



EXPERIMENTER
FEATURE

FITTING — THE — SPORT PLANE — TO THE — MISSION

IT STARTS WITH A DEFINITION



BY BUDD DAVISSON

LET'S LOOK AT THE TITLE OF this article and disassemble it to establish some clarity. For instance, what are we defining as a sport plane and what is meant by mission? Let's look at the last first.

"Mission," brought down to the personal level, essentially means "what we hope to do with an airplane." Sounds simple on the surface, doesn't it? But is it? This could easily be a totally separate discussion because the concept of mission varies wildly from person to person and from situation to situation. The combinations and permutations are unlimited.

"Sport plane" is a little easier to define. However, sport could be in the eye of the beholder. People see different airplanes in different lights because of the way they use them. Do they see their airplane as A-to-B tools, or do they see them as a form of recreation? For all we know, a pilot could own a King Air or Cessna Citation and fly strictly for the fun of it. On the other extreme, their PA-12 Cruiser or RV-6 could be their daily commuter from their backyard strip to their job two towns over. It's a tool. However, for the purposes of this discussion, we're going to limit sport plane to the categories established by EAA for vintage aircraft: Antique, Classic, and Contemporary, which sets the age limit at December 31, 1970. However, in the years since 1970, many of the pre-'70 airplanes have continued in production (will the 172 ever be permanently retired?), so we're going to fudge a little and include some of those in the discussion.

