

40 FORTY YEARS OF AOPA

OPERATIONS DIVISION: WORKING FOR YOU

BY FRANK KINGSTON SMITH

AOPA 124393

Many AOPA members with whom I have talked in the last few months have thought of their association primarily as their advocate in Washington. True, one of AOPA's main functions is to work with government officials who seek to inflict burdens on the use of aircraft by overregulation or schedules of taxation that are unnecessary and often unwise. However, the organization now serving almost a quarter of a million aircraft owners and pilots has a second, equally important function: it provides special, direct membership services, most of which it originated and many of which are unavailable from any other source.

Programs of such services were initiated shortly after civilian aviation was permitted to fly again when the governmental edict banning such activities was lifted in 1945. Interestingly, AOPA—then only slightly over 18 months old—had 8,068 members in December 1941, and more than doubled its membership to 17,000 by May 17, 1945. Within the next six months, 6,000 new members joined—more than 50 a day—and in 1946 the rolls swelled by another 10,000. With some 30,000 active members, AOPA, with a staff that by that time had risen to 30 (then General Manager Hartranft had set a rule of thumb that the staff should be restricted to one for every 1,000 members), initiated several programs to meet the original philosophies of the founders: "To make flying more useful, less expensive, safer and more fun."

First, AOPA launched a vigorous campaign through its monthly newsletter (which was bound into *Flying Magazine* each month—the first "service to members" was a reduced-rate subscription) exposing and naming fixed-base operators who had been reported as gouging private fliers. Although the program frequently irritated and infuriated the people named, it was roundly applauded by the flying public.

When AOPA attacked the developing aviation facility monopolies, which resulted from the turnover of former military training fields to local and municipal governments, and insisted that competition must be allowed on any airport built by public funding and open to public use, another round of castigation and vituperation resulted.

In 1947, AOPA initiated a special service for the benefit of its members who were planning to purchase used airplanes: title search to make sure that the purchaser was not going to own an airplane plastered with liens and mortgages. In the same year the staff prepared the first *International Flight Guide*. A year later AOPA published a booklet, which was distributed free to its members, explaining the new navigation system that was going to supplant the old low frequency, four-leg radio ranges: the static-free, very high frequency, omni-directional radio

Many of AOPA's special, direct membership services are not available anywhere else

ranges, the "VOR's," which were then called "omnirange" or more simply, "omni" stations. All of these services, except for title search, were general in nature. What was wanted were special *personal* services.

Taking a leaf from the remarkable service organization known as the American Automobile Association (AAA), which offers predesigned or "canned" highway routings for its members, the staff envisioned a similar service for private fliers, complete with pads of professionally produced flight plan forms similar to the AAA's well-known "Trip-Tiks." With 35,000 members, the volume of requests for tour-by-air assistance began to mount rapidly. Furthermore, inquiries began to come in regularly for help on all sorts of problems besetting members, which meant more specialists were required for the professional staff. It can be said that AOPA "grew like Topsy:" not planned, but as required to meet the needs as they arose.

Now, most of the special services to members that have grown from those early efforts are consolidated into the Operations Division headed by Senior Vice President Ralph F. Nelson, a veter-

an of more than 20 years on the AOPA staff who has been dealing with members' problems virtually all of his time with AOPA. He started as director of the Pilot Service Department in 1958. Then, after developing a series of flight training courses leading to an instrument rating he became executive vice president of the Air Safety Foundation. In that position he developed programs for revalidation of flight instructors, an aviation weather TV program, mechanic refresher, FBO management, and weekend ground school courses. These courses proved so popular that some 10,000 pilots a year attend. In addition, many other schools have copied the concepts throughout the country.

In 1973, Nelson was promoted to the position of vice president and executive assistant to the president, and in 1978 was made senior vice president in charge of the new Operations Division. For his efforts in the area of safety Nelson has received numerous awards and commendations from the FAA and other organizations.

The Operations Division has four departments, which process some 10,000 telephone calls (averaging one every 12 minutes each working day) and 5,000 letters per year (20 a day) ranging from requests for assistance with denied medical certificates, disputes on a manufacturer's warranty policy, and repair overcharges, to where to find a part for an old airplane. Most of these requests are referred to the front line troops of the Operations and Safety Department led by Russell S. Lawton (whose face is familiar to most of us because his picture adorns the "Answers for Pilots" column each month). Lawton is one of AOPA's troubleshooters and represents the association at many aviation meetings, symposiums and get-togethers, where AOPAers can ask him directly about solutions to their problems. In addition,

he participates regularly in governmental meetings at the FAA and other agencies and is assigned to cover special problems, such as the Memphis midair accident (where he was accredited as an NTSB investigator).

