

# WORKING



# WACO

*Making pleasure pay*

BY WILLIAM L. GRUBER

“Beautiful.”

Taxi up to any ramp in a Waco Classic, and you are just about guaranteed to hear that word. Linemen, other pilots, even tower controllers feel obliged to tell you with boyish admiration, “That’s a beautiful airplane.”

Indeed it is. Muscular yet graceful, distinctly symbolic of the whole goggles-and-helmet myth of the bygone days of aviation, the Waco Classic is fun to just stand around and look at.

It needs those good looks. With multiple struts, two thick wings, and that big, round nose, the whole airplane is a flying speed brake. And it can get pretty chilly in that open cockpit, even when it’s hotter than Georgia asphalt down on the ground. Practical, it is not. But who cares? Classic Aircraft Corporation

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FIZER







may build airplanes at its factory in Lansing, Michigan, but what it sells is romance, pure and simple.

But romance comes at a price. At \$180,000 apiece, with an annual production of only about 10 airplanes, the Waco Classic is one of those few items justly described as the perfect rich man's toy. Guys who buy these usually own other airplanes to use for transportation. They've worked long and hard to get where they are, and by God, they deserve a little fun too, don't they? Doing loops in an open-cockpit biplane is a great stress reliever after a tough day performing surgery or wheeling a big deal.

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***Despite the Waco's image as a back-to-basics airplane, most owners choose to equip them with full IFR panels.***

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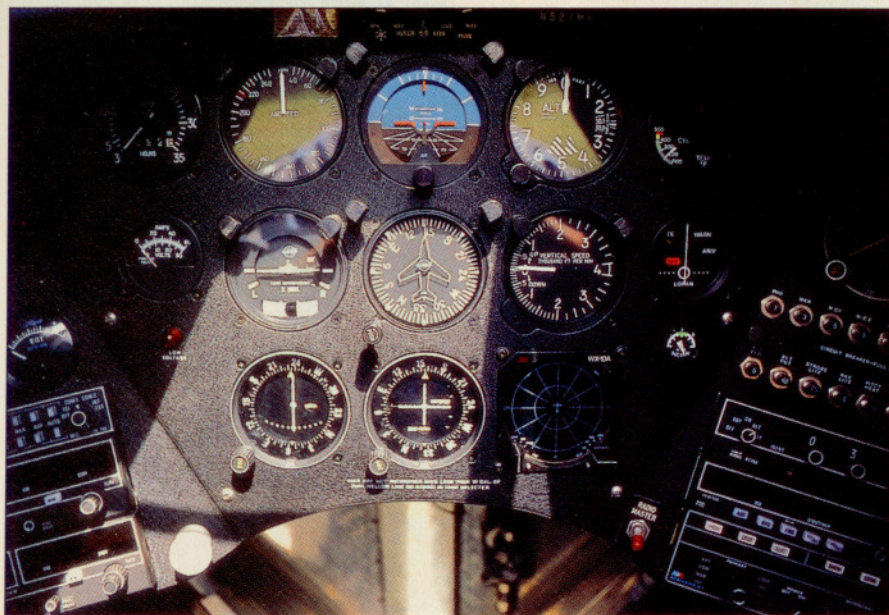
But despite their obvious role as objects to be pampered and flown on sunny Sundays, some Wacos actually work for a living. Their employment as latter-day barnstormers is common enough, in fact, that Classic Aircraft is now building a new, stretched version, called the Super, specifically for commercial use.

It seems slightly immoral to earn your keep by doing something as fun as flying in an open-cockpit biplane all day—somehow goes against the Puritan ethic and the spirit of capitalism and all that. But hey, set up shop near a tourist area, where people have money to spend and are hellbent for recreation, and you can actually *make a living* with one of these airplanes. The days of \$5 airplane rides may be long gone, but the sight of a biplane still incites a spirit of adventure in even the most earthbound vacationer. Fly over the beach in your Waco, and the customers will *seek you out*, wallets at the ready.

At least that's how it was for an operator who gave rides in Key West, Florida, for several years. He made enough money with his first Waco to buy another one, then he sold the business and retired. Others have followed his lead. At last count, eight Wacos now earn their keep in other mundane locations like Bryce Canyon,







Utah; Vancouver, British Columbia; and Hawaii. Why not make a living doing what others dream of doing in their spare time?