SPORTY / AEROBATIC BONANZAS

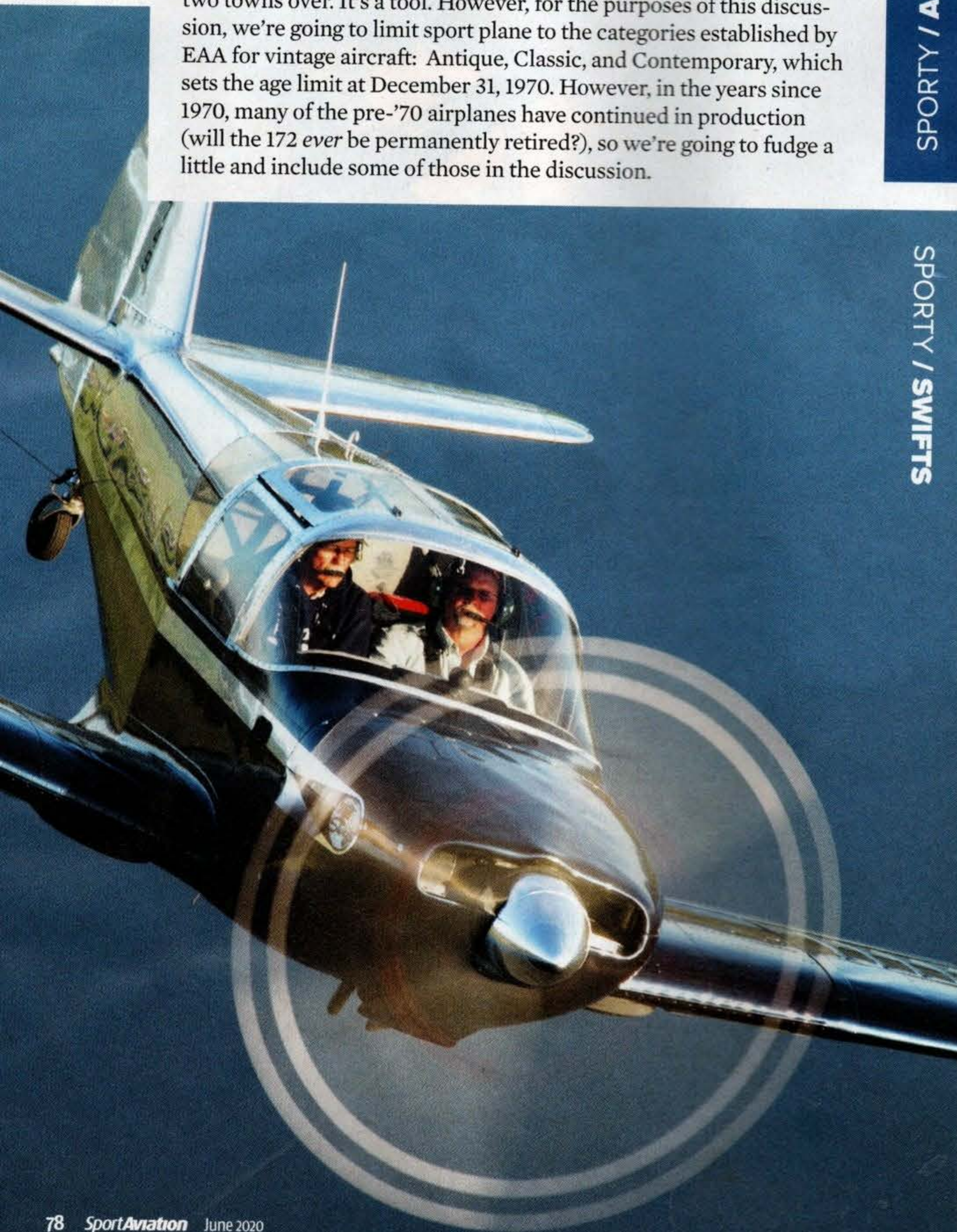


FINING THE MISSION: SOMETIMES IT'S EASY, SOMETIMES IT'S NOT

SPORTY / SWIFTS

In theory, we could define a person's mission for an airplane by simply asking, "Why do you want an airplane?" Note that the operative word there is "want" as opposed to "need." There is a huge difference. Then, to make it even more complicated, in some areas, such as available seats, the need is defined by how the family is going to factor into the buying decision. They add another dimension to the mission definition. The individual may want a single-seat hot rod, but that may or may not play well on the homefront. These factors, and their importance, could be put into a spreadsheet or list that each airplane can be judged against.

Incidentally, what we're about to do is apply cold, calculating logic to buying an airplane, which includes type, capabilities, and mission suitability. This is mentioned only because most people reading this know that the overriding factors in almost all airplane purchasing ventures are emotion and finances. Not pure logic. That having been said, for those who are in better control of their airplane emotions than the rest of us, we're going to present some factors and thoughts that might help in guiding the definition of the mission as it applies to sport-type aircraft. Then we'll go on to mention some flying machines that might fit the bill.





THE MAJOR FACTORS

Although there are a million large-to-small items that might make an airplane right (it's our favorite color) or wrong (horrible upholstery pattern turns us off), there are some basics that most agree must be considered. Some are obvious, some aren't.

1

NUMBER OF SEATS

How do your spouse and kids feel about flying? Remember, few four-place airplanes can actually carry four FAA-sized people and fill the tanks. Also, on average, four-place airplanes are usually flown with one or two people, and all seats are filled only occasionally.

2

AVERAGE TRIP LENGTH

Does your flying amount to hamburger runs, monthly trips to see grandma one state over, or are you constantly flying 500 miles or more? The vast majority of pilots take one long trip a year and a bunch of much shorter ones.

3

FREQUENCY OF FLIGHTS

How often do you realistically see yourself flying the airplane? The operative word there is "realistically." Cross-country airplanes are flown less often than hamburger runners.

4

TRIP PURPOSE

Is the trip just for giggles or for getting somewhere? This has a huge effect on the airplane to be selected.

5

SPEED

In most cases, speed is highly overrated. It's good for bragging rights more than practicality. The difference between a 160-mph airplane and a 200-mph bullet on a 500-mile trip is about 37 minutes; 120 mph versus 200 mph is 100 minutes; 120 versus 160 mph is 63 minutes. But, how many times do you fly 500 miles? In fact, if you're flying for the pure joy of it, speed should be of no importance. The longer it takes, within reason, the more fun you're having.

6

LOAD

How much do you want to carry? People and fuel weigh a lot. The more of each, the bigger the airplane. However, the bigger the airplane, the bigger the bills and financial responsibility.

7

AIRPORT STORAGE: INSIDE OR OUT?

What storage options do you have locally? Rag and tube airplanes suffer outside, no matter where they are parked. Aluminum airplanes much less so. Outside storage on the coasts or major cities (acid rain) is hard on every kind of flying machine, but hangars in those areas are usually expensive. It's a hard decision but has an effect on which airplane best fits your situation.

8

LOCAL ENVIRONMENT (ALTITUDE, ETC.)

Almost all airplanes are dogs when the airport is at 7,100 feet and it's 101 degrees in places like Flagstaff, Arizona. The same airplane on the same day in Sussex, New Jersey, at 449 feet and 85 degrees is a different airplane. Local environs often automatically limit the airplane choices that can be easily flown year-round.

9

ANOTHER SOLUTION:

MORE THAN ONE AIRPLANE — OR A PARTNER

There are few pilots who, at least in their own minds, couldn't justify owning two airplanes — one for cross-country work and another for pure fun. There are equally as few pilots who can justify two airplanes financially. However, two pilots (or more) can often join together and pool their resources to buy both ends of the airplane spectrum. A Bonanza and a Pitts. A Centurion and a Cub. The combinations are endless.

