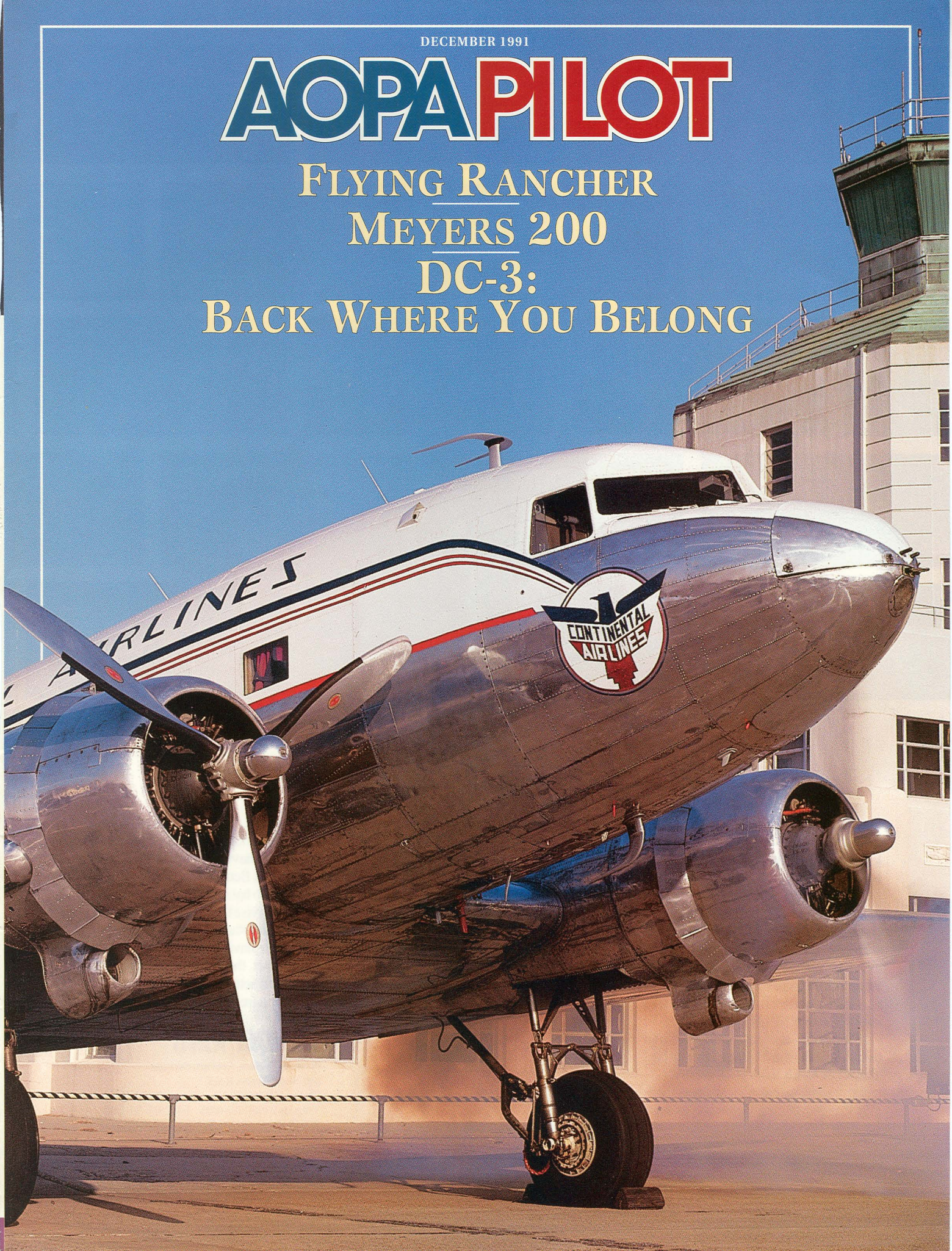
DECEMBER 1991

AOPA PILOT

Flying Rancher
Meyers 200
DC-3:
Back Where You Belong



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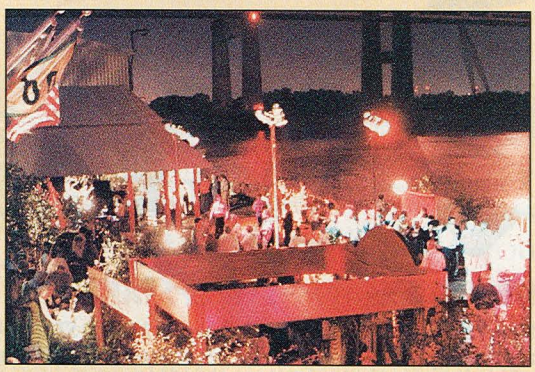


MEYERS/AERO COMMANDER 200

COMMANDING RESPECT

It coulda been a contendah. . . .

