classic revived

New life for old Piper Navajos

BY THOMAS A. HORNE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FIZER

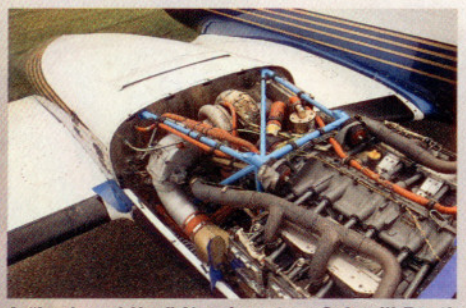
The glory days of the big-cabin piston twins may have peaked in the 1970s, but fans of the Piper Navajo can still buy a like-new Chieftain or C/R. Mike Jones Aircraft Sales, Inc., located in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, offers its "Lock and Key" series of heavily upgraded Navajos for $995,000 to $1.05 million. That may sound like a lot to pay for a 30-plus-year-old twin—and it is—but Jones' refurbishments make you think you're looking at a brand-new airplane.

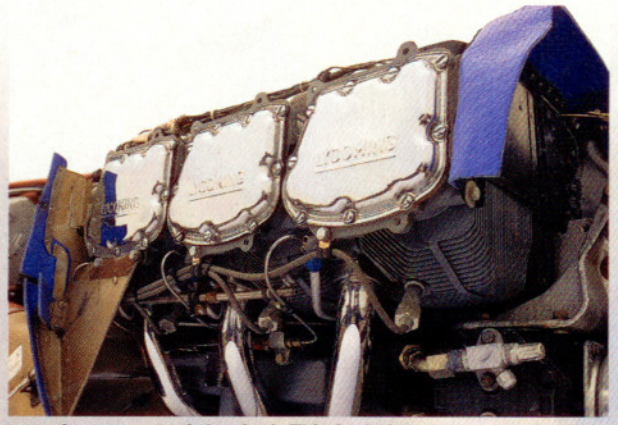
For those unfamiliar with the Navajo Chieftains or C/Rs (these are the only models Jones upgrades), here's a brutally brief synopsis of their attributes. The Chieftain, introduced in 1973 and in production to 1984, comes with counter-rotating 350-horsepower Lycoming TIO-540 engines. It can cruise at 205 knots and has a maximum range of some 855 nautical miles. With five huge side windows, maximum seating for 10, and a four-foot, two-inch wide, 12-foot, six-inch-long cabin, it's an all-time passenger favorite.

The C/R models were built from 1976 to 1982. They came with counter-rotating 325-horsepower Lycoming TIO-540 engines. Slightly smaller, lighter, and two feet shorter than the Chieftain, the Navajo could cruise at 196 knots or so, and still had a respectable cabin size.

Jones inventories two to three Navajos at a time, then asks for a $50,000 deposit to get a "Lock and Key" transformation underway. The first move is to Colemill Enterprises at the Cornelia Fort Airpark in Nashville, Tennessee. There, the old engines are pulled, then either overhauled or replaced with factory new engines, your choice (overhauling gives you the $995,000 price tag). Then the engines are given the Colemill Panther conversion. This includes Hartzell four-blade, Q-tip propellers, new spinners, new prop governors and synchrophasers, a Shadin digital fuel management computer, new fuel and oil lines, new Lord mounts, new vacuum pumps, and winglets. The C/R's 325-horsepower engines are replaced with the 350-horsepower engines. The engines are also given new turbochargers, wastegates, starters, and alternators. A new cowling design makes for better engine cooling, allows takeoffs with cowl flaps closed under all but the hottest conditions, and boosts climb speeds from the usual 125 knots to 140 knots.

Attention to interior detail is another hallmark of the Mike Jones conversions. Seats and sidewalls are done up in leather, all chrome parts are stripped and replated (even the cupholders), and the original galley/refreshment center cabinetry is refinished.





A "Lock and Key" Navajo gets a Colemill Panther conversion as part of the deal. This includes new or overhauled engines, plus new Q-tip propellers, prop governors, engine mounts, winglets, and more.

This deluxe treatment doesn't end there. New landing-gear power packs and actuators are installed, as are new fuel selector valves, fuel shutoff valves, and crossfeed valves. Same deal with the fuel tanks (these come with a five-year warranty), fuel boost pumps, flap and cowl flap motors, autopilot servos, air conditioning system, and much, much more.

The instrument panel is also given a total makeover. The old avionics are yanked, and then replaced with a Garmin GNS 430/530 combination and an Avidyne FlightMax EX500 multifunction display with Jeppesen CMax electronic charts, XM WX's datalink weather, and a new L-3 WX-500 Stormscope. A Honeywell Bendix/King KFC 200 or S-Tec 65 autopilot/flight director with altitude preselect is also standard equipment. All-new rocker and other instrument-panel and interior switches are installed—and color-coded by system.

With loads of interior cabin volume and baggage space, the Navajos are perhaps the most spacious of the cabin-class piston twins.

The instrument panel fast-forwards to the 21st century, with Garmin GNS 530/430 GPS/navcoms, an Avidyne FlightMax EX500 multifunction display, XM datalink weather, and your choice of either a Bendix/King KFC 200 or an S-Tec System 65 autopilot/flight director.

Airport Interiors of Smyrna, Tennessee, is another stop. There, a new leather interior replaces the original design and new carpet and windows are installed. The interior plastic is covered in leather, the cabinetry is completely refinished, and the seat rails and cup holders are chromed.

Jones has the airplanes taken up for shakedown flights to make sure all is working properly.

When Jones brought one of his Navajos to AOPA headquarters, I flew it for the photographs accompanying this article. It really was like flying a brand-new airplane, right down to the

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Then comes a paint job by Oxford Aviation in Oxford, Maine.

With all the performance mods, Jones says that his refurbished Navajos pick up 10 knots in cruise speed, and have better twin-engine and single-engine climb rates. His Chieftains will climb at 1,120 fpm on two engines, and 230 fpm on one; his C/Rs can climb at 1,220 and 255 fpm, respectively. IFR ranges are posted as 550 nm for both airplanes.

Before delivery to the customer, aroma of new leather. Although a ground-lover during the takeoff, the airplane performed as advertised and, thanks to that cavernous luxo interior, drew a lot of prospects and admiring gawkers at the AOPA Fly-In and Open House in June. People took special notice of the "big-airplane" features—the massive ramp presence, the large wing lockers (which can hold 300 pounds of baggage), the airstair door, and, of course, the interior dimensions.

It really does take you back to the days when Navajos ruled the air-taxi kingdom. Only now the equipment and upgrades give you the benefits of today's state-of-the-art flying. AOPA

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Links to additional information about Piper Navajos may be found on AOPA Online (www.aopa.org/pilot/links.shtml).