10

RENT UTILITY, BUY FUN?

Maybe the best approach, if limited to one airplane, which most of us are, is to buy/build/restore what we want for fun and rent an airplane when we actually need cross-country utility, assuming that our fun airplane isn't cross-country capable. There are very, very few locations in the country where you can rent a purely-for-fun airplane like a Pietenpol, Cub, Pitts, Waco, etc. However, there are 172s for rent on every street corner. Skylanes are rented on every other street corner, and almost all major cities now have an operation that is renting Cirruses (or is it Cirrae?). So, without the cost of owning an airplane, most levels of cross-country utility are readily available without all of the heartburn attached to ownership. Further, if the total cost of owning an airplane is divided by the average number of hours most pilots fly, the cost per hour is generally much higher than the cost of renting. Sad but true.



SPORTY / BELLANCAS

THE MAGIC COMBINATION: FUN AND FUNCTION

— Depending on your definition of both fun and function, there are some airplanes out there that deliver in both areas. One factor or another may be slightly dulled down — you can't carry as much as you'd like, it burns a little more fuel than you'd like, or it's not quite as fast as you'd like — but the combination gets the job done while satisfying your need for fun.

SPORTY FUNCTIONALITY

You don't have to dig very deeply into the massive population of general aviation airplanes to find a number that handle "differently" than the norm. They have quicker and sportier handling and combine perky looks that go well with the way they fly. At the same time, they are capable of serious cross-country work but may not offer room for your golf clubs and/or scuba gear. And, yes, before you tell us via email that we forgot to mention your favorite in the list below, we know, but we have only so much space.

SPORTY / RV



- **Grumman Americans**

Beginning with the little two-place AA-1 Yankee series in 1968, the Grumman Americans, including the four-place Tiger and Traveler, are sportier handling than their peer groups. Although the AA-1 is a little short on power, it is very long on fun. They feel like factory-built RVs.

- **Globe/Temco Swifts**

The Swift is definitely the sports car of the classic airplane set. Besides being one of the best looking, they are among the nicest handling. Today, many of the 85-/125-hp originals have been hot-rodded with 180 hp and 210 hp being common. Unfortunately, your golf clubs won't fit.

- **RVs/Thorps/Mustang IIs, Lancairs, Glasairs, Tailwinds, etc.**

Homebuilt aviation has some superb high-speed, cross-country airplanes of all descriptions. Uniformly they're limited to small baggage compartments, but all have fairly long legs and sporty handling. However, most are not designed to accommodate really big pilots or passengers without scrunching them together. Whether goofing around on Sunday morning or going somewhere, these airplanes do both jobs well.

- **Aerobatic Bonanzas**

Although not many were built, the aerobatic E33Bs and F33Cs are aerobats in businessperson clothing. And, yes, your golf clubs will fit, along with your in-laws and all their stuff.

- **Bellancas**

Since before World War II, Bellancas have set themselves apart in giving more performance than most planes for the horsepower and combining that with lighter controls and quicker response. It's the classic period's fun and function machine. Older Bellancas (triple-tail, 1940s-1950s) do well, and the later Vikings are out-and-out rocket ships. Aerial Corvettes, as it were.

- **SIAM-Marchetti S.F. 260s**

First flown in 1964, the Italian-built S.F.260 is a fast (more than 200 mph), aerobatic, four-place (back seat is weight-limited) ex-military trainer that has found a home in sport aviation. It looks great and flies even better! If you want your own fighter that won't bust the fuel budget, this is it! But, it ain't cheap.



CLASSY / STINSON (POSTWAR)

CLASSY FUNCTIONALITY

If blazing speed isn't a prerequisite but distance, fun, and comfort are, there are a bazillion (or close to it) aircraft produced in the '30s, '40s, and '50s that fit that bill nicely, even without getting into the really rare aircraft, like Spartan Executives.

It would be logical to ask, "Why spend as much, or more, money on a nicely restored old airplane than on a shiny newer one just to fly from A to B?" The answer could easily be, "If you have to ask that question, you won't understand the answer." There are folks who travel to get somewhere. And then there are folks who travel just to travel. To sport airplane folks, the trip is the destination. The destination is just an excuse to get in an airplane and go somewhere. Traveling behind a funky, old, round engine surrounded by a ridiculously roomy and luxurious art-deco cockpit is a trip in itself. It offers a form of serene therapy not to be found in a high-speed plastic bullet. Besides, to many, speed is highly overrated.

