

KIT OR CONVENTIONAL?

# CESSNA 120

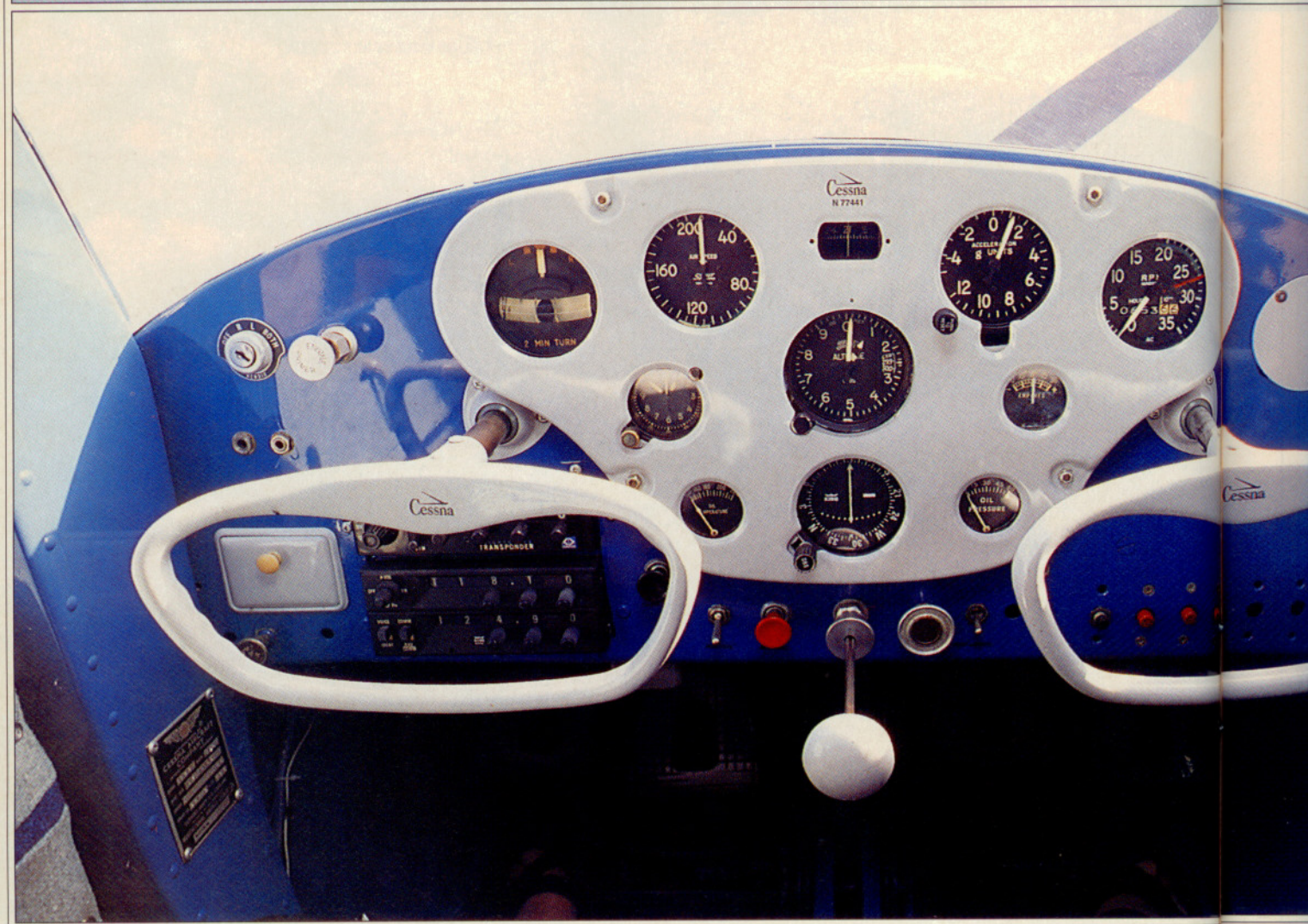
*A love affair with a real McCoy*

BY LANE E. WALLACE

**MY** love affair with old airplanes started on a golden summer evening in southern Indiana, when I got a ride in a 1929 Arrow Sport biplane. It was small and yellow, with cream-colored wings and a side-by-side cockpit trimmed in wood and leather that reminded me of a vintage sports car. ■ It was not my first ride in a small airplane, but it remains

