

TUBE AND FABRIC

A cross-country sojourn with the short-wing Piper clan

BY MARC E. COOK

Wayne Richert, after all, was right. Months ago, he had suggested that the only way to truly experience airplanes of a type—to say nothing of the people who fly and care for them—is to live with them. Upon his presenting that obvious but perfectly sensible premise, I launched to Kansas City, Missouri, to join Richert and a group of short-wing Piper enthusiasts for a 1,300-nautical-mile journey. Our destination: The 1994 Short Wing Piper Club fly-in, this year held in the lovely central Washington city of Wenatchee. ■ Two full days of flying the much-jeered PA-22 Tri-Pacer would help me not only fath-

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE PEZER



om the breed and its benefactors, but also put into perspective my usual mode of transportation. Honestly, in a sophisticated turbocharged single, getting there is dominated by systems management and weather judgment. Not so in the Tri-Pacer world. Push the throttle to go, and if the weather's bad, stay home. Simple as that.

Near departure time, the weather outlook makes it clear the saints of high-pressure domes have put in a good word for us. A thin, dry cold front is forecast to intersect our route at the halfway mark, something all noted would probably happen at our overnight stop.

Early the next morning, as Richert gently coaxes his immaculate 1955 Tri-Pacer from the runway at Johnson County Executive (just outside Kansas City), it occurs to me that 1,300 nm is a distance to be reckoned with, not exactly a hop around the patch. Commenting casually that our climb rate of 500 feet per minute looked pretty good to him, Richert doesn't notice my raised eyebrows as he checks in with the two other ships in our group and turns us north-westbound. "Uh, Wayne," I mutter just under the intercom's squelch threshold, "there's a lot of tall rock between here and there." In behind us fall Steve Marsh, head honcho of the SWPC, and his mother, Mary, in his 150-horsepow-

er Tri-Pacer and Tom Ellis, in his wheel-pant-less 160-hp PA-22.

At 2,500 feet, Richert adjusts the power to allow the slower airplanes to hold position, and we are off, netting about 104 knots true and the same speed over the ground. A quick mental calculation: About 13 hours to go, not including stops and the inevitable west-bound headwind—such a trek seems only to stretch out in front of us pleasantly, like a long weekend from the Thursday-afternoon perspective.

Richert has the airplane down cold, and the first stop has been duly programmed into the loran. I idly punch the buttons on a GPS lashed to the right-side yoke and ponder the Tri-Pacer.

It's hard to imagine now, but the PA-22's ancestors were born of dire necessity. At the time of the light-airplane-market crash in 1947, Piper had a tremendous excess inventory of Cubs and Cruisers. Hired-gun accountant William Shriver, known around Lock Haven as "the kidney puncher" for his ruthless cost-cutting measures, ordered a light, inexpensive addition to the line. Piper shortened the J-3 wing and attached it to a widened tube-and-fabric fuselage, adorned it with a Cub-derived tail, and called the side-by-side two-seater the PA-15 Vagabond. At less than \$2,000 new, the Vagabond was a modest success and the first of what has come to



Short-wing Piper fly-in in Wenatchee, Washington.



be known as the short-wing Pipers, or SWP for short.

A more lavishly equipped Vagabond, called the PA-17, came out the next year, with bungees in the landing gear and a 65-hp Continental replacing the earlier Lycoming. By 1949, Piper decided to remake the Vag, as it's now affectionately called, into a four-place mount; with a Lycoming O-235 of 115 hp, it became the PA-16 Clipper. Pan American World Airways nixed the name, so by 1950, Piper recast the model as the PA-20 Pacer.

Pacers departed from Vagabond and Clipper practice in many ways, with flaps (save for the earliest versions), yokes instead of sticks, an electrical system, and more power. At first you could have the 115-hp engine, but soon a 125-hp O-290 Lycoming came aboard, and then a 135-hp version was introduced.

Piper unleashed the sales floodgates with the daring (if not darling) tricycle-gear PA-22 Tri-Pacer in 1951. Originally sold as an option to the 135-hp Pacer, it quickly overtook the taildragger in

sales and eventually forced the PA-20's extinction. A Lycoming O-320-powered version of the Tri-Pacer arrived in 1955, packing 150 hp, and three years later, it was supplemented with a 160-hp version. In all, Piper made about 1,000 Pacers through 1954 but a whopping 8,000 Tri-Pacers over the model's 10-year run. Call them flying milk stools if you want, but the Tri-Pacer was an instant and enduring success.