And that's how it's going to be for Mike Adamick. Just ask him. This is Adamick's first season as proprietor and pilot for Beach Stormer Air Rides, purveyors of scenic flights aboard a Waco Classic in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. Fun is his business, and in Myrtle Beach, business is good.

"The people have been tremendous. I don't think we've had one unhappy customer," Adamick says, his trademark toothy smile further illuminating a face that is so sunburned it practically glows. "They're like little kids, turning around in the front seat, giving you the thumbs up and the OK. It's just great having a job making people happy."

Adamick, 49, made his fortune in the service station business in an affluent part of Connecticut (fortune is a subjective term, and Adamick doesn't say how much he put into the new barnstorming business, but his Waco is paid for, and he has enough left over to drive a Jaguar and keep a Cessna 310 at his year-round home in Ridge Spring, South Carolina). He'd been a fan of the Waco ever since Classic started building them brand-new in 1986, the same year he earned his pilot certificate. The Beach Stormer scheme started out as an idle fantasy, until he did some research and called some Waco operators, who reported that, yes, you can make it pay. That's when he got serious.

"We definitely were looking at biplanes, maybe Stearmans," he says. "I always was interested in the new Wacos but never thought it was anything I could afford." Still, the Waco has distinct advantages for giving rides. For one thing, you can put two people up front, and most customers want to fly in pairs. And its newness adds an added sense of security for customers who aren't so sure about this open-cockpit stuff to begin with.

After visiting the Sun 'n Fun fly-in specifically to look over the Waco, and a subsequent trip to the Classic factory ("Their quality control, I think, is what really sold me."), Adamick became the proud owner of N527MN, a 1988 YMF-5 with a full IFR panel and 85 hours on the tach. He had planned to buy a new one but saved about \$35,000 by opting for the "pre-owned"



airplane. With an HSI, Northstar loran, Stormscope, and other niceties already installed when he bought it, Adamick's Waco is an up-to-date mount for a modern barnstormer. He's put another 200 hours on the airplane, including a thorough, 20-hour check-out at the factory in Lansing. Adamick wasn't a tailwheel pilot when he bought the airplane, and he says of the check-out, "I never did so many touch and goes in my entire life."

Having lived in South Carolina for several years, Adamick thought the Myrtle Beach resort area, with its long beaches, golf courses, and myriad other tourist lures, would be an excellent place to set up shop. Already there were businesses there giving scenic flights in helicopters, sailplanes, and Cessnas. But nobody was offering *biplane* rides, and Adamick figured he could make a go of it. Besides, wouldn't it be nice to kick back in a beachfront condo after a long day

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***Everything on the Waco is brand-new except the 275-horsepower, remanufactured Jacobs radial engine.***

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in the cockpit? He discussed the plan with his wife, Judy—she especially liked the bit about the beachfront condo—and they decided to go for it. Mike would fly, and Judy would act as the ground crew, meeting customers, escorting them into the airplane, and collecting their money.

But where would they base their operation? To make a longish story short, Adamick found out about a private, 4,000 x 150-foot grass strip, called Javika Airport, in disuse in the Surfside community, just four minutes by Waco from the most choice sands of Myrtle Beach. He contacted the owner, negotiated a deal, overcame some local bureaucratic hassles, renovated the field, and now has this great grass strip all to himself. The best part is that the airport is right on the heavily traveled Route 544. Banners that say "BIPLANE RIDES" and the sight of that Waco from the road are all it takes to draw a steady stream of customers.

The local pilots who work the beach and informally coordinate the way you

fly that busy 30-mile stretch of airspace (Myrtle Beach Approach also remains in radio contact) accepted Adamick into their ranks. One operator even taught him to tow banners, which he does every morning when the weather is halfway decent.

