

AOPA
The Debonair
Sweepstakes

The inside job

Out with the old—interior

BY THOMAS A. HORNE

IT SEEMS LIKE YESTERDAY (September 2012) that we took delivery of what was then our creaky-but-serviceable Debonair. Now, its transformation is nearly complete. We put in a new windshield, tinted side windows, flap and aileron gap seals (thanks to D'Shannon Aviation), replaced the agglomeration-of-the-ages (sixties through nineties) instrument panel with the latest and greatest (thanks to principal contributors Aspen Avionics; Garmin; R.C. Allen; Alpha Systems; Electronics International; PS Engineering; CO Guardian; and master installer Santa Fe Aero Services), put in a new 70-amp alternator from National AirParts, then had KD Aviation paint Scheme Designer's inspired design treatment that features amusing decals bearing facts about the Deb in an often humorous vein. Then we put the airplane on display at EAA AirVenture. Whew, lotta work. And travel.

But now we're entering the home stretch. Immediately after AirVenture I flew the Debonair—now renumbered N75YR in honor of the upcoming seventy-fifth anniversary of AOPA's founding in 1939—from Oshkosh to Batavia, Ohio's Clermont County Airport. That's the home of Air Mod, perhaps the best of the interior shops in the entire world. "We're dedicated to keeping these old airplanes alive," says Air Mod President Dennis Wolter. "And this 50-year-old Debonair is a lot like plenty of airplanes we work on. It's had a lot of neglect and deferred maintenance over the years, it hasn't been kept clean, and corrosion is taking many of these old airplanes away from us. So we address all that—and believe me, it's a big, expensive job." Air Mod has been in business since 1973.

In the Debonair's case, any deferred maintenance is deferred no more. But as Wolters' crew dismantled the battered old interior it became clear that dirt was an issue. "Look, the glue for the side panels has turned to a tarry mess. And they used roofing shingles at one

point to shore up the sidewalls! That's all got to go," Wolter said. "And in the belly there was a thick layer of indistinguishable dirt, mixed with what I think was an anticorrosion treatment done years ago."

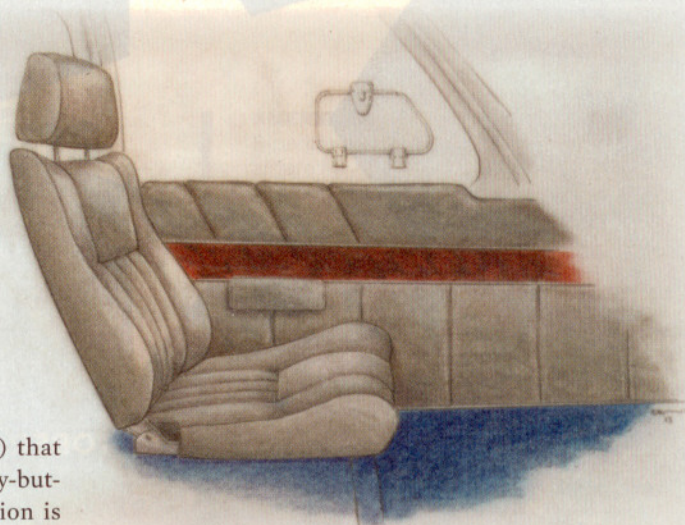
After the interior is cleaned, Air Mod will install a brand-new leather interior of its own design, complete with pilot and co-pilot headrests. There will be four-point restraint systems for the front seats, courtesy of B.A.S. Systems. For me, this will be a most welcome addition. Back in 1963 shoulder harnesses weren't required in light aircraft. So I have been flying the airplane for some 30 hours, feeling somehow naked with just a fraying, discolored lap belt that is probably original—holding me in a seat that has virtually no lumbar support. And a wafer-thin, dry-rotted seat cushion that wants to fuse your derriere to the metal below. That, too, will be set right.

The rear seat will be reupholstered as a single-bench design, in a nod to nostalgia—and the original design. The original headliner, which unceremoniously dropped down on me and a passenger in flight, will be replaced, and so will the carpets. When Air Mod is done with it, the interior will look orders of magnitude better than it did when it rolled off the factory floor back in 1963. And it will be safer, too.

All this will take about two months. As we go to press it's late August, so work is still in progress. But you'll receive this magazine—the October issue—in late September. This means that work will have finished by then, and any of you going to this year's AOPA Summit in Fort Worth will be able to see the completed interior on display there. In fact, almost all the restoration work will have been completed by then.

AN ARTIST'S

rendition of the new interior shows the Debonair with ergonomically correct leather seats, leather sidewalls, and Bubinga-wood trim. The belly of the beast (below) shows the original, asphalt-based protective coating—and a static line that will be secured with hose clamps. Current AOPA members are automatically eligible to win the Debonair Sweepstakes. For more information, visit the website (www.aopa.org/membership/sweeps.aspx).

ON THE
WEB

FOLLOW Tom Horne's sweepstakes blog (http://blog.aopa.org/sweepstakes_logbook/) for updates on the renovation, as well as related news.

So far, the reports from Air Mod have been good. No corrosion under all that gunk in the belly, for example. But a bulkhead in the tailcone will need to be inspected. A minor tail strike in the distant past has bent the bulkhead, and it needs to be checked for cracks. Here's hoping the answer is in the negative. Otherwise, it will mean repair or replacement of the bulkhead.

THE PERILS OF SITTING

Oil analyses for the Debonair's Continental IO-470 engine have turned up signs of elevated concentrations of iron, copper, chromium, nickel, and silicon. These are signs of potential wear at the cylinders, camshaft, and valve guides. The silicon is from dirt ingestion. The consensus of opinion is that these signs are consistent with an engine that has not been flown very much. From 2007, when the engine was overhauled, until 2012 the airplane flew approximately 140 hours. That's about 28 hours a year, which is not much. Then I come along and fly it across the country and back. In the process, all the deposits accumulated from the years of sitting are now abrading and showing up in the oil. Following oil analysis firm Blackstone Laboratories' recommendations, we'll be changing oil at 10-hour intervals for a while. An Airwolf spin-on oil filter will be installed (the Deb's engine has no filter, just a screen), and so will a Donaldson Company dry air filter, which should lower the silicon levels. The moral: fly often, people! And the longer the trip, the better.

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