BY MARC E. COOK

By most measures, the Meyers 200 was a failure—which is a shame. Because compared to either its contemporaries or today's classmates, the Meyers stacks up well. Handsome, well-built, and fast, the Meyers would make an outstanding personal airplane today, with performance and panache to go sneaker to sneaker with the Bonanza. • That's not to be. The 200, its production spanning the

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICH COX


N31CC

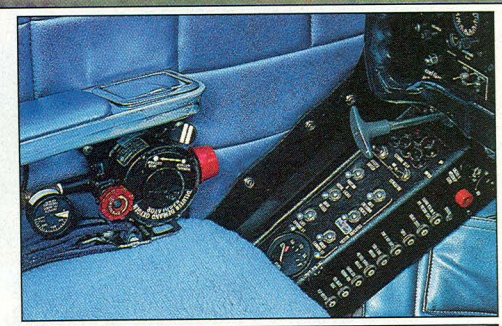
years 1959 to 1967, fell into relative obscurity after fewer than 120 airplanes had been built. And even though a loyal band of hard-core owners exists to keep the breed alive, in the grand scheme, the 200 is just a small twig on a very large tree.

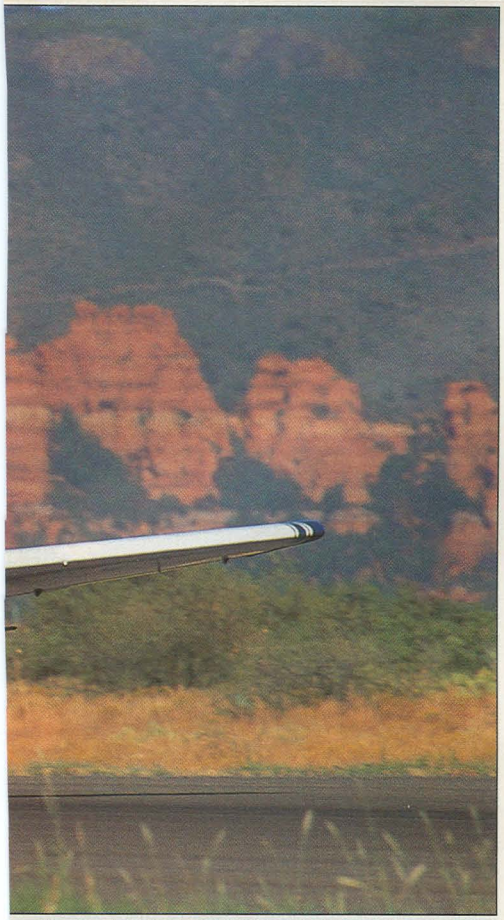
What separates success from failure? One could argue that a fortuitous combination of timing, marketing savvy, and plain old luck are required—in addition to the goodness of any basic design—for an airplane to go from the production equivalent of a half-mile hoofer to a marathon runner. Airplane success stories are more often than not the result of a good idea introduced at the right time. What's more, initial success often breeds continued success; the Beech Bonanza, Cessna 172, and Piper Cherokee are all examples of airplanes that gained swift approval and long-term production.

In some ways, the 200 was doomed from the start to a life of low volume. When Allen H. Meyers set out to build a businessman's express, he didn't have the resources of a large airplane manufacturer and was forced to construct an airplane that he had the tools to build. As a result, the 200's fuselage is made up of 4130 chrome-alloy steel tubes that run from the nosewheel support/engine-mount structure to behind the baggage compartment, as well as out into the wings to the main-gear attachment points. Mooneys use this technique, too, but their birdcages extend mostly around the cockpit. With all this tubing, building a 200 was a painstaking task, and even with the later acquisition by Aero Commander and subsequent production-line construction, the output of 200s would never be more than a fraction of, say, the Bonanza.

As you might imagine, this construction method also made the Meyers very strong and very heavy. Typical empty weight is more than 2,100 pounds and, against a maximum gross weight of 3,000 pounds, doesn't leave much for fuel and passengers. With the 74-gallon (usable) tanks brim-

Meyers 200D panel is well laid out and spacious, especially so for a mid-1960s airplane. Electrical panel, fuel gauge, and fuel selector take up residence on a subpanel to the pilot's left. Back seats, though not Barcalounger large, offer a decent ride, considering cabin's taper.





ming, you can add in just over 450 pounds in payload—two people and their Nike Airs. To fit four FAA-standard souls aboard would mean carrying only about 37 gallons of fuel, good for about 2.5 hours with no reserve. The last manufacturer of the 200 completed paperwork to raise the maximum gross to 3,350 pounds, but the Federal Aviation Administration has not approved this modification.