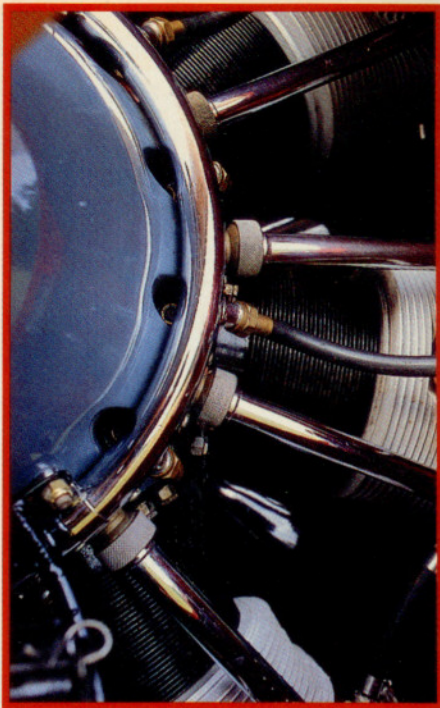
"BIPLANE RIDES ROUTE 544 SURFSIDE," towed up and down the beach, is all the advertising Adamick needs. Pamphlets also have been distributed to local motels, where the clerks had tired of giving handwritten directions to "the place where you can get rides in a biplane." It doesn't take much promotion. Some people see the Waco fly over and then follow it in their cars.

He charges \$50 for a ride of about 15 minutes, which works out to \$25 per person and is cheaper than most Waco operators usually charge, according to the folks at Classic Aircraft. Departing Javika, which from the cockpit of a rolling biplane resembles a bowling alley cut out of a very tall wood, Adamick climbs to 1,000 feet, turns left for the quick jaunt to the beach, then descends to 300 feet over the water, which provides for some serious sightseeing. In addition to the heavy beach traffic, there are airliners and Air National Guard A-10s flying out of the mixed-use Myrtle Beach Air Force Base, so Adamick's personal sightseeing is kept to a minimum as he scans for traffic and advises of his position on a CTAF monitored by all of the pilots working the beach. There also are 35-minute rides for \$50 per person and hour-long rides that go for \$75 a head.

"We give them goggles, and we offer the headgear, but most of them want the wind in their face and their hair blowing," he says. Some people are surprised by all the noise generated by the wind and that big, round, 275-horsepower Jacobs engine, but Adamick has had no real complaints.

"Wow"—a common observation—is the first word out of one middle-aged woman's mouth as she climbs from the cockpit on a recent business day at Javika. "I never flew in anything like that before. I've seen them in the movies."

Hollywood references come to mind for a male customer later. As he and his wife head for the car, he re-









marks, "It's just like *The Blue Max*."

In the course of the day, a bit slow due to cloudy, hazy weather, Adamick gives about a dozen rides. The passengers all are giddy when they climb in, maybe a little nervous—after all, there's *no roof on this thing*—and they all are beaming when they return. And they all have their cameras out.

The customers have kept on coming, and when we visited toward the beginning of the season, Adamick expected July and August to be his real heavy-traffic months, the ones that would truly pay the bills. "We don't mind coming here seven days a week, 12 hours a day, knowing that in five months, we'll be done," says Adamick.

There have been some setbacks, the most dramatic of which was a tornado that turned Adamick's new hangar into scrap metal (the Waco was elsewhere and wasn't damaged). Somewhere along the way, that condo on the beach turned into a trailer at the airport. But Adamick says that just means he's "living the real barnstormer's life," and Judy doesn't seem to mind.

"I enjoy it. The people here are all on vacation, so they're all in a good mood. It's a nice way to make a living," says Judy. "He promised me winters off, but that remains to be seen."

Her suspicions may be justified. First, they'll have to see how the summer goes. But Adamick already is thinking about doing rides during the winter months somewhere in the Caribbean. And he plans eventually to trade his airplane in on a new Waco Super. You just can't keep a good barnstormer down. □





# CROSS-COUNTRY CLASSIC

*The sound and the fury*

**W**hen Don Kettles, marketing director at Classic Aircraft Corporation, offered to let me go along with chief pilot Carl Dye to fly the company's YMF-5 demonstrator from the factory in Lansing, Michigan, to the National Biplane Expo in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, I viewed it as an excellent opportunity to familiarize myself with the aircraft in a real, in-the-field setting. My editor saw it differently. His word was "boondoggle."

Despite our disparate views of the assignment, I somehow found myself on the ramp at Lansing early the morning before the weekend fly-in was to begin, exchanging quick how-do-you-dos with Dye and looking over N40121, a white and red Waco that I couldn't help but observe was "a beautiful airplane." I had prepared myself for the journey by looking over the sectionals, studying the rather thin Airplane Flight Manual, and renting *The Great Waldo Pepper* from Blockbuster Video.

