



“When we pulled the do-it-right trigger,

JIM KOEPNICK

The Seven-Year Paint Job

There are Travel Airliners and then there are Travelairs

BUDD DAVISSON

“Honest,” says J.J. Janovetz, “we were going to pull the gear to repaint it and then have the airplane stripped and painted. That was it. Roll it in the shop, do the work, roll it out. Two, three months, tops. No biggie.”

It didn't work out that way.

Janovetz is talking about their 1958 Travelair. First, it's unusual to see a Travelair (at least *that* kind of

Travelair) in the vintage/antique area. Second, it's even more unusual to see one that has been taken right down to its underwear and brought back up again, which was not the original plan.

“The whole thing started I think just because a couple of us wanted to go flying with two engines. It seemed like a glamorous thing to do, and the Travelair seemed like an economical way to go. Charlie

Hillard had just traded a Widgeon project for the Travelair but hadn't registered it in his name yet, so it went directly to us.

“Richard Wheeler, Archie Taylor, and I had been partners in a 1980 Piper Warrior II. We sold it to buy the Travelair from Charlie. Archie, who has over 400 hours instructing in Travelairs, then convinced another friend Lee Finley that it would be a great airplane, so Lee

we ignored common sense and completely gutted the airplane.”

joined us to help pay for the paint job. As we got deeper into the project, Dan Bruhl jumped on board, so now there are five partners.

“Beginning in 1990, I had my machine shop, Lone Star Aero, where I built parts for antique airplanes in Charlie's hangar, and I was always hanging around. I had become a professional hangar rat and in 1994 he hired me full time, so I was working on his Widgeons and anything else he was flying.

Then we got the Travelair and there were times I was practically living in the hangar.”

The partnership's Travelair is serial number TD 130 and was part of the very first year of production of Beechcraft's entry into the light-twin field. The Apache is generally accepted as the first, full-production light twin, but Beechcraft intended the Travelair to be a cut above the competition both in quality and performance.

Comparing the Model 95 Travelair to the Apache would seem to be unfair, if nothing else, because Beech designers spent so much time making their airplane look svelte and modern. Plus the Model 95 had a lot of Bonanza in its

bones, which is to say its fit and finish were superlative. And it had a 180-hp O-360 Lycoming on each side. Did it blow the competition away? Not exactly, because the fat-wing Piper had such a price advantage. Still the Travelair enjoyed success until the product was discontinued in 1968, long after the bigger-engine Baron had been introduced. The economical machine is still being used by lots of flight schools for multi-engine training.

“When we got the airplane, it really wasn't in bad shape. It was a little tired, but it was 38 years old and had earned the right to be tired. We were going to do some cosmetic stuff, like paint it and remove the four or five layers of paint

that covered the landing gear and just enjoy flying it. But we had something happen at the paint shop that forced us around the corner toward total restoration.

“We had already discovered that we had a bad fuel bladder, so we were going to have to get into the wings. Then the paint shop didn't protect the lower molding on the windshield correctly and the stripper ate the gel coat.

“No problem, right? We'll just

remove the molding and fix it. Except that to get the molding off, the windshield had to come out. And to get the windshield out, we had to remove the instrument panel to get at the hardware. You see where I'm going, right?

“So, there we were, with a really ugly, stripped airplane with most of the panel laying on the seats, the gear off, and the wings partially opened up. Oh, and the windshield was out.

“At that point we had to make some serious decisions. We were already much farther into the airplane than we wanted to be. And the market value on a first-year Travelair wasn't that high. Still, we had the airplane apart and we had bought it to fly, not to sell. So, what the heck, we said, if we're going to do it, we might as well do it right. If we had only known.”

There are thousands of airplanes of the same vintage as the partnership Travelair that have never been completely gone through and rehabbed. Most of them have never been allowed to go derelict, plus they seem somehow “modern” and haven't made it into the psychological category we reserve for true vintage machines even though they are old enough. Because of this, few of the airplanes have had someone lavish the kinds of TLC (and money) on them that they truly need. Each of a long progression of owners did what they needed to keep it safe but, in the process, they left their indelible tracks behind. Airplanes like these resemble archeological digs where each layer reveals yet another layer and each bears the marks of the previous inhabitants.

“When we had the panel out, we could see what a real mess it was. It wasn't even close to being unairworthy, but it had decades of wiring running around that served no purpose. Plus, as each new generation of avionics came out, yet another mechanic would chop yet another hole while patching up an existing hole.



LEEANN ABRAMS PHOTOS



Since the original panel had patches screwed to patches, the entire panel was redesigned and a new one fabricated. Behind the panel and throughout the airframe, the wiring harness was replaced, removing pounds of unused wiring left from previously installed instruments.

“The instrument panel had been modified so many times, it was like a quilt, with pieces screwed to pieces that were screwed to other pieces. Plus it had radios on both ends of the panel. Not a tidy setup and by the time Richard was done, he had rewired the entire airplane.

