

Little Plane That Could

Sleek and stylish, these Aero Commander 200 speedsters sport excellent performance, even though they never found a big market

By Bill Cox

Whatever else the Meyers was, it certainly was different. It remains an odd combination of semi-Spartan, near-military systems, plush leather interiors, forward-thinking aerodynamics and sport-plane performance and handling qualities.

In fact, if you didn't know better, you'd swear that the airplane's designer, Al Meyers, must have been Italian. His airplanes certainly have a look and concept to them reminiscent of Italian machines. In case you've forgotten, Meyers also was the father of the remarkable model 145, a sexy, bubbled and swept, post-war speedster that delivered far more performance than it had any right to by the standards of the day.

Enzo Ferrari might have been looking at a Meyers airplane when he designed his world-beater super cars. Similarly, Stelio Frati could have had the Meyers 200 in mind when he cranked out such later flying stilettos as the Falco and SF-260.

Al Meyers certainly had every reason for optimism about the 200's chances of success in an already crowded market. In addition to a basic belief in his own talent when he introduced the 200 in 1959, company pilot Bill Broadbeck confirmed Meyers' faith when he flew a specially prepared Meyers 200 to three successive victories in the Pendleton Air Race. The airplane's spectacular race record proved it was easily the equal of anything on the market.

Unfortunately, the 200's success was confined to the race course. Meyers produced only 44 airplanes at his Tecumseh, Mich., plant before selling all rights to the giant aerospace conglomerate Rockwell Standard Corp. in mid-1965. Rockwell assigned the design to its Aero Commander division for production, and in a flash of unoriginal think-



Bubble-style canopy looks like slide-back, although it's not. Visibility is superb. RIGHT: Dr. Richard Morgan.

ing, Aero Commander renamed the Meyers the Aero Commander 200. The company charged into the market like a lion, hoping to bite into the burgeoning Bonanza/Comanche market.

Commander had a long and honorable tradition of building comfortable, easy flying, high-wing corporate multis, but that didn't cut any mustard in the highly competitive single-engine retractable market. During the next two years, Commander sold only 85 more 200s, compared with Beechcraft's 1300 straight-tail and V-tail Bonanzas. Since the 200 obviously was not competitive in sales, Commander shut down production for good in 1967.

While it's true the AC 200 fell on its sword, that didn't in any sense impugn the integrity of the original design. The Meyers 200, like Dr. Windecker's Eagle, Mike Smith's Propjet and a number of other innovative general aviation airplanes, proved it had the performance to compete with its classmates. The reasons for the airplane's untimely demise are perhaps moot now, but they probably had more to do with the lack of proper promotion and a high purchase price than with any inadequacies of design. Another theory was that

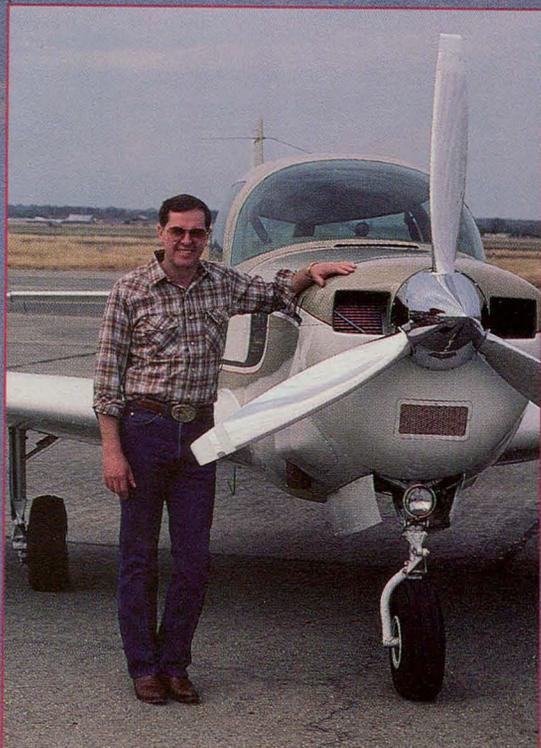
despite the tall base price (\$1,000 more than a Bonanza's when the single Commander was introduced in 1965) the construction complexity of Meyers' machine made it virtually impossible for the builder to show a profit.