Though Tri-Pacers dominate, then as now, one cannot discuss short-wing Pipers without mentioning the Colt—an airplane Piper somewhat hastily pulled together in the late 1950s, seeking an inexpensive and effective trainer. It's basically a Tri-Pacer sans flaps, with one of the two 18-gallon wing tanks and a 115-hp Lycoming O-235. Thanks to light weight, it's a decent performer. More than 2,000 were built through 1963.

Two hours of such Piper-history musings brings us to the first fuel stop, at Grand Island, Nebraska. Once on the ramp, we taxi in behind a pair of "follow me" carts, each driver motioning enthu-

siastically for our business. Even from the one who doesn't cheer loud enough to get the fuel sale, we receive a friendly wave and a smile. At Grand Island, Tom Ellis takes on a passenger, Norm Banek, who elects to leave his Colt at home. In fairness to the Colt and its owner, the rest of the group appears relieved to be free of the trainer's limited range.

The interplay among the SWPC members at Grand Island proves illuminating. Richert's manner is militarily precise, where the others are far more laid back. Moreover, Richert's fanaticism for maintaining the Tri-Pacer looms large over the group. He explains after some ribbing about fueling the airplane himself: "It's not fanaticism, it's just discipline."

He kindly offers me the left seat for the first PA-22 stick time I've had in a long while. Full of fuel, two of us, and a back seat nearly overflowing with baggage, the Tri-Pacer is within 50 pounds of the 2,000-pound maximum gross weight. It's a cool morning and Grand Island's 1,846-foot elevation fails to tax the airplane, so the takeoff roll proves

brisk, and the climb, at 74 knots indicated and 500 fpm, does not disappoint.

Though it's been widely overused in describing aircraft, the term "honest" still is the most accurate with the Tri-Pacer. Reasonably light in control forces and fairly well-harmonized, it's a docile and predictable accomplice. In no time, I become accustomed to the overhead trim handle—it looks like a 1950s-era automobile window crank because it is—and the big oval yoke. I tend to overwork the rudder, though, which surely sends Richert's brow to furrowing, though he's too much the gentleman to issue comment.

Our next destination, still in Nebraska: Gordon Municipal. On the all but deserted airport, the manager-cum-lineman



cheerfully fills the Tri-Pacers that can use autogas with the 94-octane "good stuff" for a princely \$1.50 a gallon. When one of us asks for change for the soda machine, he hands us the contents of his pocket, pushing away paper money with an "aw, don't worry about it."

It's a deal that Tri-Pacer owners can appreciate. Let's not call them cheap, but perhaps one of the biggest draws of the breed concerns price. Indeed, for generally less money than a comparable-year Cessna 172, you get an airplane with similar performance and utility, and with all the charm and nostalgia that come with tube-and-fabric construction. Modern covering materials offer long life and excellent weather durability, and many of the short-wing elite





staunchly defend fabric as lighter and quieter than metal. (In fact, mention the few metalized short-wing Pipers around and the hard-core types will quickly change the subject to health-care reform or earthquakes in Chile.)

According to the *Aircraft Bluebook—Price Digest*, a 1956 PA-22-150 sells for about \$14,000 retail, where the same-year Skyhawk will supposedly fetch \$17,500. For a 1960 160-hp Tri-Pacer, that retail figure climbs to \$15,250, compared to \$18,500 for the Cessna of that vintage. Note, too, that you're buying a nearly bulletproof four-cylinder Lycoming in the Pipers, against the more expensive Continental O-300 six-banger in the 172s of that vintage. And the Colt, at \$11,750 for a 1961 model, checks in 20 percent

altitude air traffic control would like you to remain at or above—and we head on to Spearfish. We refuel more frequently than strictly necessary—the legs are under three hours—in part to keep ourselves fresh. But it's also to accommodate myriad social obligations because the short-wing Piper tribe tends toward the gregarious. With ever-waning alacrity—groundspeed falls steadily all day to between 85 and 90 knots—our flight aims in the general direction of our overnight stay in Billings, Montana.

In Billings, our group of three meets three more SWPs, two Tri-Pacers (of Virgil and Jean Sloan and Bob and Eleanor Mills), and the Pacer of Dick and Karen Zukowitz. Not more than an hour after we arrive, a storm whips



"Converted from Tri-Pacer" Pacer of Jack Bench (top) earned the Best Modification Award at the SWPC convention. Wayne Richert (above) and his Tri-Pacer (left) took home honors for Best Tri-Pacer, and Chuck Davey's Colt (below) landed the Best Colt prize.



below a Cessna 150 of the same year.