Basil Maile and Don Koranda field most of the queries coming in. Although any of the three can handle just about anything and can back each other up, the general procedure is for Maile to deal with issues that come to his Medical and Technical Assistance Department, and for Koranda to treat Pilot's Service and Reference matters.

Maile personally handles medical certification problems ranging from heart attacks to hypertension and sometimes amputation. He spends several hours a day on the telephone with the FAA's Aerospace Medical Center in Oklahoma City, to help members with medical problems. If a member's problem is such that testing by specialists is required, this department has an arrangement whereby he can be referred directly to the Wright State University Aerospace Medicine Clinic, headed by Dr. Stanley Mohler. AOPA likes to think of this as its own Mayo Clinic for pilots.

Maile's other specialty is a far cry from physical problems: steeped in aviation lore and technical knowledge, Maile is a wizard at finding sources of information about aircraft and component parts. He can, with total equanimity, respond to queries about where to locate such esoterica as a landing wheel for a 1937 Fairchild 24 or a cogwheel for a Polaris ADF. Sometimes it takes a few days, but sometimes the quickness of his response can knock your socks off.

Recently, during a telephone conversation with a member about a supplemental ATC matter, the member just happened to mention that he had found a bag of valve springs for an OX-5 engine in the back of a closet in his old maintenance shop, just in case anyone ever wanted to know. Methodically, Maile jotted the information down to place it in his special file just as the phone rang again. This time it was from a frantic antiquer who was refurbishing an old Travel Air and rebuilding its World War I vintage OX-5 engine and needed (you guessed it!) a set of valve springs, which he had discovered were nowhere to be found. When Maile without hesitation reeled

off a name, address and telephone number where those rare items could be found at that very moment, the rebuilder was properly impressed with the service of his association.

Basil Maile also takes care of requests from foreign members of AOPA (many people from other lands are members). Many of them indicate that they are planning flying vacations on the North American continent and want to know what they have to do to have their homeland pilot and radio operator licenses validated so that they can do so. One does not learn how to dispose of such a variety of issues overnight and with such nonchalance as Basil Maile, especially with such a high degree of success. Maile has quietly been doing the job for a long time—and it shows.

The Service and Reference Section under Don Koranda's charge is involved with two different phases of membership services. The first, mostly handled by Koranda himself, has to do with the extremely sensitive problem of members' violations of Federal Aviation Regulations. Although he is not a lawyer and cannot represent a member who is having a brush with the enforcement procedures, Koranda has a list of

It is not unusual to find many industry researchers poring through the AOPA library's extensive files

lawyers specializing in aviation law at his fingertips. Most of them are AOPA members as well as members of the Lawyer-Pilots Bar Assn. In violation/enforcement cases, AOPA will supply a member with a list of qualified attorneys in his home area and let him take his pick. I must add that anyone who receives a violation notice should contact Koranda immediately, before making any response of any kind to anyone.

Koranda is also administrator of the AOPA Library and Subject Files Department, which is professionally managed by Joan Urciolo, who has developed it into one of the most valuable aviation reference and referral sources in Washington. It is not unusual to find several researchers from other associations, from government agencies and from the news media in the library, their noses buried in books. Almost everything in print about aviation is there, either in bound volumes or on microfilm, including owner's manuals of aircraft of all types, FAA Advisory Circulars and Airworthiness Directives, the *Federal Register* and copies of *Jane's All the World's Aircraft* dating back to 1902.

The subject file consists of 125 file cabinet drawers in which repose a huge collection of newspaper and magazine articles, speeches, correspondence and captioned photographs, which have been collected and compiled over the years, each placed in a file folder by subject. If an AOPA staffer is going to attend an FAA meeting on, say, "FAA policy about positive control," he can sign out the file and study it, which gives him tremendous background when exchanging views (and sometimes barbs) in the meeting. From years of experience walking the Washington beat, during which time I was sometimes with 'em and sometimes agin' 'em, I can report that AOPA staffers do their homework and don't go to any meeting to "play it by ear." Urciolo's shop is the ammunition magazine for the guys on the firing line.