Enter Vince Vanderford and Dr. Richard Morgan of Yuba City, Calif. Both men are legitimate airplane nuts who've been around long enough to have owned a variety of machines, but like so many other pilots who develop personal favorites, Morgan and Vanderford have found a single model that

lights their candles.

In case you hadn't already guessed, they are two of the 100 or so remaining owners who can lay claim to three of Al Meyers' best efforts. Yes, I said three. Not only do Morgan and Vanderford own a pair of the sharpest Meyers/AC200s around, they're also partners on a one-of-a-kind 200; a six-seat prototype that Aero Commander built and flew but decided not to produce.

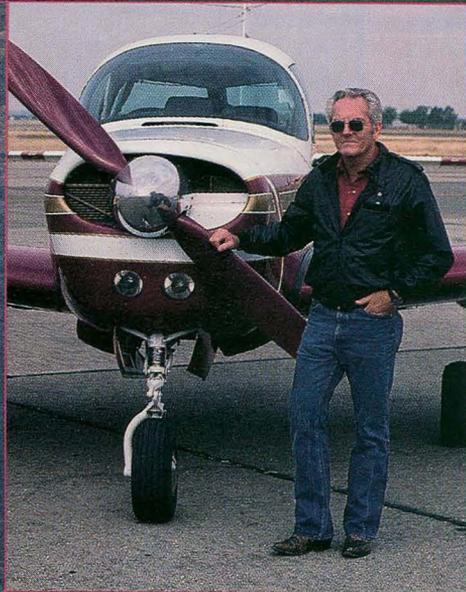
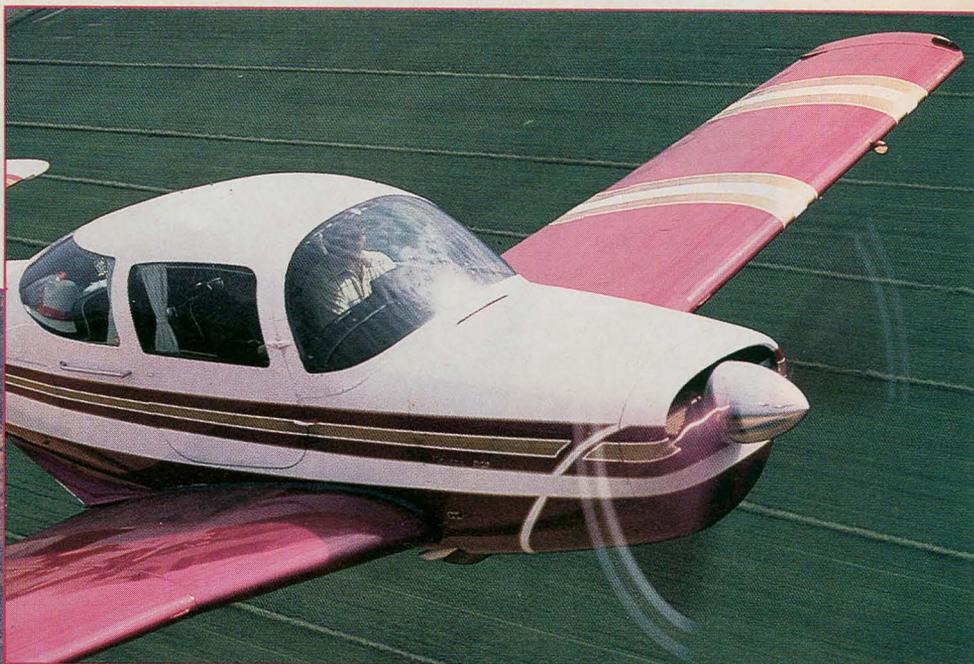
Externally, the standard four-seat Meyers 200 is a relatively small airplane. Comparisons with the straight-tail C33A Bonanza are inevitable, and the numbers do indeed prove that the Meyers design is a more compact machine. It's two-feet shorter with three-feet less wing, and though you might logically expect that to translate to a lower empty weight, the reverse is the case. The Commander weighs in at about 1950 pounds against a 3000-pound gross weight, while the C33A weighs only 1775 pounds sans people and fuel and is licensed at 3300 pounds. In other words, while the Commander is aerodynamically less draggy, it has far less payload. Both airplanes will carry 80 gallons of fuel, but if you load the two with full tanks, the Bonanza will have a theoretical payload of 1045 pounds, and the Commander will be left with only 570 pounds.





