

Lockheed 12A

The Whittlesey family's 68-year-old limo

BY BUDD DAVISSON

"We thought we'd just clean it up and fly it, but when we got it home and started going through it," says Les Whittlesey, "it became clear that the old girl was plain worn out. I purchased the 12 with the thought that I could have a 'family' plane, as my Waco biplanes did not offer the range or comfort the 12 would. I wanted it to be as safe and reliable as we could make it, and at the same time return her to her glory years. With the style and grace the airplane has, she doesn't feel like a station wagon, van or bus, but like you're riding in style in a limo."

The experience is a common one. An old airplane/car/boat/house is bought with expectations that it'll take only a little elbow grease to make it livable. Unfortunately, as the cold light of day illuminates parts of the structure that haven't been seen for years, the truth settles in: The purchase price was just the entrance fee to put yourself in the position of spending some "real" money. And so it was with Whittlesey's Lockheed 12A, serial number (S/N) 1277. To make it an airplane that he could use for family transportation, the old airplane had to come completely apart. But we're getting ahead of ourselves.

Whittlesey is a Southern California real estate land broker and developer in the homebuilding market. That sounds important, but the really important fact is that he comes from a long line of old-airplane people.

Whittlesey explains, "My dad flew B-47s and B-52s for the Air Force and bought his first airplane project, a 1939 Waco YKS-6, in 1960 when he was stationed at Castle Air Force Base in California. In 1971 he bought a 1939 Waco EGC-8, which I started flying when I was 18. We were always at the airport, always working on antique airplanes.

"In 1983 I become the proud owner of the EGC-8, which became my first restoration. A few years later, I bought a 1940 UPF-7 and converted it to a ZPF-7. In the summer of 2001 my dad



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The cabin's outstanding appointments extend to the cockpit. The center console includes a nifty cover duplicating the look of the old autopilot, which covers the modern radios when the aircraft is on display.

and I took both Wacos across the U.S. and barnstormed a bunch of Waco flyers and also made it to Oshkosh, where the ZPF won a Bronze Lindy. We called the trip '2001, A Biplane Odyssey.' The only thing better than flying across the U.S. in a couple of biplanes is having your dad fly one of them."

This is a man who isn't afraid to venture out in his old airplanes, feeling that, if they are properly maintained and were mechanically 100 percent at the beginning, there's no reason they shouldn't rival a modern airplane for both utility and reliability. Plus, they have the added benefit of providing much classier transportation.

"I had always admired the polished 12A owned by Sandy and Kent Blankenburg, but it wasn't until '96, when I saw serial number 1277 at the Stagging Fly-In at Bill Allen's on Gillespie Field in San Diego, that I saw them in a different light. Little did I know that I would own the airplane someday. I really liked the lines of the airplane, as it was from that classic era of aviation's Golden Age. I put the thought of owning one day in the back of my mind and that where it stayed for several years, as I was in the middle of the restoration of the ZPF-7.

"In 2002 my dad called and told me there was a Lockheed 12A for sale in *Trade-A Plane*. I contacted the owner, and sure enough it was the same ship I had seen in San Diego. It seemed that the owner had passed away, and his



The stately cabin of the Whittlesey Lockheed is perfectly appointed for long-distance cruising.

wife was very reluctantly was putting the plane up for sale. We started e-mailing back and forth about the plane, and I finally made an offer that was rejected. I e-mailed my best and final offer from work before the Thanksgiving holiday and left for the long weekend. I came back into work and checked my e-mail and to find out that she had accepted my last offer. When I told my wife, I reassured her that this was not a project, that we had bought a flyer that just needed a little work. She still periodically reminds me of that conversation, even though she really loves what we did with the airplane."

The Lockheed 12A is an interesting airplane, if nothing else, because it has a massive identity problem: Far too many people mistake it for a Twin Beech, which is frustrating for Lockheed owners because, to their eye, the long lines and sleek, chopped-windshield look of the nose sets the airplane entirely apart from the more common Beech.

"We get asked all the time if she is a Twin Beech," says Whittlesey, "and we say, 'No, that's her ugly stepsister.'" Although the two airplanes first flew only a little over a year apart, the 12A was designed much earlier and a casual examination of its systems shows that it is much more of an antique than the Beech. Still, in its day, the airplane was nothing short of phenomenal.

The specific airplane Whittlesey had purchased, S/N 1277, was built in 1939 and the next year was taken over by the

Treasury Department to become part of a Lend-Lease package headed for England. She became part of the RAF and for the balance of the war did utility and liaison duties before being discharged in 1945. Rumor has it that even Winston Churchill rode in her.