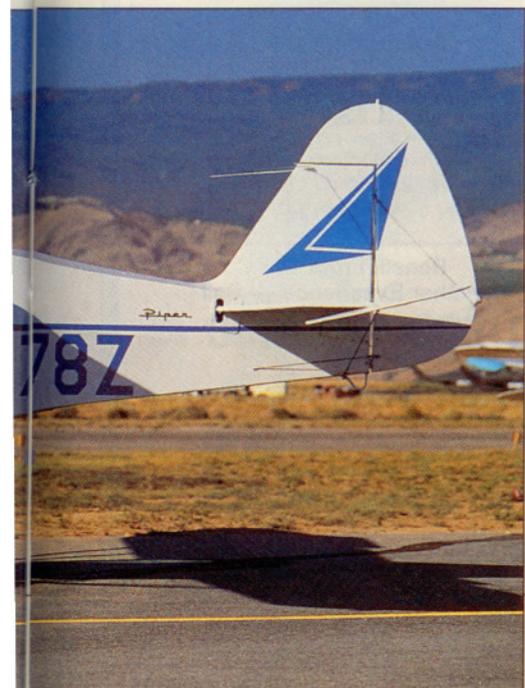
Although price indeed plays a part in Tri-Pacer ownership, it's clear to me, as the group makes for Mt. Rushmore and the next stop at Spearfish, South Dakota, that Richert spares no expense (in money or energy, though you get the idea it's truly a labor of love) keeping N2381P perfect. This is his second SWP, his first was a Colt that he bought in July 1983, restored from January to August 1985, and sold in 1992. That Colt won the SWPC Grand Champion Award in 1988 and Best Colt awards every year from 1989 to 1992. He purchased the Tri-Pacer in 1991 after a lengthy and superlative restoration by Noel Gouldsmith. Others in the group hint that the value of Richert's airplane is probably on the far side of \$25,000.

We complete a somewhat uneventful few circuits of Mt. Rushmore—it looks awfully small from 7,700 feet msl, the

through, shutting down power in parts of town and causing airplanes to struggle against tiedown ropes. At dinner, the pilots glance frequently out the window, watching the light show and the whipping of the trees. Afterward, several return to the airport to double-check tiedowns.

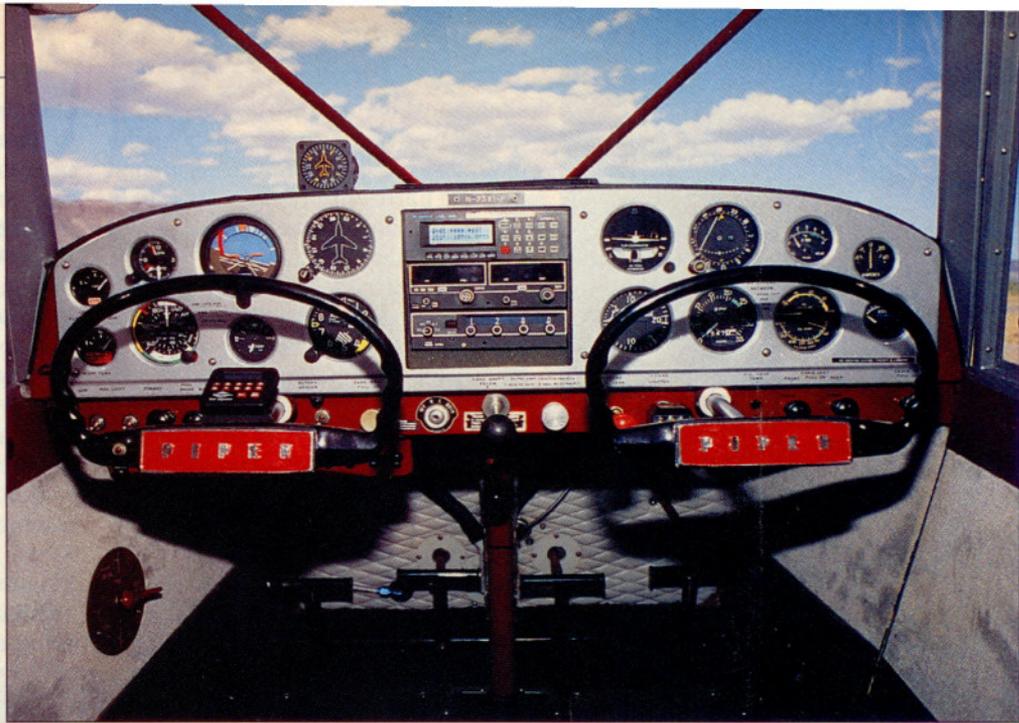
The next morning, all the short-wing Pipers are cocked 30 degrees in their moorings, weathervaned into the wind. A local Cessna 172 isn't so lucky; it ended up on its back from the winds. The Pacer owner discovers a leaky fuel strainer gasket, and the group pitches together to find the fix.