“When we pulled the do-it-right trigger, we ignored common sense and completely gutted the airplane. Everything came out right down to the belly skins. Fortunately, we found most of the skins were in good shape with no corrosion, but they had 38 years of crud on them. To get at the belly, we had to remove the floorboards, but it was a good thing we did—there had to be a solid half-inch of sludge from miscellaneous oils and fluids that had collected there.

“We didn’t have to do any walnut shell blasting or anything. We just got in there with solvent, rags, and toothbrushes and cleaned and cleaned and cleaned.

“The pulleys and cables were in good shape, so at least we didn’t have to replace those, but everywhere there was a movable part, no matter how big or small, if it had a bearing or a bushing, we replaced it.

“The nose baggage compartment had some sort of tar-like sound deadener in it and everything we tried to clean it with

ate it. So, we sprayed it with a water-based truck splatter paint.

“Every time we ran across something made of rubber, we took it out and replaced it. The same thing with all the bolts and screws. For some reason, however, we did use one original screw on the landing gear actuator switch handle.

“I fabricated the aluminum side panels for the interior myself, but we took the seats and side panels to C & H Aircraft Interiors and had them done in Ultra Leather, which is an imitation leather that’s easy to clean. To make the seats more comfortable, I made and installed four armrests, which was just one of a dozen 337s we had to do.

“When it came to the instrument panel, we decided to go from scratch and design and build an entirely new one. First, I sanded the control yokes down and painted them, and then I made an instrument panel out of 1/8-inch aluminum. I’m a machinist by trade, so it was no problem to make anything we wanted.

“Even though this was a form of restoration, we didn’t want the panel to be 1958-original. We were looking for totally modern utility out of this airplane so we set it up with center stack radios and the standard “T” arrangement.

Three of the five owners of N100BH, (top to bottom) Rich Wheeler, Archie Taylor and J.J. Janovetz. Partners Dan Bruhl and Lee Finley couldn’t make the trip.



The Travelair 95 was Beechcraft’s first entry into the “light-twin” market that was created in the post-World War II years. Powered by a pair of 180-hp Lycomings, it could tool along at a very respectable 180 mph.

For this restoration, everything from the baffles to the hoses was replaced in the engine compartments.



JIM KOEPMICK

The unsettled summer skies over Oshkosh make for a dramatic background for the 1958 Beechcraft Travelair restored by J.J. Janovetz and his friends.

“I had seen something on Charlie’s Widgeon that we copied on our panel. The basic panel has a piece of Lexan covering it. The backside of the Lexan is painted black and the front is painted with opaque white. Then it is silk-screened with a chemical for lettering. After the front topcoat of Cadet Gray is painted on and dried, the panel is dipped in acid to remove the gray over the white lettering. Lights hold the Lexan overlay to the aluminum panel and light the lettering at night. The result is really impressive.

“We used the original instruments but shipped them all out to be rebuilt and refaced. At the same time we pulled every actuating cable, the throttles, and so forth and pressure lubed them. They work smoothly now.

“The wings were basically as good as the fuselage so we did a lot of cleaning and touch up. At the time, only one bladder was leaking, but we figured the others couldn’t be far behind, so we replaced all four of them.

“The magnesium on the control surfaces was corroded, so we went to aluminum on the ailerons, but the tail surface magnesium was

okay so we cleaned and painted them. Then they sat for six or seven years while we finished the rest of the airplane.

“The engines were more or less okay but, like the rest of the airplane, they were tired. Of course, we managed to make the situation worse because we didn’t pickle them. Hey, it was supposed to be flying in less than a year, right? I found some rust on the cam, and that made that decision for us.

“We did the engines and, for the most part, used the original parts and had them overhauled. We sent the jugs out and had them welded and generally reconditioned. The cams and cranks were ground and everything was brought back to new tolerances.

“The props were overhauled at the same time and the AD on the blade clamps and hardware was complied with.

“By the time we were done, the logbook entry ran for five typewritten pages. We did five 337s on one day!”

In typical pre-Oshkosh fashion they barely made it.

“The last four months before Oshkosh were a real grind and our wives didn’t see much of us. We flew

it for the first time 10 days before leaving for Oshkosh. We spent an hour and a half circling the airport to break in the engines, and that first flight had only a few minor glitches to fix. With fifteen hours on the Hobbs, we headed for Oshkosh. It was the first time the airplane had left the field in over seven years.”

So now that they’re finished, what does J.J. think about the results?

“You could look at this airplane several ways. Yes, we have far more tied up in it than we will ever get out of it. Still, it feels and performs like a brand new airplane and it gives exactly the utility we need regardless of its age. It’s a 1958 airplane that’s giving us 2003 utility we couldn’t buy in a new airplane for two or three times what we have tied up in this one.”

So, I guess you could say they are pleased with the effort.

J.J. says, “Mostly we’re pleased it’s over.”

Apparently the judges at Oshkosh 2003 were pleased too because they awarded the airplane the coveted Contemporary Reserve Grand Champion trophy. So, it looks as if a little insanity combined with lots of dedication does have its rewards.