THE PLANE

1117
1118
1119
1120



TOP: Vince Vanderford's red 200, like all Commanders, provides excellent visibility in all directions, especially backward.
ABOVE: Vanderford shows off his pride and joy. **LEFT:** The commander can out do the C33A, one of the aerodynamically cleanest airplanes in existence.



Remember, too, those are the top-
heads of airplanes really rated in
time. There is the standard 180-horse-
power and other variants that may
power in this class carry with the Com-
mander's payload is down to a clean
450 pounds. In order to fly away with
two 170-pounders and 20 pounds bag-
gage each, you'd have to leave 50 per-
cent of fuel behind, meaning you could
fly 100 miles.

LITTLE PLANE

LEFT: Cushy interiors are a hallmark of the Meyers design. BELOW: The IO-520 delivers 1000 fpm climb at 130 mph.



Once inside, you'll find the cabin typical 1960s in layout. In standard trim, the seats are done in a double-padded, over-stuffed leather look similar to the old Mercedes. Room is snug but comfortable, with more elbow space than head space.

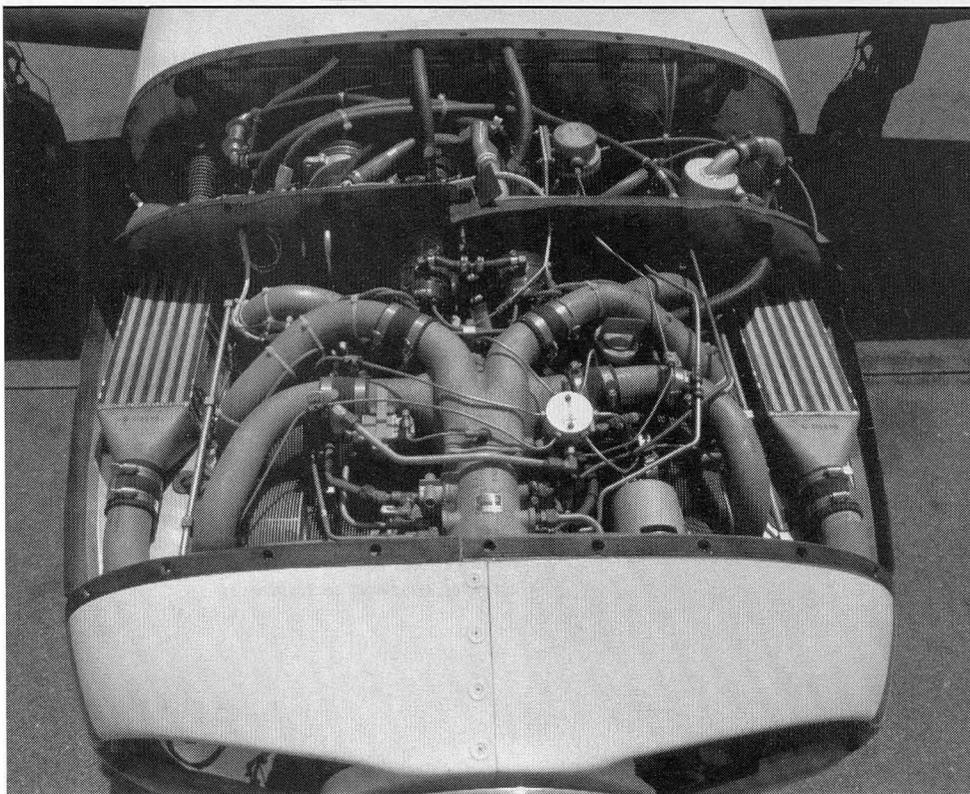
The panel is all business in basic black crackle finish with engine gauges to the right, radios at center and flight instruments grouped in front of the pilot. The five-position fuel selector is mounted on the left side panel and reads fuel level in each of the four 20-gallon tanks through a single gauge that switches electrically as the selector is positioned. This is a fairly failsafe system. The only disadvantage is that you must actually switch fuel sources in flight in order to check capacity in each tank.

