

The Piaggio Royal Gull

Sky-wide and handsome

The CEO of seaplanes

By Mark Huber



Some



he 1957 magazine advertisement painted an idyllic picture of the unusual and elegant Italian-built, twin-engine, and gull-winged amphibian: "Here's a working ship that's specially designed for the man who's going places. Be he an air-minded executive, aerial survey, or company pilot, he'll go 'sky-wide and handsome' in the exciting new Royal Gull." ★ Francis Trecker, the Milwaukee machine tool magnate, was one of those "sky-minded executives." Although not a pilot himself, he was the man who brought the twin-engine, five-seat Piaggio Royal Gull pusher to the United States and built an organization to assemble, equip, market, sell, and support it. Trecker saw the airplane's primary market as his well-heeled colleagues who owned wilderness lake cabins. Between 1956 and 1962, Trecker's Royal Aircraft Corporation and its 35 employees imported and sold almost 30 of the 6,000-pound ships, slightly less than half of its total production. Versions sold by Trecker commanded prices of \$79,000 to \$89,000, an astronomical sum for such an airplane in those days. People paid it gladly. ★ The airplane, designated the P-136 (with various marketing superlative prefixes and alphanumeric sub-designations assigned as it morphed over almost 30 years), continues to be spoken of enthusiastically by those who flew it and the lucky few who still pilot the half-dozen that are still flyable in this country today. The Gull is to piston amphibian aficionados what the 1953 Silver Dawn convertible is to Rolls-Royce collectors: coveted, stylish, rare, rugged—and expensive. Indeed, the overstuffed leather seats and durable cabin hardware give the

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FIZER

flavor of a hand-worked body by England's legendary coach builder, Molinar Park Ward. The current asking price for a good specimen hovers around \$400,000, and direct operating costs exceed \$300 an hour.

"It's a phenomenal workhorse, the C-130 of amphib," says Lance McAfee, who has flown one since 1987 and used it to supply the treasure hunting ship *Arctic Explorer*. Sidney Hendricks owned three Gulls over 20 years, accumulating more than 1,000 hours in them commuting between his home in California and a mountain lake cabin in British Columbia. "It's a fabulous airplane," he says.

As a boy, DC-9 captain and airshow performer John Mohr remembers seeing his first Gull at his father's seaplane base on Minnesota's Boundary Waters. The aircraft made quite an impression; today he owns two of them. Dr. Forrest Bird fell so completely in love with the Gull that he devised numerous modifications for it and holds more than a dozen supplemental type certificates for the airplane.

(One is for something very useful on this large airplane—reversing propellers. They make docking and parking a snap.) Lloyd Anderson, one of the five original mechanics Trecker hired to assemble the



Graceful Italian lines adorn even the most prosaic components, such as this sponson. The Gull weighs 1,000 pounds more than a Grumman Widgeon.

Gull in 1955, still has a cabinet full of related memorabilia. Thirty-eight years after he last turned a wrench on one, he still speaks almost reverently about the Gull.

The airplane did not always enjoy such a cult of personality. The Gull was introduced to the world a year after it first flew at the 1949 Paris Airshow. The market's reaction was considerably cooler. In its original incarnation, a pair of rear-facing 215-horsepower flathead Franklins sat above the wings, yielding a top speed of 181 miles per hour; that is, if you could ever get it off the water. In calm or glassy water, the original Gull rode like a saddled dolphin. The step was placed to handle ocean chop, not tranquil mountain lakes. (Trecker would eventually move the step aft 18 inches, solving the prob-