Now with six SWPs in tow, the group heads on toward Helena, Montana. We do our best to keep the cruising altitudes



low enough so that we don't spend all day climbing—a distinct possibility in a heavily loaded 150-hp airplane—and so that the ever increasing headwinds don't chip away too harmfully at our progress. Tri-Pacer savvy includes allowing the airplane to drift up with the air currents and trying to maintain reasonable airspeed in the downdrafts; it's a challenge all but forgotten to this Mooney driver.

Eventually, we make it to Helena and stop for fuel at Tim Beck's neat-as-a-pin fixed-base operation. His is an interesting story: Tired of paying top dollar for fuel, he opened his own self-serve facility—we pay \$1.65 a gallon for 100LL. Attached to his hangar is a good size pilots' lounge with bunk beds, showers, and a well-stocked refrigerator. Beck himself herds Tri-Pacers and drags around the fuel hose. Though he flies a Glasair III for fun, he's distinctly amused by the half-dozen rag-wing Pipers nosed around the pump. He's not alone: At every stop, fellow pilots



The low-slung panel in early PA-22s still allows for sufficient avionics and instruments.

grin and recollect their own Tri-Pacer (or Pacer or Colt) experiences.

Although the Tri-Pacer is well known for its Cessna 172-beating cruise speeds—compared to the early Skyhawks, the PA-22 is slightly speedier and has better payload—it's not renowned as a climber. That's something I learned

firsthand coming out of Helena. Crawling out toward Bozeman Pass, Richert again in the right seat, I pull a Mooney-pilot bonehead move. I aim the airplane right at the next waypoint and, coincidentally, at the downwind slope of the western ridge line. Predictably, our climb goes from nothing special to

nothing flat and then to a steady 300-fpm sink. Noting that we were definitely not going to make the end of the pass, I suddenly remember something from sailplane training and point the airplane at the other ridge line. Finally, with a bit of help from the orographic flow, we make our 1,000-foot margin over the top of the pass. I turn over my left hand to show Richert the sweat gathered there. With that, we continue uneventfully toward Kellogg, Idaho.

Kellogg's approach to Runway 25 is somewhat truncated by terrain to the north and south and the presence of a smokestack—*right on downwind*—that seems to stretch to the tropopause. I take the opportunity to make a short, steep approach and see if the Tri-Pacer's legendary sink rate will help out. Sure enough but, as many PA-22 pilots before me have learned, it's simply too easy to run out of energy in the flare. With airspeed decaying rapidly, the nose up, I luck out and find the runway right there to break the fall. While rolling out and reaching under the panel for the single brake lever, I notice Richert begin breathing again—some discipline, that guy.

From Kellogg on to Wenatchee, it's all quite literally downhill, a fact that brings

a new lightness to the faces of our pilots and passengers. High terrain and Tri-Pacers don't always mix well, and we are all glad to have the eastern Washington plateau, ground wrinkled like a rug behind the rocking chair, at our feet.

In no time, it seems, we arrive in Wenatchee, just under 14 hours by the tachometer from Olathe. At Pangborn Memorial, we see some 40 short-wing Pipers have beat us there.

Walking around the flight line at Wenatchee, SWPC President Steve Marsh fills me in on the history of just about each airplane—he claims to have photos of nearly every short-wing Piper built. Not just of each type, but *of each airplane*. Marsh points out various modifications, chats about the wing strut problems (corrosion in the forked fittings have resulted in airworthiness directives, but parts are plentiful), and offers a few tips on buying in. (Specifically, look for good fabric and

Lycomings with the larger valves, and beware of parts-bin specials, airplanes pieced together from the boneyard.)

Marsh also points out that you can thumb through the parts catalogs—the biggest of which comes from Univair in Aurora, Colorado—and find bigger engines for the Pacers and upgrades to larger mills for the Tri-Pacers. (Needing to swing a long propeller, the 180-hp upgrade isn't available to Tri-Pacer drivers.) Short-wing Piper owners rate Univair highly for parts support. And by the same token, SWPC members rate the organization highly, citing it as one of the most valuable resources they know. With membership, you get a copy of the excellent *Short Wing Piper News* every other month.

In the end, Richert's assessment of the more than 117 aircraft gathered for the SWPC event is kind. He comments that in the recent past, the number of neglected Tri-Pacers has diminished and some lovely restorations have been completed. Still, Richert had nothing to worry about: The SWPC awarded him a trophy for the best Tri-Pacer of 1994, which will have to find room on the mantle next to all the trophies from the Colt—proof of what you can do with a short-wing Piper, tender loving care, and discipline. □

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