Elevator trim is uncharacteristically through a large, panel-mounted, vernier knob that looks like a mixture control. Rotating the knob clockwise trims down the nose, exactly the opposite of most other trim wheels. It's not a big problem, and the system becomes friendly fast, but it's important to differentiate between the elevator trim and the power knobs, as all three of the latter also are verniers.

Engine start is conventional IO-520 with one interesting exception. An often neglected pre-start check is gear selection position, and each year, at least a few older retractables wind up settling onto their bellies when the pilot starts the engine with the selector in the up position and the hydraulic pump obediently folds the feet. Commander cleverly sidestepped the problem by wiring the starter through the gear circuit. If the gear isn't down with green lights showing, the starter won't engage.

Other airplanes have "squat" micro-switches that won't allow the gear to retract as long as a strut is depressed, but a rut in the taxiway or a sticky strut can fool the micros and allow a ground retraction.

Taxi pressures are fairly stiff, almost



Remember, too, those are the payloads of airplanes totally naked of options. Throw in the standard 150 pounds of radios and other options that most planes in this class carry and the Commander's payload is down to a dismal 420 pounds. In order to fly away with four 170 pounders and 20 pounds baggage each, you'd have to leave 57 gallons of fuel behind, meaning you could

pump only 23 gallons into the tanks, worth only one hour plus reserve.

At least, those who do fly will have a comfortable place to do it. Climb up onto the wingwalk via the retractable step (complete with its own flush-fitting door, incidentally) and the chrome towel bar assist handle, and step down into either front or aft seat through unusually wide cabin door.



Full panel space and excellent visibility continued on in the Rockwell version, dubbed the Aero Commander 200. Nine vents helped with cabin heat.

as if someone forgot to remove a gust lock on the rudder. Fortunately, minimum travel provides maximum response, and there's hardly ever a need for differential braking.

Takeoffs demand 20 degrees of flaps, a simple matter of keying the flap lever all the way down. The hydraulic pump stops automatically at 20 degrees and resets for the second 20 in case you should call for them.

With a power loading of only 10.5 pounds/hp, acceleration is brisk, to say the least. (Interestingly, Bellanca's Viking 300 is the only production high-performance retractable with more power doing less work.) The torque generated requires a considerable amount of right rudder to keep the little 200 tracking the centerline, but the airplane is ready to fly fairly quickly if you lever in back pressure at 65 knots. Fail to rotate at the appropriate time and the Commander will use quite a bit more runway (a characteristic shared with the twin-engine Commanders, though the latter were designed by a different designer, Ted Smith).

Gear up requires cycling the big, wheel-shape gear handle through 30 degrees of arc. Both mains fold into the wells and wink green lights immediately, but the nose green stays dark until the pilot drops the lever back to the center neutral position to shut off the hydraulic pump, an intelligent hedge against burning up the pump.

Using 100 knots and 2500/25 on the

power during test flights in both Vanderford's and Morgan's airplanes, I watched the VSI settle on an initial 1500 fpm, then drop back to about 1300 fpm. This is certainly excellent upward mobility, but a better compromise is 130 knots which still delivers 1000 fpm.

Throughout our short climb to 6500 feet, the airplane remained smooth and stable. Visibility is excellent in nearly every direction, especially looking back. The compound curved side windows wrap around to the rear, providing an even better view of that dangerous quadrant than the aft-window Cessnas. The cabin roof is built fighter-style with what appears to be a sliding bubble canopy. It's not, of course, but the result is that the pilot can see in all directions with an almost unrestricted view.