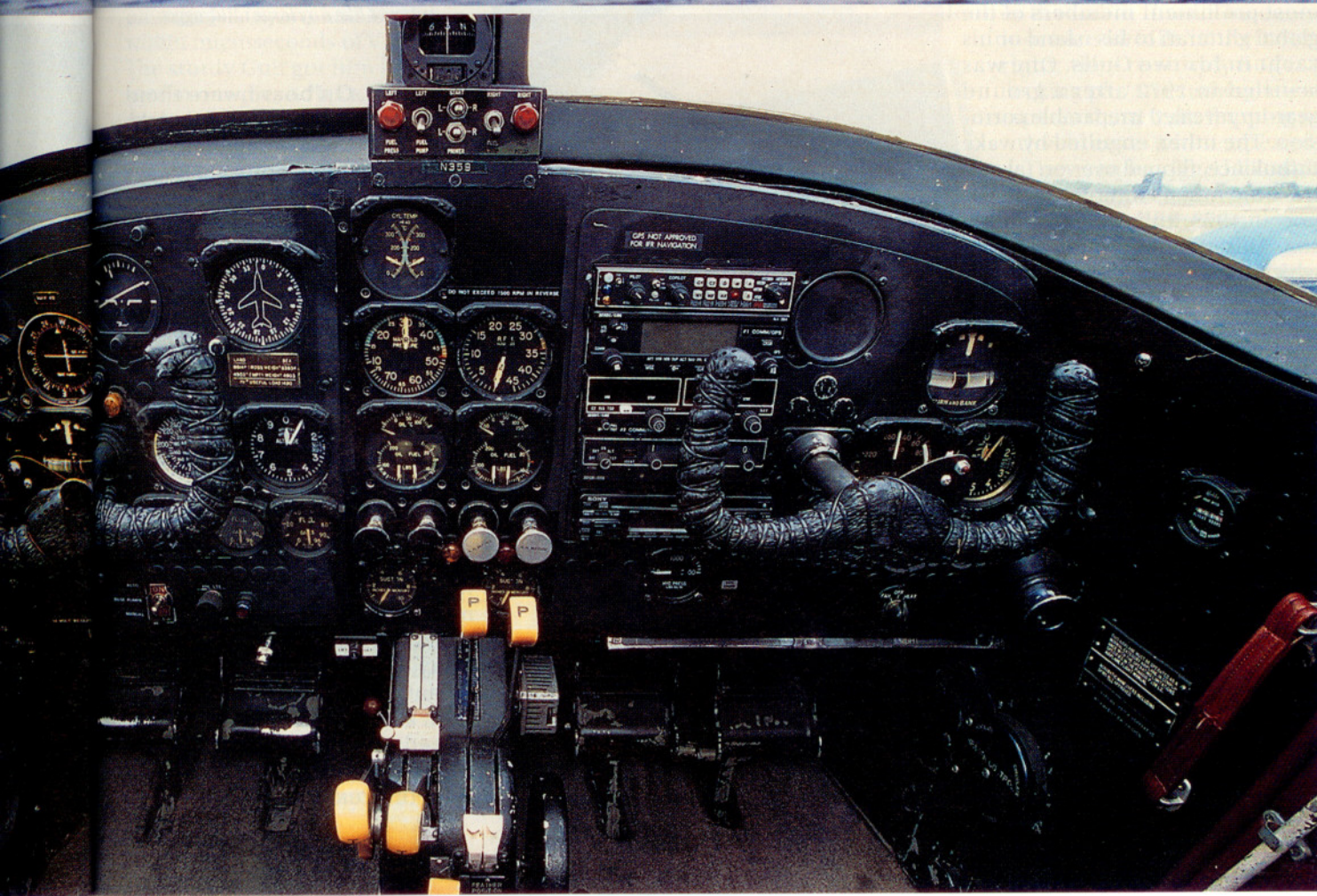
lem.) Rinaldo Piaggio had been building flying boats and seaplanes since 1915, but the consensus seemed to be that this latest model was not the firm's best work.

The Italian government ordered the first batch of 15 airplanes and over the years would buy 19 more before the last one, number 63, rolled off the line in 1967 at Piaggio's Finale Ligure plant. As with any government order that intersects an airframe, the results were predictable: weight gain. With a full load the Gull had about two hours' endurance. Hardly a desirable characteristic in what was then marketed as a coastal patrol and search-and-rescue aircraft. Modifications over the years would make the Gull a much more capable airplane. Eventually, at Trecker's suggestion, a pair of supercharged 340-horsepower Lycoming GSO-480-A1A6s were mated where once the Franklins slouched. So powered, the Gull's 6,000-pound heft would leap out of the water after a run of only 14 seconds. Dave Bardeau, a Florida aircraft broker who spent two decades flying seaplanes in Canada, says of the Gull, "This is the only amphibian I know of that gets off the water almost as fast as it gets off the ground."