For the next 17 years she passed through a number of hands before becoming part of a short-haul airline in France being operated by a Monsieur Chapeau. This was 1962, and for the next 20 years Monsieur Chapeau continued flying 1277 all over Europe. He would probably still be doing it, but as he coasted past his 78th birthday the French government took an increasingly dim view of him continuing to act as chief pilot. It would be nice to know more about characters such as Monsieur Chapeau because he wasn't about to sit on the ground while other people flew his airplanes. So he unceremoniously shut down the airline and retired.

A noted French aviation enthusiast bought all the assets of the airline, which included not only S/N 1277, but at least two other Lockheed 12As as well. Shortly thereafter, S/N 1277 moved to Greenville, Maine, where Lou Hilton continued to campaign for her at air shows. Incidentally, she didn't come over in the hold of a ship. They simply strapped three 55-gallon drums to the floor in the fuselage and flew over. After all, she is an airplane.

After several years, Hilton needed some extensive work done on the air-

plane and it was sent to Florida. In the process, he decided to sell the airplane, and it was bought by Dave Swanson, who had the work finished.

If you've been reading closely, you'll note that from 1939 until Whittlesey purchased her in 2002—a period of 63 years! there were no significant dormant periods in the airplane's life. It spent little or no time tied down, collecting bird droppings. In fact, for the majority of its life S/N 1277 has been a working airplane. This might be some kind of record.

When Whittlesey was sitting at his computer in sunny Southern California negotiating the purchase, it was the dead of winter everywhere else in the country. Especially in New Hampshire, where the airplane was based. This caused a problem Whittlesey hadn't really considered, as it would be one of the worst winters in years.

"Part of the deal was to have the airplane receive an annual. When we cemented the deal, it started snowing in New Hampshire and did not stop until spring. There was so much snow on top of the hangar, the roof sagged and the door would not open. You could not get the airplane out to complete an annual, and so there she sat until the following spring.

"I could not go out and get her, so a family friend, 'Captain Kirk' McQuown, a good stick (he soloed 14 planes on his 16th birthday), and my dad flew back to pick her up. When they were flying the airplane home, they began to get an inkling of how tired the old girl was, and when we started poking into her innards, we really weren't left any choice. Every machine wears out, and after 63 continuous years of use, that's exactly what was happening to this one."

When they pulled the wings off and started what they knew was going to be a long process, one of the goals was to convert it back to civilian transport configuration from the C-40, the military configuration it had carried for so many years. More than that, Whittlesey wanted to make it as period-correct as he could and still have it be a viable piece of transportation and not a museum piece.

As is always the case, when you start

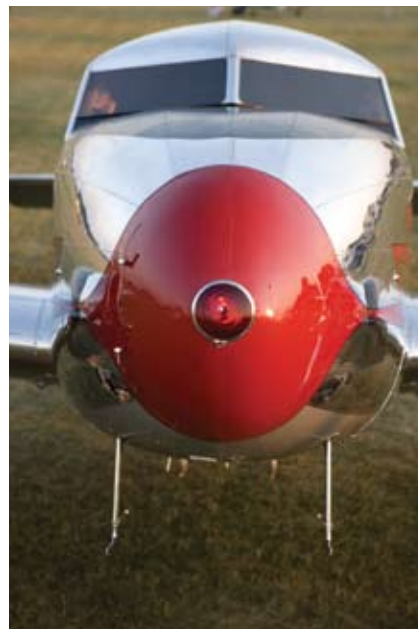


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One unique aspect of the retractable landing gear is the factory addition of a pair of mud guards installed on the gear. In the interest of maintainability, Whittlesey installed Twin Beech tires, wheels and brakes to replace the nearly impossible to find air wheels and original brakes.

working with an aluminum airframe that is more than six decades old, an interesting process takes place. First, you think that most of the aluminum is still flyable, so you'll replace only the panels that have corrosion or are really beat up. So, you replace one. Instantly the perfection of the new panel brings out previously unnoticed imperfections in the surrounding panels. Although Whittlesey didn't say so in so many words, the fact that he wanted to polish the airplane and quickly found so many more zits on it than he could live with led to a progressive re-skinning that included both outer wing panels, all the flight controls, and 80 percent of the fuselage.

"When we were doing the skinning, in the interest of originality, we used the peculiar brazier head rivets Lockheed used," Whittlesey says. "We scoured the country for them and because they were so old, they were really hard to rivet. So we looked up how to properly heat treat them to make them soft and then kept them in the freezer until we were ready to use them, as they would get hard



The nose features a forward baggage compartment, but you'll need a ladder to access it.

again if left on the bench."