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FIZER







my most memorable. As the biplane lifted off the runway, the rough, crackling sound of its radial engine filling my ears, I had the odd sensation of leaving behind not only the ground, but also the current day. Looking past the airplane's silver flying wires and narrow spoked wheels, the mist-covered hills and farms below could have been those of 1932. In five short minutes, the hectic modern world had dropped away, and I had entered a magical, misty place that seemed almost outside of time. Suddenly, I was aware of all the pilots who must have flown this airplane before me, of how they would have seen the world, the similar sounds and smells they would have known. I almost felt that if I listened hard enough, I might even be able to hear them talking or feel their hands on the controls.

This was not just an airplane, it was a time machine to adventures both past and present, and I decided then and there that I wanted to learn to fly. Of course, the Cherokee Warrior I had to rent for my flying lessons was decidedly less romantic than the biplane that had inspired me, but my hours in it did lead me to a couple of important conclusions. First, although the Warrior was a good, solid little airplane, I realized that what I really wanted was to fly an *old* airplane. I wanted to touch that place outside of time again, and I wanted an airplane that had history, secrets, and adventures of its own. Unfortunately, airports with old airplanes available for rental are rare. And even if I could have found one with a Champ or Cub on the line, I did some quick math and realized that with rental rates of \$40-plus an hour, my flying time in anything was going to be extremely limited if I had to rely on renting an airplane.

So even before I earned my certificate, I began trying to figure out a way to buy my own airplane. It would have to be cheap, and I had already decided I wanted something with history. Consequently, as nice as Kitfoxes or Avid Flyers might be, I never even considered a kitplane or homebuilt. In retrospect, I could say that I was totally unprepared to build an airplane or that the cost would have been prohibitive or that I had a private certificate burning a hole in my pocket, and I didn't want to wait three years to have my own airplane. But back then, I

ruled them out simply because kitplanes were, by definition, new airplanes. Some of them might perform and even look something like an old, two-seat taildragger, but I wanted the real McCoy.

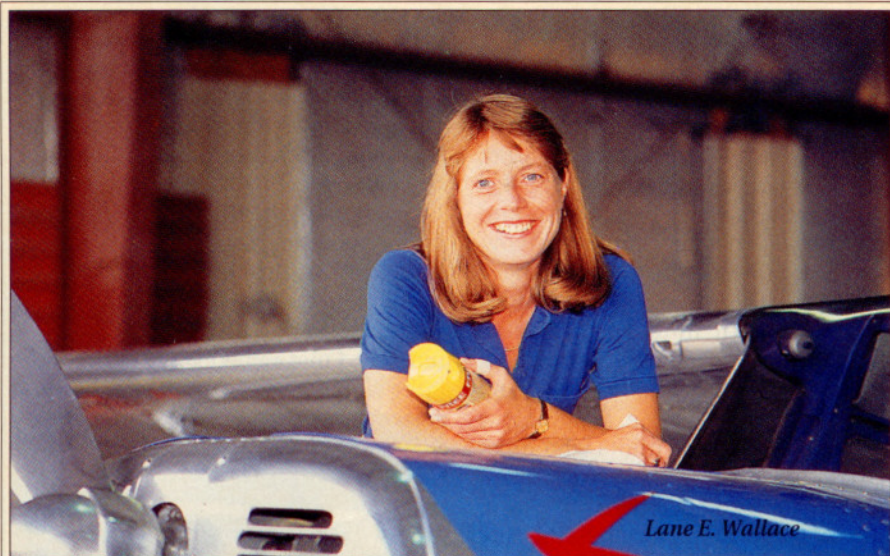
Not having the financial resources to purchase any airplane on my own, however, my airplane dreams had to wait until I found a partner who could split the cost and work involved. Fortunately, I met someone a few months later who was an aircraft mechanic