These two factors—limited weight-carrying ability and slow production—probably did more to harm the 200's chances than anything else. Even so, the airplane soldiered through its production life, gaining improvements and sophistication all the way.

Al Meyers saw the Model 200, equipped with a 225-horsepower Continental O-470, first take flight in 1953 and earn its Normal category certification five years later, by then housing a fuel-injected IO-470 of 260 hp. (To further the Meyers/Beech comparisons, you should know that the 1953 D35 Bonanza had a 205-hp powerplant but would be upgraded the next year to the 225-hp engine. By 1958, Beech's J35 had 250 hp on tap and would get the same as the Meyers' 260 hp by 1961, with the N35.)

Those first Meyers models, hand-built in the company's modest Tecumseh, Michigan, plant, were dubbed the 200A. Following the A model, the 200B, brought out in 1961, showed detail refinements and an increase of limiting airspeeds—for example, V_{NE} climbed from 179 to 205 knots. As mentioned, production was slow, and a total of only 28 A and B models was built. Big news for the 200 was the C model, introduced in 1963, which featured a 3-inch-taller cabin and correspondingly larger windows. This modification made the cabin much more hospitable, according to Meyers aficionados, where it bordered on claustrophobic before. Reportedly, cruise performance did not suffer with the change. As welcome as these alterations were, the Meyers company soon found itself in financial hot water and turned out only nine Cs.

During the early years, Meyers boosters crowed that the airplane could outrun a Bonanza without breaking a sweat. But in 1965, the Beech S35 debuted with a 285-hp

powerplant and came roaring up on the Meyers' tail. No longer could the airplane be sold solely on speed. As a response, the 200D came out with 285 hp and, so endowed, regained some of its speed advantage.

Not that the earlier 200s were slugs, either. With 260 hp, the A-through-C models would turn in a 170-knot cruise, according to factory figures. With 285 hp, though, the 200D really stretched its legs, turning in a book maximum cruise figure of 183 knots.

Though a bit blunt in appearance from some angles, the Meyers is clean aerodynamically and plenty speedy.

Seeking to breathe life into its light-airplane line, Aero Commander purchased the rights and tooling from Meyers and moved production to Albany, Georgia, in late 1965. Here, the Meyers' construction made economical production elusive, and despite several small improvements like flush riveting on the wings, the Aero Commander-built 200D survived through only 90 examples, which, though impressive by previous Meyers production numbers, was hardly a match for Beech's V35 production of nearly 300 airplanes in 1967 alone. By the end of 1967, Aero Commander had had enough of trying to make ends meet and gave up on the Meyers line.

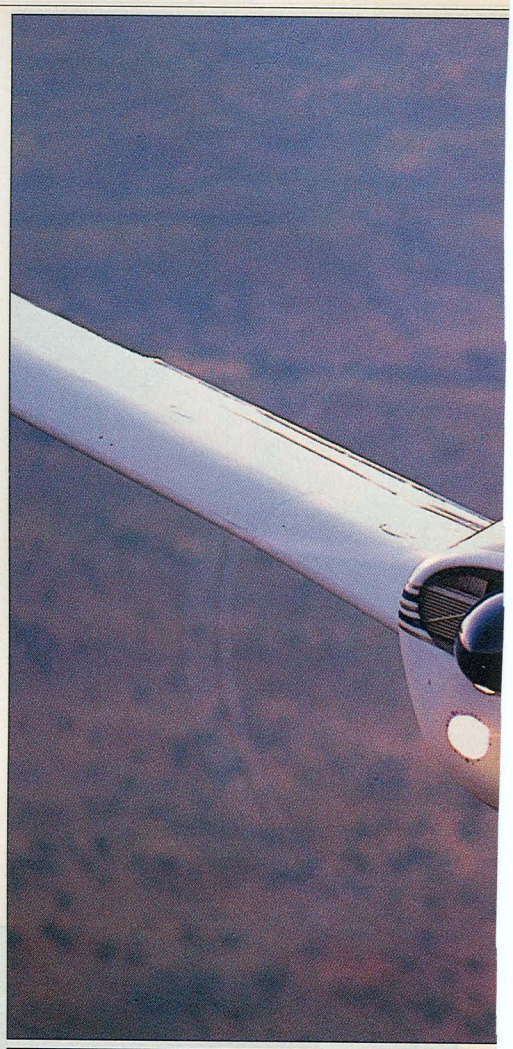
Aero Commander had expected to expand the line and built a single example of the 200E, a six-place airplane with a swept tail. That prototype still flies today. Also, a company called the Interceptor Corporation, which owned the type certificate and production rights in the early 1970s, shoehorned a Garrett TPE331 turboprop derated to 400 shp into the nose of the 200D, giving the airplane a 240-plus-knot cruise and breathtaking climb performance. Though much modified in many areas, the trademark tubular steel center section remained unchanged, even though the airplane gained a 243-knot redline.