A word about that tailwheel thing: A lot of the classic, antique-looking flying machines that combine looks with functionality have the little wheel on the other end. Does that make them hard to fly? No, not after logging a little dual time. The taildragger component makes them that much more fun in which to taxi up to the gas pump. With any of the following airplanes, be prepared for onlookers to pester you at every fuel stop by asking questions and sharing experiences.

- **Cabin Wacos**

There are so many 1930s cabin Waco variations that they can't be summarized in this space, but they range from the early QDCs that have a stately approach to aviation to the late SREs that have barn-burner performance. All cabin Wacos share limousine-like interiors that make a cross-country at any speed a joy. They do burn more fuel than a 172, but that's the price of incredible comfort and tons of class.

- **Stinsons (prewar)**

Like the cabin Wacos, the prewar Stinsons and their round engines, especially the Reliant series, boast of higher-than-normal speeds and bigger-than-normal, luxurious cabins.

- **Stinsons (postwar)**

The postwar, flat-engine 108 series Stinsons have the slickest, nicest controls of almost any four-place airplane ever built and rival most modern airplanes in functionality but with more comfort and better handling. The Franklin engines are good but require a little more time when chasing down parts. However, the parts are out there.



CLASSY / CABIN WACOS

- **Beechcraft Staggerwings**

When you arrive in a Staggerwing, you have definitely arrived. They have a presence few other aircraft possess, unmatched comfort for five passengers, and speeds that rival modern airplanes (depending on the exact version). However, they do burn more gas and require a little more understanding to maintain.

- **Howards**

The Howard series that's most common is the DGA-15, which is another ex-military aerial limo with biceps. It's thirsty, but you'll arrive in style and won't be worn out from the trip.

CLASSY / HOWARDS



CLASSY / BEECHCRAFT STAGGERWINGS

- **Cessna 170**

In the days before nose wheels, the Cessna 170 introduced aviation to a well-thought-out, all-aluminum, four-place design with flawless over-the-nose visibility and runway manners that border on super easy. It'll run with a more modern 172, but it has "that look."

- **Straight-Tail Cessnas**

When Cessna put a nose wheel under the 170, and then the 180, it inadvertently created a family of modern classics, the straight-tail Cessna. Built from 1956 to 1959, the 172 had a smaller engine than later aircraft, but the 182 built at the same time is capable of running with the latest of the breed. Some are faster and can carry more than their decades of newer offspring. Pick a good one and, for a fraction of the price of a much newer 182, you'll enjoy the same (or better) performance, but it'll have a retro vibe that is pleasant to look at.

- **Cessna 195s**

The 195 has one foot in the antique camp and another in the thoroughly useful, semi-modern airplane camp. It's a five-place mini-airliner like the prewar limousine birds, but it has an all-aluminum, postwar design and won't burn nearly as much fuel as the bigger round-engine airplanes. These 195s absolutely exude class and bring the round engine into the modern age.

- **Early Bonanzas**

It should be noted that in 1946/47, the first Bonanzas were being produced at the same time that Beech was building the final version of the Staggerwing. Yesterday and tomorrow under a single roof. Although early Bonanzas lack some of the mechanical finesse of the later airplanes, they'll still carry us cross-country as well as any brand-new airplane. And you'll arrive flying a well-known aviation icon.



CLASSY / CESSNA 195



CLASSY / CESSNA 170



CLASSY / EARLY BONANZAS



CLASSY / STRAIGHT-TAIL CESSNA

BOTTOM LINE: A MISSION MISMATCH IS EASILY CORRECTED

— **When buying an airplane**, besides the normal caveats about picking either the best (top dollar but needing nothing) or the worst (bottom dollar but needing everything) — analyze these carefully, recognize the fact that you're buying an asset. Just because we've spent the money doesn't mean it is gone forever. It has just mutated into a three-dimensional, fun form. A form that, assuming we bought right, can be transformed back into cash almost immediately. So, if after a new bird has joined your household and you find your mission has changed or there was a mission/airplane mismatch, sell it and start the search again. As opposed to buying a new anything — car, motorcycle, whatever — that experiences immediate depreciation, if your new-to-you airplane isn't allowed to deteriorate, you'll get all, or most, of your money back out of it. It's sort of a piggy bank with benefits. Explain your purchase to your spouse that way, and if it works, let me know and I'll try it on mine. *EAA*

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