***This was not just an airplane, it was a time machine to adventures both past and present.***

*The clean lines of the Cessna 120 and classic simplicity of its panel continue to attract today's pilots.*

and who was also looking for a partner in an old airplane. He had the skills to build a kitplane, but we both liked the idea of an airplane that could connect us with the past, and we also wanted an airplane that we could fly right away. Since our resources were extremely limited, a quick look at prices narrowed our preliminary list down to a Cessna 120/140, a Luscombe, or an Aeronca Champ or Chief. The Cessnas or the Luscombe



had the advantage of being mostly or all metal, which would reduce the amount of maintenance required and allow the airplane to be stored outside, if necessary. But the bottom line was finding a good deal on something flyable.

After a couple of months of searching through *Trade-A-Plane* and asking everyone we knew for possible leads, someone at the airport said he thought he knew a man who might want to sell a Cessna 120. The man had bought it for his son, but the son had died, and the airplane had been sitting on the man's grass strip for some time. When we went to look at it, I was pleasantly surprised. It was not a showpiece, but it was definitely a solid, flyable airplane.

The airplane was a 1946 Cessna 120. The fabric wings had been replaced with aluminum skins, and whoever had done the work had done a very good job. It had a mid-time Continental C-85 engine and an elec-

■

*As I looked through  
the logs that evening,  
the airplane's past  
life began to unfold  
in front of me.*

*Elbow grease and a passion for  
the Cessna 120 are all that's needed  
to create an almost shiny bird.*

trical system with a starter, which was a big plus because that meant I would not have to hand-prop the airplane. The instrumentation was basic—altimeter, airspeed, turn and bank, tachometer, ammeter, oil temperature, oil pressure, and a compass accurate to within about 30 degrees—but the essentials, at least, were there. It also had a single Bendix/King KX 145 nav/com radio, which has the disadvantage of not being able to be used

for navigation and communication at the same time, but which can double as a dual-frequency communication radio. The dark brown, diamond-tuck Naugahyde interior left a lot to be desired, of course, but I knew that could be replaced.

The Cessna was bare metal, with a blue and gold stripe down the side. This appealed to me, because I had always loved polished airplanes. I had often wondered, in fact, why more people didn't have them. After spending weeks with a buffer and what seemed like 16 different "magical" polishing compounds, however, I began to understand why polished airplanes are so rare.

Even in its unpolished state, however, the airplane was a good deal. It was a flyable Cessna 120 in sound condition, and the owner only wanted \$5,500 for it. On January 31, 1987, we signed the papers and flew it home.

Since the airplane did not originally come with a Hobbs meter to record the flight hours on the airframe, all of its early flights were manually recorded in the airplane's logbooks, and several owners had continued the practice even after a recording tach was installed. So as I looked through the logs that evening, the airplane's past life began to unfold in front of me. On December 18, 1946, Milford D. Mardis took it on its first test flight at the factory in Wichita. Five days later, R. W. Sparks took it on its second flight when he ferried it to its new home at the Tuscarawas County Airport in New Philadelphia, Ohio. The trip took 10.25 hours. An entry dated May 29, 1964, by a pilot named Ralph Schaefer, proudly noted, "My first flight in my 120." Another owner named Lawrence Henry based the airplane in Ross, Ohio, but traveled with it as far as Montana.

Dozens and dozens of flight entries hinted of some of the places and adventures this little airplane had known. And by purchasing and flying it, I had formed a link with all of these unknown pilots whom I would probably never meet, but who would understand without my saying a word the pride and joy I felt about this particular airplane. They would know and laugh with me about its quirks—how that famous spring gear makes any landing except a perfect greaser feel like the airplane has bounced 10 feet or its annoying tendency to resist

starting when the engine is hot or how the cowlings do not always keep the cowling from coming open in flight. I liked that thought.

