

# CESSNA PILOTS ASSOCIATION

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# *Our Beloved "Songbird"*

*Jim Densmore, Jr.      Colorado Springs, CO*

*1956 Cessna 180      N6555A*



My very first, vague memories of flying are in my family's blue Cessna 195, N3009B, but circumstances forced Dad to sell his share in that wonderful old radial classic. That 195 is no longer flying. Poor girl, she sits in repose at a Travis Air Force Base museum. Dad purchased another airplane in February of 1960: the 180 my wife Linda and I still own. George Veith, our A&P at Cable Airport, called and said he had found the perfect airplane for us. He was right. The retired airline pilot who had bought the 180 from the factory had lost his medical, and his wife was having trouble flying it safely because she was so short. The old couple bought a Comanche with the \$10,000 Dad paid for the 180, and the dependable taildragger N6555A became a permanent member of our family.

Several trips stand out in my mind from our family's early years with the 180. One is our flight to the Calico Ghost Town. The logs say we'd owned the airplane for about a month. It was the first time I recall seeing the technique of dragging a strip before landing on it to assure its suitability for a landing. We dragged an area on the dry lake near town and then landed there. I was only four, but this simple, vital safety lesson still stands out in my mind today.

Comanche climbing the steep hill at the end of the short grass runway so that there would be more speed at the other end. We thought he'd tear his nosewheel right off at the bottom of the hill, but his departure was successful. And finally, Dad neglected to lean the mixture prior to takeoff. We still had room over the fence at the end, but no extra room. Dad's lesson was another early lesson learned for me too. The photo with the 180 in its original classic '56 paint scheme is from that trip. Yup, that's me, the little squirt.



On another early trip we enjoyed an overnight camping trip into Monache Meadows in the Sierras. This high altitude, one-way strip was memorable for several reasons. First, living in the Los Angeles area, my 4-year-old eyes had never seen standing water freeze overnight before. Second was the impressive sight of a

I was 8 years old when we moved to Southern California's San Fernando Valley, and our airplane moved from its previous home at Cable to the large Angels Aviation hangar on the east side of the Van Nuys Airport taxiway that previously had served as runway 8-26. Van Nuys was then easily the busiest airport in the world. This exciting hangar held a Bonanza ("N1CE"!) and two P-51D Mustangs in addition to our diminutive Cessna. My family managed to trade rides in the P-51s for flights in the 180. I thought how could anyone be interested in trading rides in the most amazing aircraft on the planet for a flight in our little jewel? But interested they were these two pilots who are now life-long friends of the family. I filed that lesson away too – pilots really like our airplane.

We began improving our airplane. In 1965, Mom and Dad decided that the much-faded factory paint had lived out its natural life. The original white, black and 50's era yellow was garish anyway. Mom and Dad repainted the airplane and it looked fantastic. The old 35 lb. dead-weight, dial-tunable Lear VHF radio was very difficult to use in the Van Nuys traffic environment, so Dad outfitted the airplane with a Narco Mk 12 in April 1966, and later a Mk 16. The Mk 16 was just recently removed to make room for a Garmin 250XL. (The FCC would no longer allow transmission on the Mk 16.) Somewhere along the line the Mk 12 was replaced as well - with a King Nav/Com.

While based at Van Nuys, my Mom decided to add to her glider experience and learn to fly power. She learned in the 180! Dad said he tracked her progress by the decreasing rate at which the tires were cycled through the retread shop. Mom and I flew together many times, and you can imagine the stares we got in those days when my 5'4" and very attractive (hey, Dad always said so!) mother was flying her little squirt around in a 180. It was great.

In 1966 Dad got a new job with the Department of Transportation in Washington, D.C. Of course, we shipped the cars and flew east in our airplane. Dad based the airplane for many years at the Manassas airport, and I learned to fly there (well, officially, anyway) in 152s. Then I checked out in a Citabria and then the 180. That done, I flew it occasionally, but never really became comfortable in it as circumstances kept me from flying it much. Dad worked in DOT and then the FAA for many years before retiring to Southern Maryland, relocating to St. Mary's County airport. Mom stopped flying it as PIC, but they flew regularly. During all those years I went to school, got a job, married Linda and began raising our three wonderful kids, dabbled in soaring and flying, and ended up in Colorado Springs in 1993; we still reside there.

In Colorado Springs I had the good fortune to hook up with High Flights Soaring Club at Meadow Lake airport, where I found my 50 hours of tailwheel time to be useful: they needed tow pilots. I checked out and started towing with the club's Super Cub. Flying it, and doing up to 30 landings in a day in crazy

crosswinds, fixed my confidence problem with the 180.

In the summer 2001, my two high school age daughters expressed a desire to tour a variety of east coast universities from New York to Virginia. It was the perfect GA mission. I called Dad – Could I borrow the airplane for two weeks? Dad was gracious with his aluminum mistress. We visited each college on the itinerary and several relatives as well. Linda, my wife, was hooked by the enormous flexibility and time saved. Can we have an airplane?

But I dragged my feet. There was no airplane that could come close to 55A in my eyes. I continued to fly with the soaring club and rented to travel on occasion. And then a most bittersweet moment arrived. After 50 great years of general aviation flying, Dad was experiencing a medical condition he felt disqualified him from flying as PIC. Would I be interested in having the airplane? You know the answer.

Friend and 310 owner, Eric Gustafson and I flew 55A home to Colorado in April of 2002 and I now base 55A at Meadow Lake (KFLY). We began a slow restoration that's still in progress. Our bird still sported its 1965 paint, or what was left of it, and that became the first order of business.