One interesting little side note surfaced during the re-skinning process: They found flak damage from WWII in the left wing. It was the result of the airplane being hit by friendly fire over Belgium.

"Since we had the airplane on stands and completely apart, we pulled the landing gear and rebuilt and X-rayed every bit of it. We also had brand new screw jacks machined, since the old ones were getting pretty tired. We went through everything and replaced all the electrical wiring, fuel system, and all the control cables. Eighty percent of the pulleys had stopped turning and



BONNIE KRATZ



PHIL HIGH

were being sawed through by the cables."

A sticking point for Lockheed 12A owners is the main gear tires; they aren't easily available, if at all. The originals were smooth doughnut types and are no longer available.

"I didn't want to modify anything, but the tires and brakes just weren't going to work on a long-term basis. While I love the look, the old-style tires and brakes are impossible to come by, and the last thing I wanted to worry about were odd tires and ancient brakes. So, we just bit the bullet and went with Twin Beech tires, wheels, and brakes. They aren't original, but I can service them and don't have to worry about them."

Totally remanufacturing (not restoring) an airplane like a Lockheed 12A isn't something you take on solo, and Whittlesey recognized that. As much as he would have liked to be able to say, "I did it all myself," regardless of his abilities in the workshop, that just wasn't practical.

"My crew and I set up a little operation on Chino they called 'The Lockheed Stinkworks,' and the slogan was 'Where airplanes are restored to udder perfection.' This is in reference to the dairies that surround the airport and can usually be smelled. They even had an cartoon character dairy cow drawn up like the Lockheed skunk.

"My brother-in-law, Jim Heinemann, took over as project manager, coordinating the various subcontractors we had working on the airplane. He had

(Left to right) Neil Whittlesey (Les' father), Jim Heinemann, project manager; "Captain Kirk" Mc Quown, flight instructor and comedian; Lindy Whittlesey, (14); Les; his wife Susan; Steve Dotson, aircraft restorer; Allie Whittlesey (12); and Dave Waterman, aircraft restorer.



delivered over a 100 airplanes for McDonnell Douglas and Boeing, so he had plenty of experience in managing complex airplanes. We started this in '03 and flew three years later. I could probably calculate how many hours we put into it, but I really don't want to know. I know it's in the tens of thousands, and that's close enough. All I know for sure is that it was a lot. Everyone asks, 'How much money do you have in the airplane?' and I say, 'It is in the 2s...' 'Too much!'"

One of the major problems in a project like this is where you draw the line as to what should be done. The short answer is, you don't. Since the airplane is such a piece of history and so visually arresting, you really can't look at something and say, "That's good enough."

In the decades prior to World War II, the Sportsman Pilots Association created crests for use by the members on their aircraft. Whittlesey decided that in the same spirit, he'd create one for his family. The "W" is self-explanatory, and the "LS" stand for Les and Susan, his wife. The "LA" stands for their daughters, Lindy and Allison. Lindy is named for Charles Lindbergh, and Allison for the great World War II fighter engine of the same name.

"The cowlings on the airplane were perfectly usable, but when you're looking at a round motored airplane, what's the first thing that catches your eye? The motors, right? So the cowlings had to be redone, which opened an entire can of worms because you don't just go to your local scrap yard and come up with a set of Lockheed 12A cowlings. They were a very specific shape, and the only way we were going to get them was by building our own. We teamed up with Yanks Air Museum at Chino, which owns a C-40, the only military version flying. Along with three other owners, we made a die and stretched formed blanks for five ship sets of cowls. Of course, once you have the skins you have to add all the internal structure, which, with Yanks, we built enough parts for two airplanes. We are really glad we did them, and these will last way longer than the 63 years the first ones did."

Airplanes and big cars of the 1930s shared a very distinct feel to their interiors. Whether it was Packard or Cadillac, Lockheed or Stinson, they all had an

overstuffed, limousine feel to them, and to do the Lockheed's interior any other way would be cheating on the experience of flying in the airplane.

"The original floor boards were plywood sandwiches with balsa cores, which, of course, don't carry much of a fire rating, so we opted to go to aluminum skins on a balsa core in those areas for safety reasons. But for the upholstery and headliner we went strictly 1930s. We used original factory photos for the location of changes in materials. The headliner is the old mohair style, while the sidewalls have a wooden belt strip, like wainscoting, running around the interior under the windows with leather up to that. All the fabric was purchased from an antique auto interior company, and then we had it fire-proofed. Yanks had a complete set of plans, and we used those to rebuild all the seats, which are all different at each location, so not one is the same. The plans were invaluable, as we even copied where the welt cords went on the seats. We even put the hat netting back in, as everyone wore hats back then."