The weather in Lansing was scuzzy, with low ceilings and visibility, and promised to get worse. Our enroute forecast called for thunderstorms, but they would be isolated, and Dye was confident we could get around anything unpleasant. The demonstrator, like most Wacos sold by Classic, is IFR-equipped.

Dye elected to let me fly the first leg from the back. The front cockpit has only an altimeter and airspeed indicator—not even a compass or an inclinometer—so you really are pretty much on your own in the rear. But Dye did have a control stick and rudder pedals to help keep me out of trouble on the ground. We went through the straightforward starting procedure, and the Jacobs went quickly from sputter to rumble. We were on our way.

I learned to fly in a J-3 Cub, so I like to think I know how to use my feet for something other than kicking the tires before getting into an airplane. Still, the Waco is big, forward visibility is nil, and all I'd flown lately was a Decathlon, so docile on the ground it barely qualifies as a taildragger. I did manage to keep the Waco going in more or less a straight line on the takeoff roll, although to an observer, it may have looked as if we were dodging potholes.

The Waco does require close attention to keep it from swapping ends, but I would learn in subsequent attempts that in fact my problem was *overcontrolling*. The rudder pedals needed a well-timed tap-tap, rather than the *stomp-stomp* I felt compelled to deliver at first.

Soon after we departed Lansing, we realized that the forecast for marginal VFR was a bit optimistic. We returned and filed IFR, then swapped places, with Dye flying from the rear. Open-cockpit IFR is a unique experience. In this case, you really are "in the clouds," or rather, the clouds are in the cockpit. Somehow, they seemed less foreboding to me that way. Less like the heart of darkness and more like plain old fog. We broke out on top after about 20 minutes and were treated to a splendid view.

If flying in a biplane makes you feel a bit childlike, sitting in the middle of that big tub of a front cockpit in the Waco makes you feel even more so. A sole passenger has plenty of room to spread out up there. One of the first things you notice is the noise. The wind creates a real racket, and that Jacobs is right in front of you. I



Mike Adamick in the cockpit, and a happy customer. A gazebo serves as the Adamicks' base of operations.



was surprised by how much the vibration from the engine made my teeth rattle, until I bent forward into the cockpit to unfold a sectional. My teeth stopped chattering. I realized then that the vibration wasn't from the engine at all, but the slipstream blasting across the top of my head.

We wore cloth flying helmets and David Clark headsets, which kept the noise to a comfortable level. Remove the headsets, and there's a real din that would grow tiresome on all but the shortest flights. The wind delivers a steady massage to the scalp, but you get used to that.

When the overcast had passed behind us, we canceled IFR and descended to 2,500 feet. It was hazy over Illinois, but visibility from the open cockpit obviously is excellent. I settled in up front until our first fuel stop at Kankakee.

Fuel stops are always fun in the Waco. When you taxi up in that airplane, you're an instant celebrity. I greeted the admirers with a smile and tried to sound like I knew what I was talking about when I answered their questions. Dye always insists on doing the fueling himself. It requires balancing on top of the fuselage to reach the fuel ports on the top wing—Dye stands right on the tough rear windshield—and the addition of a dash of Marvel Mystery Oil for top-end lubrication.

I flew the next leg from Kankakee to Jacksonville, Illinois, from the rear cockpit, and it was my first real chance to acquaint myself with the airplane. We flew at 110 mph indicated, which Dye says usually yields a true airspeed of about 100 knots. Headwinds kept our groundspeed to about 85 knots. We payed close attention to the sectionals, but the Waco's Northstar M1 loran eliminated the need to make like a real barnstormer and follow train tracks or trust to dead reckoning.

What surprised me most about that rear cockpit is that it's really *noisy* back there. I figured my distance from the Jacobs would cut me some slack, and indeed you can't hear the engine at all in the rear seat. But the wind is everywhere, and the sound of it slamming against struts, wings, fuselage, and pilot really adds up. In the front seat, you have the top wing over your head, and you barely get the sensation of real open-cockpit flying. Ah, but in the rear, you have the sun on your face, an unrestricted view, and the wind blasting all around you.