Commander foresaw the possibility that so much plexiglass might generate a hot cabin, and accordingly, the company installed nine air vents to keep the cabin well ventilated, if not necessarily totally cool. Fortunately, the weather was agreeable on the day of my flight, so I didn't need all that ram air.

Level at 6500 feet for some speed checks, I soon learned that Commander's speed claims weren't exaggerated. Setting power at 23 inches and 2375 rpm, I saw a true 174 knots on about 14.5 gph. This was, incidentally, 65 percent power, and with a full 80 gallons of fuel aboard, the airplane can cruise an easy five hours for a range of about 870 nm.

At 75 percent, the book says that the airplane will true 183 knots, and it did only a knot less than that on my check flight. It's fairly apparent that Al Meyers knew a thing or three about his craft, as the Commander is a quicker machine than the C33A, the latter often considered one of the aerodynamically cleanest airplanes around.

Maneuverability of the 200 is good, again with a slight qualification. Yoke travel in either direction is a short 30 degrees. The ailerons are very stiff in comparison to a Bonanza or Viking, but if you put some muscle into a control deflection, the 200 will answer with a fairly quick roll rate.

Even at low airspeeds, the ailerons stay fast and effective. I slowed the airplane for some stall checks and found there was still plenty of roll control available through the yoke. (Perhaps because of this, Meyers designed the airplane with aileron trim rather than rudder trim.) Turns at all airspeeds, incidentally, are single control, requiring almost no rudder coordination.

The Commander has a very wide speed envelope, from about 46 knots on the slow side with everything hung out to drag, to a redline of 182 knots. Down at the bottom of the envelope, stall announces itself with plenty of aerodynamic burble before a gentle pitchover straight ahead.

Some fast airplanes are saddled with gear limit speeds that make it difficult to use the landing gear as a speed

LITTLE PLANE THAT COULD

brake. Not the Commander 200. Throwing the wheels to the wind at 148 knots results in a dramatic deceleration. When speed drops to 109 knots, you can throw out the flaps and really bleed off the knots.

One feature of the Commander that every pilot can appreciate is the self-trimming flaps. Elevators and flaps are interconnected by a bungee that automatically trims the yoke back to compensate for the underwing drag of the Fowler-style flaps.

Patterns work well at most any speed you need. During the photo shoot that resulted in the accompanying photos, I made a half-dozen landings at velo-

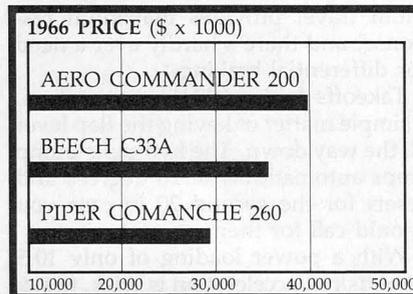
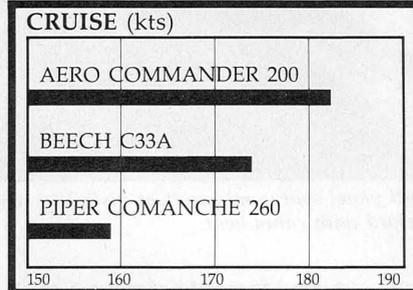
cities from 100 knots down to 65 knots, so you can mingle with the traffic at Oshkosh without fear of eating the 150 ahead or holding up the Mustang behind.

Like most airplanes as old and scarce as the Meyers and Commander 200s, it's tough to attach a hard and fast value to the airplane. Condition is the final determinate of price among airplanes of this rarity. The *Aircraft Bluebook Price Digest* suggests you'll pay about \$40,000 for one of the last of the Commander 200s and \$32,000 for an original '59 model Meyers. That doesn't seem too bad, considering the performance on tap. The suggested retail is about 10 to

15 percent *more* than the airplane cost new, so you need hardly worry about depreciation.

