*, united in October 1960 into a mutual admiration cooperative called the American Navion Society. At that time no Navion had been built for almost 10 years!

What magic induced this highly individualistic clan—never known to act like lemmings—to go in for a sort of group therapy?

What common denominator brought "the largest gathering of a single-make civilian aircraft in aviation history," according to the Society's president, to Las Vegas, Nev., in 1961, then to break its own record at its reprise last year at its second annual convention in Oklahoma City?

The American Navion Society was conceived high in the sky—of course!—when a young West Coast industrialist, S. Dan Brodie (AOPA 169734), barreled down a weather alley into a thunderstorm, although nothing more than mild IFR had been forecast along his route either in his preflight or in-flight checks. Rocketing up to 15,000 feet, falling off and plummeting earthward 10,000 to 12,000 feet he was sure he had lucked out. Particularly after the turbulence took over and the heavens came unglued.

"My Navion gyrated through every

Most famous and fastest pre-Rangemaster Navion. It is owned by Navioneer Bob Douthitt of El Centro, Calif., who says he can get 195 m.p.h. out of it. Douthitt has flushed every projection and the rivets on the wings are tear-dropped. Rear step is retractable and weighs only eight pounds; windows are flushed and the wheel enclosures streamline the airflow toward the wheels in flight. It isn't really a Model D, for it does not have tip tanks. Equipped with a 240 h.p. Continental engine, it has almost all of the other features of that model



This is the first Navion ever built and sold, according to Navioneer historians. It is owned by Navioneer Edward E. Gordon (AOPA 185383) of Dolton, Ill. It was a North American prototype and holds Serial No. 4-1. It has a dry sump engine which has caused Gordon some trouble. It was originally equipped with an E-185 engine and has undergone several engine conversions prior to its present 225 h.p. job



First gathering of the "clansmen." Photo shows only a portion of the Navions tied down at first annual convention and fly-in of the American Navion Society in May 1961 at Las Vegas, Nev. Up until that time, according to Navioneer president-founder, S. Dan Brodie, it was the largest gathering of any single-make and model airplane in civilian aviation history. Attendance at the second annual meeting, incidentally, was larger than that at the first convention

maneuver in the book and invented some you wouldn't believe," the pilot still pales as he recalls. "I wasn't sure which was up or where was down. No visibility. Icing. It was hairy! Of course, it seemed like hours but was probably about three minutes, then I broke out into brilliant sunshine and nice, smooth air."

With heart removed from mouth to its normal position, the flyer's mind returned to his recent dog-fight with the thunderheads. "Could any other light-plane have survived such a beating let alone come through unscathed?" he marveled. Then all his multi-headed experiences with his *Navion* raced through his thoughts: unavailability of parts, scarcity of accurate technical information, manuals out of print, frustration piled upon frustrations.

"Wouldn't it be great if all *Navion* owners could get together, exchange experiences and compare notes?" Brodie asked himself. For a month or so he kicked this around with every *Navion* jockey he could find. All agreed, "It was a great idea!"

Spurred on by the results of his personal Gallup poll, he determined to give it a try and exploded in a whiplash of

energy. AOPA was airmailed for a list of *Navion* owners. A pair of football tickets was parlayed into a *Navion* insignia. The "idea" was telescoped into a letter, a membership blank enclosed and rushed to the closest mail box. The crash program was underway. Now for the count down.

Time stood still. "Each morning for two solid weeks," the pilot-organizer confesses, "I was waiting for the post office to open." Then it started. Ray Gava (AOPA 145682) of South San Francisco, Calif., became the first member. Seventy others quickly followed. A second mailing found him up to here in memberships.