We quickly decided that the original factory paint pattern was appropriate for our 1956 model, duplicating the pattern present when Mom and Dad purchased it, but with more modern colors. My wife is much better at color selection than I, and in short order Linda and paint shop proprietor Gene Kear had arrived at the teal and blue selections you see pictured. Dad sent me two photos he still had of the airplane before they painted it so we could match the original pattern.

There are two significant departures from that original pattern. First, the wings had the big under- and over-wing N-numbers, which we did not apply. Secondly, I had a strong memory of the original black leading edges, and how short that had made the wings look. We decided the whole wing would be the chosen warm, off-white color. This choice doesn't duplicate the original for this airplane, but it is how some '56s originally appeared, and we like the look.

Finally, an eighth stripe, red in color, originally appeared on our 180's rudder above seven black stripes. As far as I know, only our '56 was adorned this way; every other one I've seen has only seven. In honor of this unusual feature of the original paint, we painted the eighth, top stripe blue and the remainder teal.



Gene hand-lettered the Cessna logo onto the wingtips. Finding on the cover of my original pilot operator handbook the Cessna emblem that appears in the down-swoop of teal just behind the entry doors, he also hand-painted those two emblems. They match perfectly the decals originally affixed there.

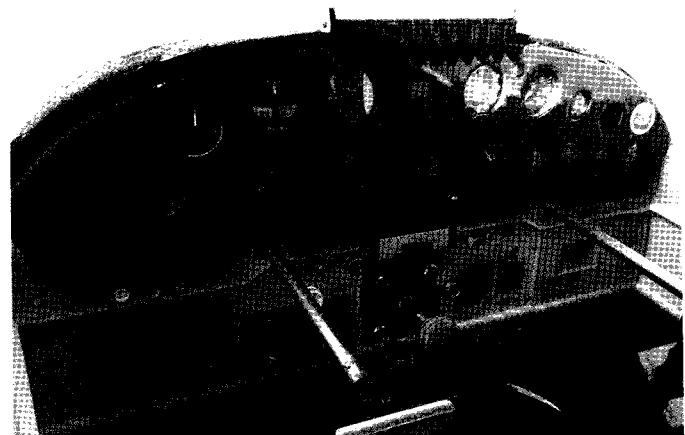
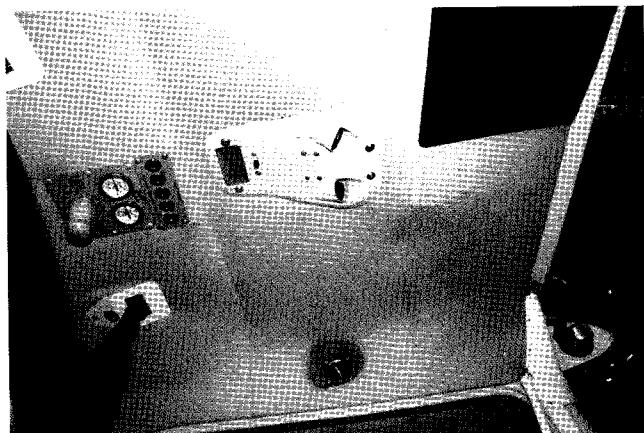
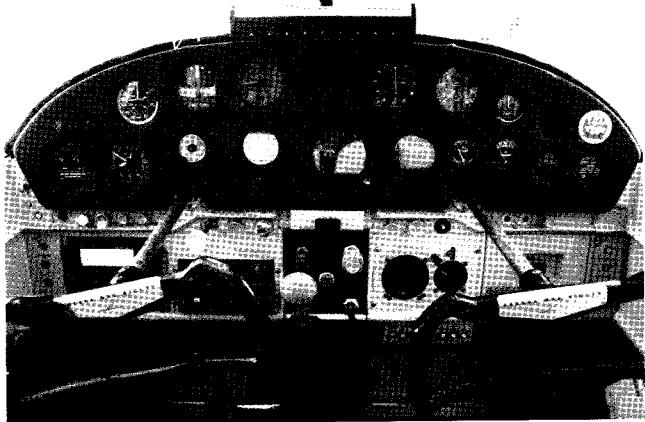
We are extremely pleased with the result. While being powerfully reminiscent of the original, stylized 1956 pattern, the colors are new and modern. It has the character we were looking for.

Our trusty O470K, 400 hours over TBO, started making metal in early 2005. I had three in college that year, so a new engine was not in the cards. Verlin Schauer and Craig Kloppenburg replaced it with an “-R”, a very clean engine rebuilt in 2001 and run to the 1500 hour TBO entirely by a Part 135 operation giving daily Grand Canyon tours. That engine is still giving superlative service at 2000 hours since rebuild. Craig also began working with me on the instrument panel; no major mods, just some cleanup and the installation of an avionics buss, a four-place intercom and eventually the Garmin and a completely indispensable JPI-700.

This year we realized we truly had waited far too long to address the dilapidated condition of our original interior. We finally did so by contracting with Mike and Kim Hughes at Parkland, CO for reupholstery. My wife again chose the colors. From our result it is easy to see how Mike and Kim have an Oshkosh winner in their portfolio; ours now looks as good.

In sum, we have a superb VFR, mountain flying machine in our family. We have made so many wonderful flights and gathered new friends and memories with it. I spent wondrous weeks in Vintage Camping at Airventure in 2007, 2009 and 2014, on each occasion introducing a different friend to the wonders of Oshkosh. I have spent quality time at the Blakesburg Antique fly-in twice. As a member and regional Director of the International Cessna 180/185 Club I participate regularly in their social and fly-in activities also.

I assure you that you'll have to pry the keys to this airplane from my cold, dead fingers. My Mom is so pleased at how much we enjoy our 180. If Dad's up there lookin' down, I know he also is gratified that his Songbird is still giving his family so much joy.



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