Of course, there is a price to be paid for the luxury of an airplane with more than 40 years of history. It is not a new machine, which I am forced to remember every time the left brake goes soft or the air vents won't stay closed or I have to clean off the oil from various little leaks it has developed over the years. We have experienced the classic year-long annual/restoration, when the airplane failed an annual because it needed new wiring, which led to a top overhaul of the engine, which led to an overhaul of the engine compartment, which led to a new interior and a new windshield and skylights. No matter how hard I polish, it will never look shiny and new, and there will probably never be a time when everything in it works absolutely perfectly.

If we had to pay someone else to fix all of these mechanical glitches, the repair bills would certainly add up, which is why some people prefer an experimental kitplane that allows them to perform a lot of their own maintenance. Of course, one could also argue that the \$10,000 to \$14,000 difference in initial purchase price between the Cessna and a comparable kitplane would cover quite a few maintenance bills.

In my case, the fact that my partner in the airplane is a mechanic greatly reduces the cost of our maintenance. But even if we had to pay someone else to work on the airplane, I would still think it was worth it. For one thing, it is undoubtedly the cheapest I will ever fly. Aside from the low purchase price, the airplane burns an average of only 5 gallons of fuel an hour, and its simplicity means relatively low maintenance. I didn't have to give up three years of nights and weekends building it before I could fly it. It is a Standard-category airplane, so we have no restrictions on where or how we operate it, and its Continental C-85 engine is reliable and has a standard 2,000-hour TBO. Its 900-pound empty weight and 9.1 pounds-per-square-foot wing loading mean that it is not a great airplane in winds or turbulence, but it still handles them a lot better than a 500-pound kitplane would.

A Cessna 120 may only go 110 mph

on a good day, and I have had the experience of sitting over the same farmer's pond for five minutes while trying to climb in a strong headwind, but I have seen a lot of the country going that slow. We have used the airplane for adventures all over the United States, from Florida to almost the Canadian border, and from the East

Kitplanes have come a long way in the seven years I have owned the Cessna 120, and I have learned a lot more about some of the advantages they offer. I have also spent many hours, often late into the night, learning firsthand about the headaches an old airplane can cause its owners. But even with seven years of experience and the advantage of 20/20 hindsight, I would still make the same decision about what kind of airplane to buy.

Certainly, the practical considerations of cost and time are as valid for me now as they ever were. But it is more than that. Never once in the Warrior did I land at an airport and have someone come running up to me, joy in their eyes, and say, "I learned to fly in one of these. Could I just look at it for a minute?" The way this airplane draws stories, memories, and emotion out of people never fails to amaze me. I have found myself connected not only to the pilots who flew this particular airplane in the past, but any pilot who ever flew a Cessna 120. And although this airplane is not quite as romantic as a 1929 Arrow Sport biplane, I have sometimes gone flying in that golden hour before dark and touched again that misty place outside of time, where it could be 1946 or 1961 or anytime in between.

This airplane has seen more years and changes in the world than I have, and it has let me see or sense a little of the world before I was born. It has allowed me to fly affordably, seek and find adventure, and have fun, all at the same time. It has also opened doors and communication with people I otherwise would never have known. The Cessna 120 may not be pristine, new, or perfect. But in exchange for all the gifts it offers, a little oil on the belly, some extra work, a few more headaches at annual time, and air vents that won't stay closed seem a very small price to pay indeed. □

Lane E. Wallace, AOPA 896621, is an aviation writer and private pilot who has been flying for more than seven years. In addition to co-owning the Cessna, she is restoring a 1943 Stearman.



**Aside from the low purchase price, the airplane burns an average of only 5 gallons of fuel an hour.**

*An attractive and roomy interior features skylights for safety in the pattern.*

Coast to California. Because it is considered a classic aircraft, we have gotten into Oshkosh on the opening Saturday of the Experimental Aircraft Association convention when more modern Bonanzas, Mooneys, and Cessna 310s were all being turned away.