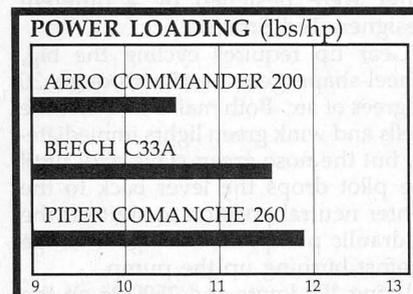
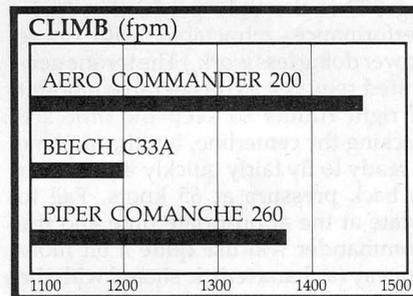
One of the prime axioms of aircraft design is that the science is one of give and take, a series of compromises between speed, range, comfort, climb, useful load, runway requirements and a number of other parameters. Certainly, the Commander has its long and short suits. Performance and efficiency are excellent, comfort is good and useful load is poor.

Still, all things considered, it's hard to understand why the airplane didn't fare better in the marketplace. Perhaps the Bonanza/Comanche/Centurion de-



Aircraft Comparison Chart

Aircraft make/model:	1966 Aero Commander 200	1966 C33A Bonanza	1966 Piper Comanche 260
Used price:	\$40,000	\$35,000	\$29,000
Cruise (kts):	183	174	159
Stall (kts):	46	54	53
Fuel 65% (gph):	14.5	15.0	13.9
Rate of climb (fpm):	1450	1200	1370
Service ceiling (ft):	18,500	18,300	20,000
Takeoff over 50-ft obstacle (ft):	1150	1225	1040
Landing over 50-ft obstacle (ft):	1150	1150	1015
Useful load (lbs):	1050	1525	1372
Power loading (lbs/hp):	10.5	11.6	11.9
Wing loading (lbs/sq ft):	18.75	18.75	18.1
Engine horsepower:	285	285	260
Propeller type:	CS	CS	CS
Landing gear type:	Tri/Retr	Tri/Retr	Tri/Retr
Fuel capacity (max) (gals):	80	80	90
Seating capacity:	4	4	4



signs were so well entrenched that the Commander had little chance of dislodging them.

Whatever the problem, Al Meyers left a legacy of high performance in his classy little model 200 that hasn't been equaled to this day. *P&P*

Aero Commander 200

SPECIFICATIONS

Base price: \$32,000 to \$40,000
Engine: Continental IO-520A
Horsepower @ altitude: 285 @ SL
Horsepower for takeoff: 285
TBO hours: 1700
Fuel type: 100/100LL
Propeller: Hartzell CS
Landing gear: Tri/Retr
Max ramp weight (lbs): 3000
Gross weight (lbs): 3000
Max landing weight: 3000
Empty weight (std) (lbs): 1985
Equipped weight (as tested) (lbs): 2125
Useful load (std) (lbs): 1015
Useful load (equipped) (lbs): 875
Payload (full opt fuel) (gals): 395
Usable fuel opt (gals): 80
Wingspan: 30 ft 6 in
Overall length: 24 ft 4 in
Height: 7 ft 4 in
Wing area (sq. ft): 160
Wing loading (lbs/sq. ft): 18.75
Power loading (lbs/hp): 10.5
Wheel size: 6.00 x 6
Seating capacity: 4
Cabin doors: 1
Cabin width (in): 42

PERFORMANCE

Max level speed (kts): 182
Cruise speed (kts):

	Altitude	Best Economy
75% power:	6500	183
65% power:	6500	174
55% power:	11,500	162

Max range (reserve) (nm):

75% power:	820
65% power:	870
55% power:	910

Fuel consumption (gph):

75% power:	14.5
65% power:	13.2
55% power:	11.1

Estimated endurance (65% power) (hrs): 5.0
Stall speed (flaps up, gear up) (kts): 52
Stall speed (flaps down, gear down) (kts): 46
Best rate of climb (fpm): 1450
Rate of climb (8000 ft) (fpm): 800
Service ceiling (ft): 18,500
Takeoff ground roll (ft): 900
Takeoff over 50 ft (ft): 1150
Landing ground roll (ft): 850
Landing over 50 ft (ft): 1150