Now more than half of all registered *Navion* owners in the world belong to the nonprofit, American Navion Society. They pay \$15 annual dues and call themselves "Navioneers." Members are scattered throughout every state in the Union, and from Puerto Rico to Kwajalein in the Pacific. What was envisioned by an overly enthusiastic *Navion* addict as a loosely knit chowder-and-hangar-flying club has grown into a unique national organization with its own office and a full-time, paid secretary. [The Society's mailing address is

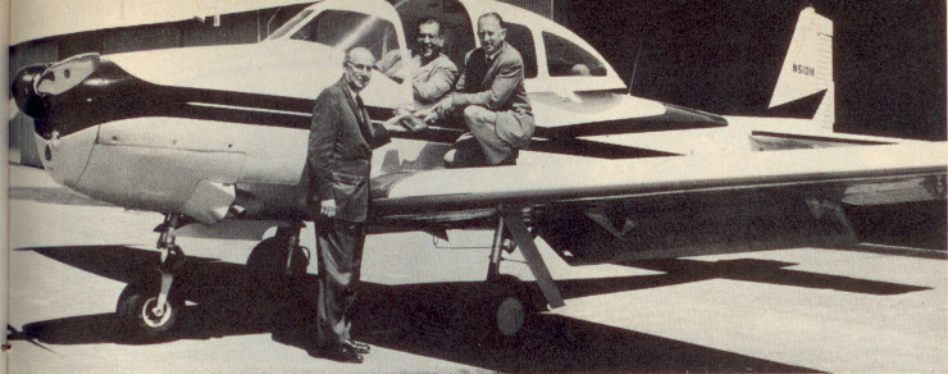
Navioneers Meet At Pueblo Aug. 27

Mecca for the Navioneers (American *Navion* Society) will be Pueblo, Colo., where they will hold their third annual convention and fly-in August 27 through September 1.

According to S. Dan Brodie (AOPA 169734), president of the Society, the *Navion* clansmen expect to break their precedent setting attendance records of former years. The convention-pilgrims are expected to swarm in like piranha

fish and to voraciously pick the minds of the experts on every phase of "Navioneering" who will be ready for them with a regular Pandora's box of up-to-the-minute information. (Nonmembers invited, if they will write the ANS, Box 516, San Leandro, Calif., for details, according to Brodie.)

Highlights of the meeting will be the conducted, flight-line inspection tour of the vast armada of diversely modified "Methuselahs," and an on the spot diagnostic-geriatric clinic equipped to give a complete "physical" to any ship suffering from chronic, acute or any other type ailment. A class on emergency procedures will be conducted for non-pilot clanswives, and a "Queen of



Navioneer President S. Dan Brodie (in the cockpit) was leaving for the second annual convention of the American Navion Society at Oklahoma City last year when this picture was made. Mayor Maltesser of San Leandro, Calif., Brodie's hometown, is handing Brodie a plaque as another Navioneer official, John J. Maggi (on the wing), looks on. Brodie's Navion has had a major "face lifting," including 28 major changes since this photo was made

P. O. Box 516, San Leandro, Calif.—
Ed.]

As a starter, a member receives a heavy, loose-leaf, blue binder stamped in gold with the Society's name, insignia and the innocuous title: "Navion Data." But the real gold is on the inside. There he finds the *Navion* information he's been trying to get his hands on for years! To mention a few of the "goodies": all FAA mandatory airworthiness directives to date; specifications for every *Navion* built since 1946, including the *Rangemaster*; a long list of publications printed, reprinted or available through the Society—such as the "Navion Service Manual," the "Navion Parts Manual"—some free for the asking, others at cost. A steady stream of fillers keeps arriving to be inserted in the member's *Navion* "bible."

The "Navioneer," the Society's monthly newsletter, is one of the most prized features of membership, according to its editor. Through its pages flows a potpourri of technical data, experiences and up-to-date *Navion* information of inestimable value to the owners of the many-vintaged *Navions* flying today. One member, who owns an elderly *Navion* which frequently suffers

the infirmities of advanced age, happily declared, "The monthly newsletter has answered questions nobody has asked—yet!"

It discusses (and cusses) the multitude of *Navion* engine conversions, difficulties of spinner installations, endless methods of stepping up flying speed, fluctuating fuel pressure "bugs," newly approved modifications, "how to do it and where to get it"; has a question and answer department; publishes photograph and description of "The *Navion* of the Month"; prints a list of recent *Navion* accidents and their causes (if known); and other hot news of interest to the exclusive and tight little world of the clansmen.