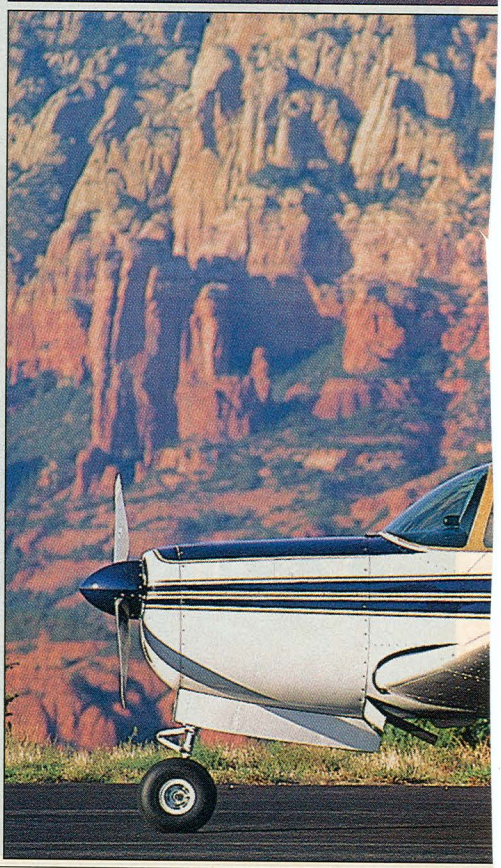
For Kevin S. Klein, owning a Meyers 200 had been a dream since high school. The Sedona, Arizona, resident, whose airplane, N31CC, appears on these pages, had been looking for a 200 for some time when he ran across an advertisement in *Trade-A-Plane* for a 200D in the Los Angeles area. After repeated telephone conversations with the owner, Klein was rebuffed, told that the airplane was no longer for sale; apparently, says Klein, the owner had changed his mind about selling the airplane. "Then I saw the ad in *Trade-A-Plane* again and had to wonder," says Klein. He once more contacted the owner, stating in no uncertain terms that the airplane would be in good hands and that he truly loved the marque. Eventually, the owner relented, and shortly thereafter—a little more than 3.5 years ago—the 200D became Klein's.

Klein's airplane, though mostly original and wearing the inevitable little scars of more than 2,000 hours of use, is still a good example of the breed. Graciously, Klein offered me the left seat for a familiarization hop. "If you're comfortable with high-performance airplanes, you can fly the Meyers," he said. Sure enough, through the pre-start check list all the way to the last item on the shutdown list, there are but a few things that would raise an eyebrow to anyone with time in heavy singles.

First, though, the good news about the airplane's reputation of being fast—it's true. When Klein and I flew his 200D out of Sedona, the temperature was 78 degrees Fahrenheit, and because we were departing from a nearly 5,000-foot-elevation strip, the airplane's leisurely 500-feet-per-minute climb rate came as no surprise. Leveled off in cruise in bumpy air at 8,500 feet, the 200D showed its stuff. Indicating 150 knots, the Meyers turned in a true airspeed of 178 knots on 14 gallons per hour. Power was set at full throttle (21.5 inches manifold pressure) and 2,400 rpm, Klein's usual calibrations; this yielded about 67-percent power. Compare these numbers to an F33A Bonanza, and you'll find the Meyers almost 13 knots faster on the same fuel burn.

Where the comparisons to the Bonanza break down for the Meyers is in handling. Where the Beech is light and smooth, the Meyers is stiff, although the feeling imparted is more one of solidity than truckishness. Someone moving out of a 210 would place the Meyers' control feel closer to silk than canvas, though. Ailerons and elevators





receive pilot input from push/pull tubes, like in a Mooney, which, by design, limits control-wheel travel in roll. The result is heavy aileron forces, although there is plentiful authority, and the airplane can be made to bank with vigor if you so desire.