Use of the library and subject files by the members, staffers, etc., is free; however, this department also provides a Commercial Research Service, which is frequently utilized by consulting firms with government (mostly FAA) contracts, research organizations, marketing researchers, lawyers, etc., to amass aeronautical data for commercial purposes. A schedule of fees has been

set up to provide this service to the industry without having AOPA membership dues subsidize commercial interests. For nonmembers this fee is \$50 for the first hour and \$30 an hour thereafter (minimum one hour); the fee for members for this service is \$25 for the first hour and \$15 an hour thereafter.

The International Aviation Theft Bureau is listed as the second department under the Operations Division and Ralph Nelson is its Executive Director. Not strictly a direct service to members as the other departments are, it is nevertheless of enormous service to all aircraft owners as regards the reduction of their insurance premiums covering theft. IATB was created in 1974 by AOPA to combat the \$60 million annual losses due to aircraft and equipment theft, simply because there was no way to trace stolen equipment and apprehend the thieves. For the first couple of years AOPA supported IATB as a service to the industry and provided facilities for Betty Kilduff, IATB's single employee, to prepare a quarterly *IATB Alert Bulletin*. The bulletin contains a constantly updated list of stolen aviation equipment. It is sent to law enforcement agencies, maintenance shops, avionics repair shops, control tower operators, flight service stations, general aviation district offices, fixed-base operators, and anyone else who wants it.

IATB has been very useful—it has been responsible for cutting the loss rate due to theft by more than \$33 million a year. Now its operation is totally funded by a group of aviation insurance companies from all parts of the United States, most of whom are vigorous competitors in the insurance marketplace.

The IATB acts as a catalyst between the various legal jurisdictions and agencies—local and state police, FBI, Customs and the FAA, for instance. The IATB activities, producing an awareness of aviation theft problems in the United States and reducing by 55% aircraft and aviation-related thefts, have become recognized and credible as an effective tool in dealing with this problem. This is so much so that on October 5, 1978, the FAA presented AOPA the Distinguished Service Award for its services with the IATB.

The third department is the Listing, Title Search and Chart Department.

Michael Santangelo is in charge of the department. The Listing Section processes requests to AOPA for print-outs from its IBM computer, which can produce (through the magic of electronics) lists, for example, of all owners of a particular type of equipment in a state or region, or by individuals' qualifications. These are routed to Mary Ann Walker, who arranges for the production of the information from AOPA's Computer division.

These mailing lists are provided for a fee to aircraft equipment manufacturers and other organizations who want to make their products and/or services available to pilots and/or aircraft owners. The users of the listing service must first obtain written permission from the FAA for the specific purpose for which they plan to use the lists. Profits made by this department, as with other services provided by other departments in AOPA for a fee, go directly into the AOPA budget. This supplemental income allows AOPA to continue to provide increased services for the membership without having to raise the dues to do it.

The Title Search Section, which has expanded enormously since it was first offered as an AOPA service, is based in Oklahoma City near the FAA Records Center. It is managed by Ann Lennon. In addition to individual membership requests (of which there is a huge volume), AOPA's Title Search Section serves many high-volume aircraft dealers, banks, financing institutions and insurance companies on a regular basis because they recognize the accurate, efficient service performed.

Many of us have known the frustration of not being able to obtain up-to-date sectional charts when considering a flight to some remote part of the country or to Canada, Mexico or the Bahamas. All too often one finds that the local FBO doesn't even have a current sectional for his own area. This is not a new or unusual situation; because of it, AOPA became an official agency for the sale of Coast and Geodetic Survey Charts shortly after World War II. This made many fixed-base operators angry because—they said—AOPA was competing with them. It apparently did not occur to them that if they had charts available for sale to the flying public, AOPA would not have entered the sales business in the first place. Furthermore, most pilots would

The Flight Planning Department offers over 600 preplanned route legs for domestic flights

rather buy their charts at an airport, than have to send away for them, whether to the government chart agencies or AOPA. Of course, AOPA gets them to you by return mail. Now as an agency for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), AOPA's Chart Sales Section handles all kinds of aeronautical charts, ranging from sectionals, World Aeronautical charts (WAC's), Operational Navigational Charts (ONC's), national planning charts and whatever else the government prints, including radio facility charts and approach plates for instrument flying, as well as the similar system of charting produced by Jeppesen & Co.

One of the most popular services available to members in this section is the World Aeronautical Chart and Sectional Chart subscription service. Members subscribe to the charts that apply to their local area or that cover routes they repeatedly take, at \$9 per chart. Their names are then put on AOPA's computer and as soon as the next three revisions of that chart are made available by the government the member automatically is mailed the revisions. There is no longer any excuse for flying with out-of-date charts.