Now and again the Society saves its members time and money through group purchase and installation of parts and kits. However, it tries not to compete with fixed-base operators and only undertakes mass contracts on its own innovations, according to the organization's president. An example was a project concerning retract links. A couple of years ago the FAA put out an AD that all main gear and nose gear retract links, heavy steel forgings which support the landing gear when the ship

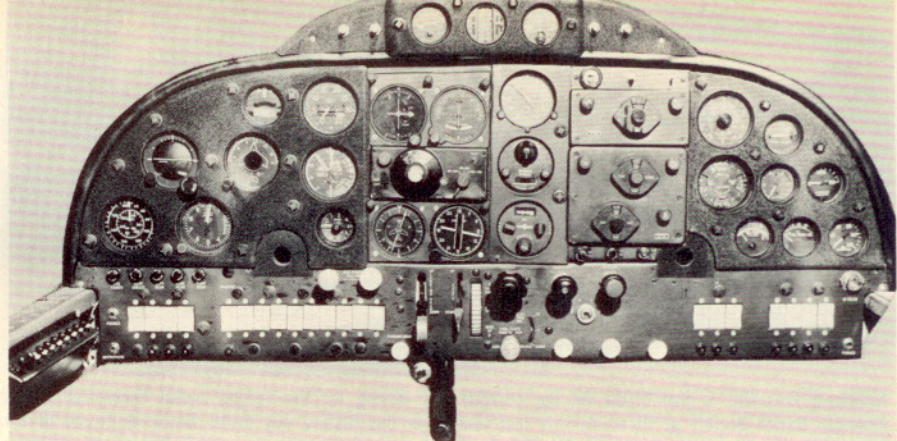
the Clan" will be crowned, probably without too much hassling. The real fireworks will ignite when the judging commences to select the best ship in attendance. The winner will reign as "Flag Ship of the Navioneers' Fleet" for the succeeding year.

There will be lectures by the assembled top technical experts followed by round-table discussions. Proficiency races, spot landing contests, dinners, cocktail parties, and—dearest to the heart of the Navioneer next to his plane (and to every other pilot for that matter)—the hangar-flying sessions wherein it is not only permissible but expected that one lie about his plane's performance.

In fact, a trophy will be given to the member who had the "roughest trip" to the convention. Judging will be by taped recordings made of members' own descriptions of their flights in, and secretly recorded by a special "reception committee."

Highlights from the "Win, Place and Show," recordings will be selected by the special reception committee and the excerpts will be played at the annual Navioneer banquet to the accompaniment of three sets of red faces.

It is even rumored that one session will be devoted exclusively to the playing of recordings of *Navion* engine sounds—always sheer rhapsody to the avid addict's ear! ●



Typical of a modernized panel is this one in Navioner President Brodie's Navion. Most unusual innovation are the "rocker switches," which were originally developed by Micro-Switch Corporation for use on Lockheed Electras. When these switches are engaged, the translucent material has a soft, red glow for easy identification

is on the ground, have to be checked every 100 hours. If any cracks are evident, a new set, costing approximately \$336 must be installed. The Society developed an approved conversion at one-third the cost. (These were the second and third Supplemental Type Certificates obtained for the membership. The first was for a Fiberglas vertical stabilizer assembly for a rotating beacon.)

The pilot whose love affair with his Navion blossomed in a thunderstorm, Dan Brodie, is the main muscle and current president of the Navioners. Prior to 1958 he had not been up in anything smaller than a DC-3 and then only as a passenger. Now he has over 1,500 hours and holds commercial and instrument tickets. Brodie is production manager of a firm which manufactures petroleum meters.

The day he received his private he rushed home to his very pretty, petite and blond wife, Betty, and dead-panned the announcement he was "personally flying" her to Reno for the weekend! His flying lessons had been a well-kept husbandly secret. Noting her eyebrows

had transformed from Cleopatra-styling to question-mark configuration, he expanded on his recent activities in and around airports. Observing that he still wasn't quite "on the step," he explained that the FAA, "the Government agency that guards the safety of the airways," had tested him and considered him adequately trained to drive a plane. He waved his license before her eyes to prove it. However, her expression only changed from shock to terror. So with less aplomb he added, "Jack and his wife are coming along too, and you know he's been flying for years."