The rear seat, unlike the front, adjusts up and down. You are reluctant to sit too far down inside the airplane, but you can duck behind the windscreen enough to avoid being battered senseless. Also, the rear cockpit is a lot cozier, so you feel more like you're flying an airplane and less like you're sitting in a barrel, as you do up front sometimes. If you wear a headset, you are prevented from keeping your head on a swivel like a World War I flying ace by the fact that your mike is activated whenever you turn your head toward the slipstream, no matter where the squelch is set. The only solution is to unplug your mike or switch off the intercom.

across the heartland in an open-cockpit biplane. Blame it on Antoine de Saint-Exupery and Richard Bach. As we thundered toward Oklahoma, it was one of those rare moments when I could not think of anywhere I'd rather be.

Still, I never expected it to be so, well, *violent*. Sound and fury. The wind was blasting through the cockpit, the noise was tremendous, I was leaning forward, battling the turbulence; it was positively athletic. It was—*great*.

We arrived at Bartlesville in less than eight hours total and were greeted by the uniformly friendly folks from the National Biplane Association, who charged us a whopping \$1 to register.

Kettles met us in Bartlesville, and early the next morning, we set up shop. First, we had to clean the airplane, which was no small order. Our flight had been a veritable bug holocaust; we had smashed and bashed flying insects of every size and description. Armed with an ample supply of Windex, Fantastik, and cloth baby diapers, we had the Waco sparkling again in only about two hours. "Now you're a real biplane pilot," Kettles told me with a smile. "Now you've flown them, and you've cleaned them."

More than 100 biplanes showed up for the event, and there were plenty of admirers of the Classic Waco. Bob Saxton of Waco, Texas, flew up in his Waco (he readily points out that he has the only Waco from Way-co), and there were a number of antique Wacos, gorgeous cabin Wacos and UPF-7s. There is some resentment from a few owners of antique Wacos, who view the new airplanes as upstart imposters, but mostly, there is

just kinship among people who admire the simple grace of biplanes.

Kettles talked to a lot of people who promised to buy a Waco as soon as they won the lottery, but there were a few serious prospects. "Third time's the charmer," he told me. "When they come back for the third time and just stand there looking at the airplane with a serious expression on their face, you know you have a customer."

After Dye and I went for a flight in Saxton's airplane, Dye adjusted the rigging—which basically consists of making a few turns on spacing bolts on the struts to bring things back in trim—on the spot. Saxton, a successful neurosurgeon, was en-



*The factory Waco in its element at the biplane fly-in at Bartlesville; antique UPF-7s stand in formation.*



There is no slop in the controls, and the Waco is very responsive, yet stable. A poke at the rudder pedal is all it takes to level a wing. "You'll notice," Dye says, "I barely move the stick at all when I fly."

Dye took the second leg from Jacksonville to Kaiser, Missouri, which required plenty of dodging around building cumulus. I got another turn between Kaiser and Bartlesville.

It was a decidedly bumpy ride, but on that second leg, I got truly comfortable with the airplane and was unabashedly in my glory. Lots of pilots probably see a 747 cockpit as the be-all and end-all, but my fantasy always has been to be tooling



thusiastically laudatory of his airplane and of Classic Aircraft. "Of all the toys I have bought for myself, this one has given me by far the most pure satisfaction," he says.

Dye and I packed up early Sunday morning and departed VFR in drizzly skies. He offered to let me fly the whole return trip. He didn't have to ask twice. We made it back in about 6.5 hours with help from tailwinds. I learned some more lessons about Waco flying, including the fact that, despite having the cabin heat on all the way, you can still freeze your buns off in an open-cockpit biplane above the clouds at 7,500 feet, even when it's scorching down below. We stopped in Jefferson, Missouri,

and Bloomington, Illinois, for fuel and were treated like visiting dignitaries.

As we encountered a low overcast over Michigan, Dye demonstrated his rapid descent technique by taking the controls up front and pointing the nose just about straight down through a hole in the clouds. We screamed through the opening and were running below the overcast in short order. "That was interesting," I commented. "Really?" Dye replied. A few minutes later, he explained, "I never worry about the airspeed in this airplane. I just keep an eye on the rpms. You can't get it going fast enough to do it any harm."