The spacious cabin sat five in regal style. (Anyone who stands over six feet and weighs more than 200 pounds, and has tried to wedge himself into the front of a Lake amphibian, appreciates just how much cabin space this airplane has.) And royalty, official and otherwise, were among the airplane's first customers. Egypt's King Farouk bought one in 1949 and used it for cavorting around the South of France, while, back home in Alexandria, a young army officer named Nasser was successfully planning His Majesty's demise.

The high and low points of the life of Aristotle Onassis, the late Greek shipping tycoon, were inexorably intertwined with the two Gulls he owned. He bought the first in the 1950s and used it all over Europe for his assignations with opera diva Maria Callas and, later, to squire Jackie Kennedy to his island retreat, Skor-







pios. Over the course of three decades, Onassis transported the most prominent members of the global glitterati to his island or his yacht in his two Gulls. One was scuttled in 1972 after a ground gear-up revealed irreparable corrosion. The other, engulfed by wake turbulence, flipped over on takeoff from the Athens International Airport in 1973, killing Onassis' only son, Alexander—an incident from which the grief-stricken billionaire would never recover.

However, the airplane's heritage is much more than lifestyles of the Gull and famous. In 1957 Bob Law acquired a pair of P136L-1s (275-hp a side) for \$75,000 each from Trecker and subjected them to aerodynamic liposuction. He removed the five-place interior, one of the two 96-gallon centerline fuel tanks, and the landing gear. He then installed an interior using eight old Cessna seats. Lake Tahoe Airlines was born, providing hourly service from Law's Sausalito seaplane base near San Francisco to Lake Tahoe one-way for \$19.50. The 150-mile flight took an hour in the Gull at 160 mph and burned 22 gph. Over the mountains by car, the trip would eat up half a day.



Thirty years later, Lance McAfee chose the Gull to be a supply aircraft for the Central America Project, a successful gold salvage effort. The side-wheeler ship *Central America* went down 200 miles off the North Carolina coast during a hurricane in

In the air, the gull wing makes the aircraft incredibly stable. On land, the Gull behaves like any large taildragger.

the 1850s. On board were thousands of *pounds* of California gold. Much of the recovered booty was recently auctioned off at Sotheby's in New York.

McAfee regularly flew a P136L-1, serial number 220, to the anchored dig ship *Arctic Explorer* on resupply missions between 1988 and 1992 and would land it in the middle of the ocean. "The Gull was the perfect aircraft for the mission profile," according to McAfee. "It performed so many different roles: parachuting personnel and materiel, air drop, and snagging cargo for pickup using a tow-banner type mechanism." McAfee had found the airplane in Texas; prior to that it had worked in Alaska. "I needed something with unquestionable endurance." On one harrowing day, 200 miles out to sea, that endurance was put to the test.

Right at the minimum controllable airspeed, a supply drop went bad. Some of the material went through one of the rear-facing props and



cracked the hub. Because of the cracked hub, it wouldn't feather, oil pressure fell to zero, and McAfee came within microseconds of V_{MC} rollover. The sturdy Gull got him back to dry land in one piece. "It's a good, honest airplane," he says with more than just a little gratitude.

And it's a *big* and somewhat complicated airplane. This becomes apparent during the preflight of N359, serial number 224, a P136L-2, on the ramp in Winter Haven, Florida.

You crawl into the second baggage compartment, through a massive cargo door aft of the beefy main spar and the two big centerline fuel tanks, to sump them. You have to remove a cargo floor panel to get at the sumps. A lifetime supply of Pinot Grigio would easily fit in here. Smugglers had to love this airplane. A "small" baggage compartment is accessible aft of the rear seat in front of the fuel tanks. It's 10 cubic feet and holds up to 120 pounds. To get fuel into the airplane and check the wet oil sumps, you have to climb

The pusher configuration protects the props from spray and debris. The main gear only partially retract into the fuselage.



up on top of the big gull wing. Don't do this in your two-piece Versace.

The hull is divided into six main compartments, and all must be checked and drained before takeoff. Electric marine bilge pumps installed in some of the remaining Gulls makes short work of any ingested water. There also is a built-in hand pump

located between the copilot's seat and the door sill, accessible through a door in the cabin floor. The cabin doors are airfoils in their own right; they're simply huge. A locking pin/strut arrangement spares them from flapping in the breeze when opened. They can be rigged like this during water taxi.