Pilots used to airplanes with considerable engine offset—which reduces the effects of p-factor on takeoff and climb—will be in for a surprise in the Meyers. A design compromise made for speed, the Meyers houses the engine square to the airframe, and the vertical stabilizer also is not canted or offset, as it is in most production airplanes. As a result, at the beginning of the takeoff roll, you will need almost full right rudder to keep the airplane sniffing down the paint stripe and considerable pressure on the pedal during climb. You won't find rudder trim, either. If you're prepared for the torque, it's no big deal, though; adding power gradually at the beginning of the takeoff helps.

Slow flight and landings are conventional in the Meyers, although you must watch carefully for a high sink rate on short final. I let the airspeed decay a bit below the target of 70 knots on final and saw the airplane head downhill with a vengeance. Landings don't come creamy-smooth until you realize the last nth of elevator travel takes considerably more stick force than the nth before it.

A few other systems quirks are worthy of note. Elevator trim is accomplished via a knob to the right of the throttle and propeller controls. I had no problem translating nose-up/nose-down needs to twist-right/twist-left commands, even during formation work.

As with many airplanes of its time, the Meyers makes extensive use of hydraulics for flap and landing gear control. An engine-driven pump provides pressure for the gear and flaps, and although the levers are located conventionally, operating them is a bit out of the ordinary. When the gear comes up, for instance, you lift the large, polished aluminum handle all the way, wait for three red lights on the side panel to the pilot's left, and then move the lever to a neutral position, which allows the hydraulic pump to idle. (Should you need the gear to come down without the aid of the hydraulic pump, they will free fall, and you can work them down with a sidewall-

mounted pump; if all else fails, you can release the uplocks by tugging on three small T-handles on the cockpit floor and yawing the airplane to lock the gear down.)

When you ask the large, semi-Fowler flaps to come up, the slipstream provides sufficient pressure to force them up. But if you want them down before the gear, you must put the gear handle all the way up to energize the hydraulic system and then move the small airfoil-shaped flap handle. Takeoffs are generally made with 20 degrees of flap; 40 degrees of flap is available for landing. A trim interconnect system incorporates bungees to compensate for trim changes with flap and gear deployment. Even so, there's a sharp nose-up pitching moment with the first 10 degrees of flaps.

Another quirk of the Meyers is the fuel system. A total of 74 gallons usable lives in four equally sized tanks, two inboard mains and two outboard auxiliary tanks per side. Normally, you take off on the left main, quickly switch to the left aux, then to the right aux, and, finally, land on the right main. Unfortunately, there's only one fuel gauge, and it's connected to the tank in use. You could land with an hour's reserve but have it spread all over the place. Meyers owners complain most about the fuel system ergonomics.

Cabin comfort is good, although the back-seat passengers will feel a bit cramped. Superb visibility gives the Meyers' occupants a commanding view. Entry and exit are through a single right-side door with three—count 'em, three—latches. Even so, owners often complain that the door is tough to get to seal properly.

Okay, so the Meyers is fast and comfortable and, thanks to limited production volume, has considerable snob appeal—but can you live with an airplane so long out of production? Klein reports, as do most owners, by the way, that parts aren't a problem. The Meyers company's modest beginnings necessitated using many off-the-shelf parts—the armrests come right out of a mid-1960s General Motors car. Engine, propeller, instruments, and most controls are common parts, and fortunately, the airframe is so rugged that it seldom needs attention.

Landing gear bushings represent probably the only area where a Meyers owner might get stuck, but a strong Meyers Aircraft Owners Association (MAOA) helps keep owners and parts in contact. The owners like to crow that there has not been an airworthiness directive issued against the airframe; still, there are several against the engine, prop, and accessories.

Nor will it cost a mint to get into a Meyers. The *Aircraft Bluebook–Price Digest* lists the retail prices of used Meyerses running from $37,000 to $47,000. Though affording one might not be difficult, finding a Meyers could prove challenging. A recent edition of *Trade-A-Plane* listed just six airplanes for sale. You would be well advised to whip a note off to MAOA Secretary Bill Gaffney (26 Route 17K, Newburgh, New York 12550) for membership information.

So while the Meyers might not have been a success story in its day, today's owners see the airplane as anything but a failure. They say that a higher gross weight and more modern production methods could have transformed the airplane from an also-ran to a top finisher. That the Meyers is more curiosity than Bonanza competition matters not to those who own them. □