

Aircraft Refurbishing:

Out where the West begins, some remarkable transformations have been wrought in elderly 'real dog' airplanes that only an owner could love

by ED MACK MILLER / AOPA 466524

At Denver's skyline Jeffco Airport, a reliever for the big Stapleton International complex, there's a young corporation that is doing all right for itself by reversing the American tendency to "compound, multiply, interlock, conglomerate, and amalgamate."

It's Exec Air Interiors, Inc., run by a big, broad-shouldered, clean-cut 31-year-old Coloradan named Larry Wells (AOPA 461315), who has swum upstream against bigness to find success.

Exec Air has pitched for and caught a good corner of the market for refurbishing and redoing small plane interiors.

"We specialize in giving facials and interior spruce-ups to singles and light twins," says Wells. "Many people feel embarrassed about the threadbare interiors of their old 172s and Bonanzas and really don't know what to do. Because they don't have a Gulfstream II or a JetStar, they're timorous about asking for professional help in cosmetizing their old bird.

"We will be content to specialize in small planes as long as the work keeps coming in," Wells continues. "We've got some terrific ideas for upgrading older aircraft. Lightplane owners have been overlooked and overcharged. Often a new, very plush interior for a single-engine, four-place plane will cost less than \$1,500, where the owner might fear it would come to \$4,000 or \$5,000."

One "special" Air Exec offers is the updating of older-model Bonanzas, both inside and outside. The end product is so slick it is hard to tell that what you're looking at is in reality an old, instead of a current, model.

"We actually restore it to original condition. We've done this to several," Wells said. On my visit to Exec Air, he showed me a recently completed 1952



Model C Bonanza that had been restored and updated to look like a 1972 V-35-Bravo type. We had to look extremely close to tell that the aircraft wasn't new.

Wells explained the restoration process to me. "It takes about two and one-half weeks," he said. "The aircraft is fitted with a new one-piece windshield and the long third window. This begins the transformation of 'Cinderella' to 'Miss America.'

"Then we put on the late-model wingtip extensions, the 'stinger' tail cone, and the airscoop in front of the butterfly tail.

"After this, the plane is stripped completely and painted with polyurethane to current Bonanza specs. That completes the exterior.

"The interior," adds Wells, "is completed—less the instrument panel—to duplicate the current Bonanza. They will look exactly alike. We incorporate the long glare shield with the new white lighting (rheostat control) for flooding the panel at night.

"If there are two seats in front and a bench in back, the seats will be modified without any structural changes. The bench will be cut down, with polyfoam added, to give the appearance of two seats in back, like a late-model plane. But no structural change will actually be made. As an option we can put two new seats in back in place of the bench.

Believe it or not, this airplane—to all appearances a 1972 V-35B Bonanza—is actually a 1951 "C" model on which Exec Air Interiors has worked its facelifting magic. The plane is tied down for demonstrations at the company's Jeffco Airport location, near Denver, Colo.

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"All told, we can make this amazing outside-inside transformation on the average for less than \$6,000—not bad for taking 20 years off an airplane's life!

"We can do this type of upgrading for all the major small planes," Wells says, "for Skylanes, Mooneys, Pipers, 172s—you name it."

If Larry Wells is the nonstop, hard-driving "pulmotor" of Exec Air, Howard Thompson, vice president, is its "old pro" at interior design—its "treasury of experience."

(Continued on next page)

Refurbishing

(Continued from preceding page)

Wells' father, Vern "Bud" Wells, is secretary-treasurer, and Jack Rankin—like the younger Wells, in his early 30s—is the company's "interior salesman." Larry Wells grins, "He's our outside man selling 'insides.'"

Thompson is one of the real veterans of the "push-up" business, having spent several decades with Horton and Horton in Fort Worth, in addition to the time he spent designing and executing interiors ("probably 800 of them") for Ted Smith when Smith was Aero Commander. He also worked on Smith's Aerostars.

Thompson has about covered the field in interior design, including Reading Air Show prizes for a "push-up" P-51 and a Westinghouse executive F-27. He has been called on to work on Air Force

VIP airplanes, beginning with the time that he did the interior on LBJ's Lode-star (when Johnson was Vice President) and continuing with work on Air Force One—plus three JetStars—for the Texas politico when he was President. He also did Mike Todd's ill-fated Lode-star, and the Shah of Iran's JetStar (which the Shah wanted done in black leather and matching fabric).

"I've refurbished a lot of planes," Thompson laughs. "Everything from a flying automobile, the Aerocar, to a group of DC-7s I redid for Overseas National Airlines."

Young Wells was flying corporate aircraft and running his own aerial "night-sign" business when he met Thompson. They agreed to join forces to provide what they saw as a badly needed service—interior consulting for the small plane owner.