Hydraulic fluid and pressure gauges are easily visible next to the landing gear boot on the port side of the airplane. The hydraulic system operates the landing gear, large split wing flaps, tailwheel unlocking cylinder, and the brakes.

A check valve prevents the loss of brake pressure should a leak occur in the main hydraulic system. A hand pump between the crew seats can be used to extend the landing gear, and a reserve fluid supply allows the gear and the flaps to be lowered—once.

Most Gulls have a small telltale crinkle along the fuselage forward of the wing root, visible testament to a hard water landing, according to Sid Hendricks. It does not affect the aircraft's structural integrity.



Engine start is somewhat reminiscent of a piston radial engine, but not overly complicated. The single-toggle primer works for both engines and is located on the left side of the instrument panel. There are four toggle ignition switches, one for each magneto, and they are located on the easy-to-read overhead panel. The water rudder control is up there as

well, sort of a metal bungee arrangement that often takes a little two-handed coaxing. There is a single switch for both 24-volt starters. The Gull takes two 12-volt batteries. Right mag, boost pumps, starter, mixture full rich—and it stays there until engine shutdown thanks to the automatic mixture controls for the pressure carburetors. When fuel pressure

A big, beamy cockpit and cabin are Gull trademarks. With its relatively high wing-loading and cushy ride, the Gull quickly acquired a reputation as a high-class execu-barge.

reaches 13 psi, the pumps come off. Runup is at 2,200 rpm. Following checks, the supercharged engines need to be retarded slowly. "You can't cowboy those (geared) engines," warns Hendricks.

On land, the Gull behaves pretty much like any other big taildragger; line up on the centerline, lock the tailwheel, rudder comes alive at 35 mph IAS, V_2 is 90.

In the air, because pilots sit so far ahead of the center of gravity, they will notice a lot of adverse yaw. "You get going opposite, almost like in a helicopter," explains Mohr.

But the gull wing makes the aircraft incredibly stable. You can easily fly this airplane in instrument conditions without an autopilot. Displace the controls and let go. It rolls right back to straight and level.

On water, it has no equal. It weighs 1,000 pounds more than a Grumman Widgeon and, because of the modified step, doesn't porpoise like one at all.



But a water run in a Gull is a busy, if abrupt, time. Drop half flaps and retract the recalcitrant water rudder and then keep the right float out of the water with full left aileron while advancing the throttles. Rear-mounting the props protects them from water spray, but it also causes the airplane to massively torque right, and the right float can get buried in a blink. Mohr recommends that Gull pilots start their water rolls with a right crosswind or at least enough wind to hold the aileron. Acceleration onto the step is brisk at 75 mph, and then *firm* back-pressure is required to

snap it off the water. Best rate of climb is 1,180 fpm at 102 mph and a cruise climb power setting of 2,850 rpm.

Landing is almost anticlimactic. Retard the throttles to 20 inches of manifold pressure and pitch for 110 mph on base and touchdown at 80 while gradually increasing back-pressure. (Gulls without the modified step require a lot of forward yoke once on the water on landing.) Those doing a lot of water work in a Gull are well-advised to keep a sharp eye on the cylinder head temps, especially on the L-2s which suffer from undersized oil coolers.

1957 Trecker/Piaggio Royal Gull, P136L-2

Price new	\$89,900
Estimated used price	\$300,000-\$400,000
Engines	Lycoming GSO-480-A1A6, geared, supercharged
Propellers	Hartzell HC-83X20-2CL/L8433, three-blade
Empty weight	4,652 lb
Useful load	1,948 lb
MTOW	6,600
Maximum Cruising Speed	208 mph
@ 70% power	190 mph
Stall speed (flaps)	72 mph
Service ceiling	25,500 ft
Single-engine ceiling	11,800
Range @ 50% power	900 nm

During the course of an afternoon's training, the engines may have to be shut down for a few minutes and allowed to cool.

And that's quite all right. Fling open the Gull's big doors, take in a little breeze, and slide back into those overstuffed leather seats as you bob peacefully on the water. Check out the smile on the pilot sitting next to you. It's "sky-wide and handsome." □

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