Being a mini-airliner, the 12A had a toilet, and that's a story of its own.

"Considering how old the airplane is and how many owners had worked it, it was pretty amazing to find it still had the original toilet. While on the surface it was a little primitive, it was pretty advanced, with spring-loaded doors and a vent attached to the back to suck out any fumes. The bathroom even had an ashtray, which I found amazing, since the airplanes had the option to have two 50-gallon fuel tanks installed behind the pilots for longer range. Smoking can be hazardous to your health, especially when you are smoking next to fuel."

"When we got the airplane, the door handles were off of a recreational vehicle of some sort and obviously weren't right. However, we also had original ads and photos so we could tell what the original door handles looked like. So, I took my pictures with me to the Pomona Antique Auto Swap Meet and started walking up and down the rows. Two hours later, lo and behold, I found two new old-stock handles still in their original bags."

When Whittlesey did the instrument panel on his family liner, he had another of those "how original do I go?" decisions to make. He wanted to fly this airplane as if it were a modern twin, which meant including items that didn't exist in 1938.

"We really wanted to keep to the originality of the time period of the aircraft while also including avionics that were provided for greater utility and safety. One of the team, Dave Waterman, took out the entire control console and instrument panel and completely rebuilt them. We reinstalled all the old instruments, even down to the clock. To make things as original as possible, Dave even made a cover from the old 1939 autopilot that we could place over the modern radios when we went to air shows. This way we could have a functional panel and keep it looking original.

"It is amazing how small today's avionics are compared to the old ones. Where the original autopilot was, we were able to fit a Garmin GPS 480, an MX-20 with satellite weather, a Mode S transponder, a SL-40 second radio, and the audio panel with marker beacon."

As the restoration progressed, Whittlesey began to think about re-registering it because it carried a personalized N number applied by a former owner, Hilton.

"The airplane came out of the factory December 27, 1939, registered as NC18900. A quick search showed that number was now on a Ryan SCW and the owner wasn't going to give it up. I didn't want the personalized license plate look, so I searched the FAA website for available N numbers and came up with 18906, as it would lay out the same size and be as close to the original number as possible."

Being a stickler for authenticity is the goal of any restoration, but it does have its downsides.

"By the time we were done, Michelle Gruenburg, the painter, hated me. It took us seven tries to get the logos and stripes right. We were down to counting rivets on old photos and advertisements. But I wanted her exactly like she came from the factory, so it was important."

Every project has some part that dogs the builder right to the end. In the case of the Whittlesey L-12A, it was the wingtips.

"Steve Dotson and Lefty McGluckian, two very good sheet metal men at Chino, worked on those wingtips right up to the first flight. I think the paint on the bottom of the wingtip was even still tacky when they were put on. That is one thing we don't want to ever have to do again, and I think the guys would agree with me."

The Whittlesey family is now enjoying their aerial limo. The trip back from Oshkosh was the first trip the family had made in the plane, as she had only seven hours on her when she left Chino for her first air show at Oshkosh. The whole family participated on the return trip back, with Susan, his wife, and his girls, Lindy (14) and Allison (12)—yes, they were named after Charles Lindbergh and the Allison engine helping from the copilot seat in flying her back. In fact, all of the kids' stick time has been in either the Wacos or the Lockheed. Since then, SN/1277 has won the prestigious Paul E. Garber Trophy at the National Aviation Heritage Invitational at the Reno Air Races.

Still, as perfect as the airplane appears, is there anything that Whittlesey still feels isn't complete?

"I'm still looking for an original lens that the red warning light on the nose used," he says. "I had to make one out of acrylic and it looks right, but it isn't right. I have the Lockheed part number for the lens, which is cast glass, but still haven't come up with one. Also, the airplane originally came with hat clips for the interior, like on the back of chairs at old diners. We would love to get some of those. And lastly, an original sales brochure, and flight and maintenance manuals. I have copies of those, but having originals would be great."

The concept was to build a safe, comfortable piece of transportation that Whittlesey felt good entrusting his family to and, judging from the amount of flight time they've already put on the airplane, it looks as if he succeeded.

"People always ask, 'After all that work and how rare the airplane is, are you afraid to fly her?' My answer," says Whittlesey, "is that you don't hang art in a closet, so you need to fly these airplanes and get them out there so everyone can enjoy seeing them." 