En route to Reno and at 9,500 feet directly over the Sacramento Municipal Airport, the engine of the rented plane quit. Brodie insists he made a dead-stick landing which he wishes his instructor had been around to observe. On the other hand, he doesn't recommend such immediate proof of one's emergency proficiency as the most effective method of overcoming the first hurdle facing every newly licensed pilot: the task of convincing the little woman that a plane is just exactly what

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This "Navion of the Month" is flown by Bill O'Meara (AOPA 154457) of Towson, Md. It is a Model D and trues out between 150-155 m.p.h. at 60% power at 2,300 r.p.m. It has a Lear ADF 12E-2 with Gonio, a Narco VTR-1. Mark V plus converter and a CS-5 indicator, plus a Dare DG-S20 glide slope





A "Navion of the Month" (a department in the Navioneer's publication), this plane is owned by the Tulsa (Okla.) Tribune and flown by Pilot-Photographer Royce Craig (AOPA 72265). While the Navionees do not consider this plane as being unusual, this photograph brings out the true Navion styling. It is used for aerial photography

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the family needs.

Fortunately, Betty Brodie has a 360° understanding of her atom-energized husband's varied interests. She went along with the purchase of the *Navion*. She made only one suggestion: "Didn't most men name their ships after their wives or sweethearts?" Not exactly concealing his jealous possessiveness of his beloved Phoenix, he conceded, "You're absolutely right, Betty. First thing tomorrow I'll have 'The Mrs. S. Dan Brodie' painted on her." This wasn't the name Betty had in mind, so the Brodie *Navion* remains nameless.

But who needs a name for a ship that recently emerged from the shop with 28 major changes! To list a few: A 260 h.p. fuel injection engine, a customized panel, over-sized seats (Brodie is over six feet), a 100% sound-proofing job, the only retractable landing light in *Navion* history to and including a new number, "707-YU." ("Well," Dan explains with a straight face, "the switches are the same as those on the big jets.") Navionees are making book on the landing sequences Brodie will receive on his next business trip into the deep South when he requests landing permission for "Yankee Uniform" from Confederate towers.

That Brodie eats, sleeps and never stops selling the Society is one of Navioneer Waymon Todd's (Hayward, Calif.) favorite hangar-stories. Todd had received mailings from the organization followed up by telephone calls from Brodie in neighboring San Leandro. But Todd had yet to join. In May 1962 Todd sweated out a forced landing in a beet field next to Brodie's plant office. Dan rushed out to help but Todd swears he wouldn't let him out of the plane until he promised to

become a Navioneer. Brodie puts it this way, "Well, he'd been promising to 'drop in and sign up.'"

Brodie confesses that his "idea" would never have gotten off the ground if it hadn't immediately captured the high-flying imaginations of a nucleus of California *Navion* nuts and been backed up by the enthusiasm of an ever-increasing membership. He rattles off a long list of members across the country who not only helped with the initial organization but continue to serve as technical and policy advisors seven days a week, 24 hours a day. It seems when a Navioneer wants something, it is not at all unusual for him to long-distance across the continent in the middle of the night and demand an immediate answer.

The Navionees' future projects, some underway and others on the drawing boards, include production of a movie on the history of the *Navion*, including its endless modifications, maintenance and how to fly the beloved bird properly; publication of an all-inclusive owner's handbook containing operating instructions for all models; and endless other bizarre undertakings which seem only common place to these dedicated *Navion* clansmen.

It is unlikely that the *Navion* will ever be consigned to memory lane. So long as there is one clansman left breathing in this atomic age, the *Navion* will ever be with us—a flying legend! ●

THE AUTHOR

Valerie Kuhn Gill, author of "That *Navion* Clan," has been flying since 1957. She soloed in a Piper Cub—not a *Navion*. She is a member of the Civil Air Patrol and has been information officer for the California Wing, CAP, since 1961. Her home is at San Mateo, Calif.