Oddly enough, it can be difficult to keep "thinking small" in a business such as Exec Air's. When this article was written, the company was re-

furbishing four Convair 440s for Aspen Airways and doing a complete rework of the interior on an Aspen Heron and two D-18 Beeches. On the day that I toured the facilities, there were 22 planes in work, including a number of King Airs, Bonanzas, Skylanes, and Mooneys.

"One interesting interior job is on the Lear owned by Jack DeBoer Associates of Wichita," Wells said. "Mr. DeBoer is 6 feet 7 inches and we've designed the seating to his lanky specifications. Another is a King Air for a Mexican company. It's been done in Karastan—and that's not a foreign country! [It's a carpet.—Ed.]

"But we're determined," says Wells, "to cater to the small plane owner. That's the way our thinking and advertising are planned."

Looking at some of the jobs Exec Air has done is impressive—especially some of the "real dogs" they have done over into things of beauty. Two that particularly impressed this writer were a British-type military Vampire jet that had been "pushed up" to become kind of the Rolls Royce of executive transports, and a Helio Courier (usually all knobs, warts, and corners) that had been given the magic touch of Thompson's truly artistic redesign.

"How about the customer's wife?" I asked. "How do you get her out of your hair?"

"Oh," said Wells. "Conversely, we like to have the lady on board right from the start. Women usually have a better decorator's sense than men. The worst thing is to do the plane first and then bring the wife in. She'll spot the wrong things right away. We like to get her going immediately and let her follow her natural instincts in fabrics and patterns. We can take her to fabric showrooms and help her make special orders. She can give us many good clues to what the boss's likes and dislikes are."

"For instance," said Howard Thompson, "when I was working with the late

The inside of a Helio Courier needn't look like that of a Sherman tank. Here's a Courier that's undergone the refinements of an Exec Air workover.



For the Texas owner of this 1965 Beechcraft Baron, Exec Air duplicated a 1972 Baron interior.

THE AUTHOR

For regular readers of aviation publications, Ed Mack Miller really needs no introduction. A pilot for more than 30 years, Miller is a veteran instructor for United Air Lines and is rated in just about everything, including the Boeing 747. His most recent article for *The PILOT* was "Jimmie Angel's Flamingo," in the December 1972 issue.



Mike Todd on the interior of his plane, Liz Taylor was the source of many good ideas. She leans toward blues, and we had a sensational blue headliner put in, at her suggestion, with little stars in the ceiling—everything in blue, with fluorescent lighting.”

“What’s the toughest job you’ve ever had?” I asked Thompson.

“An Army Huey helicopter. The brass wanted a quick-conversion kit that could be put in pronto if they had to fly a VIP, but could be taken out just as quickly if the chopper was needed for routine work. We worked out a clip-on and Velcro system of cushions and inserts. In 30 minutes it could be made beautiful inside; in another half hour it could be strictly G.I.”

“What’s the prettiest plane you’ve ever turned out?”

“A Piper Cherokee. We took a brand-new one and gave it a real Indian interior—sand and beige needlepoint, with Indian symbols hand-embroidered into the fabric. The control knobs were even remade with arrowheads inlaid in fiber glass. Lovely.”

“Other than the aesthetics, what is the advantage of a custom interior? How long does a factory-installed interior last?”

“Factory interiors,” said Thompson, “are practical, lightweight and serviceable. They use, naturally, thin, hard, light-pressed panels, mass produced to save money.

“With a custom interior,” he said, “the buyer can pick his own fabrics, vinyls, leathers, and colors. Arrangements can be changed. It’s like comparing a Mercedes with a Jeep. The personal touch is added. You can give interiors the deep-carpeted, rich luxury of a family room. Instead of transportation, you can have a flying ‘den,’ with all the comfort you desire. A custom interior is also a quiet interior, because all the luxury you incorporate acts to soften external sound. In addition, we usually concentrate on soundproofing before the cosmetics are put in.”

“How about FAR limitations?”

“This is a practical—sometimes a stern—consideration for us,” said Wells. “We are an approved repair station for aircraft interior repairs and alterations. The FAA is strict on modifications. Any change requires an FAA Form 337 and a detailed explanation.

“We have to think weight-and-balance and structural integrity and fire-resistant or fire-retardant materials at all times. The FAA keeps us honest, and we’re glad to have them checking on our work. It saves us the salary of good inspectors if the FAA does its job well.”

Someone who has watched the expertise Howard Thompson brings to the interior decoration of planes can realize that this is truly a unique art form.

Out in the piñon country of Colorado, something nice is being done for airplane owners—especially for owners of smaller, older aircraft. It’s called “personal attention.” And it comes attractively packaged—in colors like meerschauam, avocado and tangerine. □