AOPA's Flight Planning Department is the fourth segment of the Operations Division. It is managed by Catherine V. Howser and Gary Wiley and has come a long way since the early days. The department, which now spreads out over several interconnected rooms filled with chart tables and whose walls are festooned with charts of every part of the world, is as busy as an anthill every working day of the year, providing assistance for hundreds of members each week.

The range of the department's service is astonishing, from newly minted private pilots who are planning their first long vacation trip by lightplane to high-time professional pilots planning to fly corporate jets or carrying corporate executives to business meetings in London, Paris, Rome, Berlin, Kuwait, Buenos Aires—or Peking.

It is a common misconception for people to think of AOPA as being composed of amateur, part-time, (you should pardon the expression) "week-end" pilots, whose aeronautical endeavors consist of endless rounds of ring-

around-the-rosy, seldom venturing beyond the vicinity of their home airports. All it takes is a visit to the Flight Planning Department, where you can see people planning aircraft flights to all parts of the world, to set the record straight. AOPA members do a lot of travelling in their lightplanes!

The department has two separate sections: *domestic services* (which includes the United States, Canada, Mexico and the Bahamas) and *foreign flight planning services*, which covers anywhere—everywhere!—else.

If a member requests a recommended routing from, let's say Rockport, Me., to Las Vegas, Nev., noting any places he may wish to stop en route, type of airplane he will be flying and its equipment, plus pilot's experience level, he may expect to receive within a day or two a detailed VFR-suggested air route. This will direct him from VOR to VOR via Victor airways, or direct course, and give magnetic headings and distance in nautical miles for each leg of the way along the prescribed flight path between Rockport and Las Vegas. The Flight Planning Department makes available over 600 preprinted air route segments for domestic flight planning—all of which are designed for use with current en route radio charts, WAC and sectional charts; these charts are individually listed for each segment of a requested air route. Except for the charges for these charts, this flight planning is free to members.

Special Flight Reports are also available from the Flight Planning Department for such locations as Washington, D.C., New York City and the state of Florida, along with other reports for the Bahamas, Mexico, Canada, West Indies, Latin America, Central America, Transatlantic and Europe, U.S. Customs, etc. These reports provide information concerning rules and regulations particular to the areas, places to stay, weather data, information on airports, etc., all of which is provided to AOPA members on request as a membership service.

Foreign flight planning services require the payment of fees, but they are well worth the cost. The fact is, without AOPA's expert service, an individual pilot is for all practical purposes unable to obtain the required airspace and overflight clearances, certificates of

temporary sojourn (to prove that the aircraft will not be taken into a country for sale) and other permits necessary to fly outside of the United States or its immediate neighbors. Even approvals for a routine two-hour flight from Florida to either Jamaica or the Cayman Islands, required for overflying Cuba, usually cannot be arranged by an individual dealing with the State Department or foreign consulates. But a request for such permits and approvals transmitted over the AFTN (rhymes with "caftan") system—an acronym for Aeronautical Fixed Telecommunications Network—and signed "AOPA/Howser" when filed on behalf of a member moves bureaucratic mountains; approvals frequently come back within hours. The AOPA member receives a compact bound booklet containing the flight's computer-generated itinerary, all of the required permits, authorizations, landing approvals and overflight clearances, suitably beribboned, sealed with wax seals, looking like an international treaty and very impressive. Well it should be, for AOPA's International Flight Planning Department is known world-wide and via AFTN's Telex-like system is regularly in contact with air route traffic control centers, control towers at airports all over the world and government centers and can follow the course of a member's flight 12,000 miles away.

Don't think that foreign flight planning is reserved for the exclusive use of guys driving the big iron of the nation's business fleet; not only does AOPA's Flight Planning Department arrange for almost a thousand foreign flights of light and medium twins each year, but last year more than 200 single-engine planes crossed the Atlantic. Hundreds more flew to the Bahamas, Jamaica, the Caymans and the Caribbean, to Central and South America and across Canada to Alaska.

When, away back in the middle 1940's, the staff worked to develop ways of producing services for AOPA's 35,000 members, there was no way that the prodigious volume of requests for assistance that would come from the membership could have been forecast. Yet the smooth functioning Operations Division processes such requests as a normal, almost routine, service day in and day out. □