Even as my sore posterior and stiff back

made me look forward to our arrival, I dreaded the end of the flight. I didn't know when or if I'd get to do that kind of flying again. But low ceilings, poor visibility, and vectors from approach control near Lansing kept me too busy to try to wax philosophical about the whole thing. My last landing in N40121 was the first one I performed flawlessly.

"Nice job," said Dye, which for him was almost a speech.

I taxied to the ramp, shut down, pulled off my helmet, and climbed a bit stiffly out of the cockpit. Then I just stood there on the tarmac, looking at the airplane for a little while. —WLG

# MODERN CLASSIC

*Something borrowed, something new*

"It turned out to be a lot more successful than anybody ever expected. Everybody thought we would be lucky to build three of them."

Richard S. Kettles, president of Classic Aircraft Corporation, is justifiably proud as he gives a tour of the Classic factory, which is spread out among several small buildings at or near Capital City Airport in Lansing, Michigan. "Even when we started building these things, I don't think anyone took us seriously," he says, grinning.

It did seem like an improbable idea. In the early 1980s, with the rest of the general aviation industry headed into dark days, Kettles decided to start building airplanes. But not just any airplanes—he wanted to revive production of a biplane design dormant since the 1930s. Although he had operated a successful fixed-base operation for years, how could anyone with no previous aircraft production experience build and sell *biplanes* and survive?

Well, he did it. By bringing in skilled former employees of well-known general aviation manufacturers, and with the cooperation of some game Federal Aviation Administration personnel, Kettles came up with an updated reincarnation of the Waco YMF-5, the type certificate for which was in the public domain. The first Waco Classic flew in 1986. Since then, the company has built 37 more airplanes. Production now is about 10 aircraft a year, with two copies of a new model, the Super, already flying.

"We utilize 400 original drawings—we redrew them all to current standards—and we have generated over 900 of our own drawings," says Kettles. "We've had incred-

ible cooperation from suppliers."

Everything in the modern Waco is brand-new but the 275-hp Jacobs radial engine, which is remanufactured to exacting specifications. The airplanes are not cheap—base price for the Classic is \$166,000 and, for the Super, \$177,000, with avionics adding significantly to those figures—but the company has found a niche market in which a few lucky people who can afford it are willing to pay top dollar for a top-quality product.

The original Waco F-5s were built in



*The Super, intended for commercial use, incorporates a roomier front cockpit with a bigger door.*

Troy, Ohio, from 1933 to 1935. Only a handful were built, although hundreds of the various other Waco models were produced. Waco, an acronym for Weaver Aircraft Company, is pronounced Wah-co, whereas the city in Texas is pronounced Way-co. It's a situation that continues to generate modest confusion, but knowing how to say it properly provides another little in-the-know tidbit for aviation fans.

The new Wacos, both Classic and Super, have book cruise speeds of 120 mph. Power-off stall speed for the Classic is 58 mph; for the Super, it's 59. All perfor-

mance figures and aircraft gauges are calibrated in miles per hour because all original test figures were done that way. Both airplanes carry 48 gallons standard fuel, 72 gallons optional, and burn 15 gallons per hour, which provides for legs of about three hours with standard tanks.

The Classic has a maximum gross weight of 2,770 pounds, an empty weight of 1,940 pounds, and useful load of 830 pounds. For the Super, those figures are 2,950 pounds max gross, 1,985 pounds empty, and 965 pounds useful. Wingspan

for both models is 30 feet, and the height is 8 feet 6 inches. The Super, with a length of 23 feet 10 inches, is 6 inches longer than the Classic. Although wings on both models appear identical from the outside, the Super's wings have been reinforced to help cope with the added weight.

Besides the weight, the main difference between the two models is in the cockpits. The front cockpit on the Super is 2.5 inches wider than in the Classic and 2 inches longer and has a bigger door. The

Super's rear cockpit is an inch wider and 4 inches longer.

Don Kettles, Richard's son and the company's marketing director, says the Super is intended primarily to better meet the needs of commercial operators, but he expects it to appeal to long-legged sportsman-pilots as well.

Don Kettles reports that business remains strong, and most of the airplanes are sold before they're built. For more information, contact Classic Aircraft Corporation, Capital City Airport, Lansing, Michigan 48906; telephone 517/321-7500.—WLG