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Commentary

Flying Carpet

By: Greg Brown

Airplane for sale: In praise of older pilots

"Dear Greg, here are my promised spec sheet and photos. I truly love this aircraft, and am more interested in finding a good owner than fetching the highest price. Maybe your column could one day examine whether airplanes have personalities and even souls. I'm convinced that mine does: She's like a stalwart pioneer wife."

Phil Role's passion for his soon-to-be-departed airplane struck me like an arrow. So often I hear from aspiring pilots, especially older ones, wondering, "Is learning to fly worth all this effort?" Well, here was a person farther down that road, looking back. And what a perspective he had to share.

Phil first contacted me while working at the Chinle, Arizona, Indian Hospital. "I fly my 1960 Piper Comanche 180 from beautiful Sandpoint, Idaho," he wrote. "You should visit sometime in the Flying Carpet." Phil proceeded to brag about his treasured Comanche, "one of the best-kept secrets in aviation!" Attached were shots of his bird in flight. Recently, Phil and I reconnected when another Chinle doctor contacted me about becoming a pilot. Thinking Phil still worked there, I introduced the two by e-mail.

"Unfortunately, the Chinle gig was temporary," replied Phil. "But since then my wife Mary Catherine and I flew to Arizona for a memorable Grand Canyon dory run. While preflighting for our return to Idaho, I found a bird's nest with five eggs atop the cylinders. After that I bought some cowl plugs!" What followed, however, brought a lump to my throat.

"On a sadder note, my five-year battle with cancer is not going well. I must sell my Comanche. I absolutely love and worship that airplane. If you encounter any prospective buyers, I'd appreciate referrals." Then Phil shared his love affair with flying.

"My dad was a pilot, but after one of his friends crash-landed, my mother became dead set against flying. My youthful aviation memories consist of sneaking off with dad in one of his friend's airplanes, and dad catching hell when we got home because mom could always 'tell by his smile' that he had been flying. Medical school, a busy practice, and raising three kids delayed my own flying.

"I finally started lessons in 1997 at age 48, soloed at 29 hours, and didn't pass my checkride until a year later at 91 hours. I could blame my slow progress on many things, but in retrospect, I tended to beat myself up for not meeting my own high expectations. At one point I actually asked the flight school owner, 'Will you level with me if I'm one of those people who can never learn to do this?' He said, 'Assume it'll take you two to three times longer than a young person.'"

Once qualified, Phil rented a Cessna 172 locally, "until a scenic cross-country to Boise in one-fourth the driving time whetted my appetite for broader horizons." So he and his buddy George purchased Comanche N6931P. "My first chance to impress Mary Catherine with the capabilities of our new 'family member' was a weekend trip to Boise. Fortunately the weather stayed clear for our return home, as the following day was 9/11."

After earning his instrument rating, Phil flew Mary Catherine to visit family in Minneapolis,

Cleveland, and New York, and then attended a Boston anesthesiologist meeting.

“Witnessing spring emerge across the continent from 9,000-plus feet was unforgettable,” he says. “I also found that the Comanche garnered major brownie points when facilitating family get-togethers. Among our favorite itineraries was to overfly the snowcapped Cascade Mountains for family rounds to Orcas Island, Port Townsend, and Seattle—and then zip back home to Idaho. You can’t do that by car!”

Phil bought George out of 31P in 2004, but unfortunately, his life was about to change. “I was diagnosed with multiple myeloma, a bone-marrow cancer.” When in remission and off chemo, Phil flew to temporary work assignments in five Western states. “Once, my return from Twin Falls was blocked by a storm system, so I visited a med school buddy in Chico, California, before heading home.” More recently, Phil and Mary Catherine flew to Georgia, pausing to visit friends in Tucson and Grand Junction, Colorado.

“Last year I hosted a Comanche fly-in at Sandpoint. Mary Catherine and I delegated host responsibilities at 3 p.m., flew 125 miles to Lewiston for a friend’s wedding, and returned the next morning for the fly-in’s predeparture breakfast. You can only multitask like that with an airplane!

“Does 31P have a soul?” asks Phil. “Obviously it has no conscience or self-awareness, but I think it has lots of good karma. It’s my experience with airplanes that meticulous care is rewarded with consistent, unflinching service. In addition to an engine replacement and an avionics upgrade, I updated the Comanche at every annual inspection: new autopilot, windshield, and an LED beacon.”

Quash any hopes of buying Phil’s beloved Comanche. Before I could spread the word, he stopped me. “An Iowa buyer is en route to Sandpoint with a bank check to buy the plane, and I have a backup full-price offer from a Tulsa pilot. I just hope this guy will appreciate what he’s getting, and care for 31P as well as I have.”

Fortunately my friend continues flying. “I volunteer as a safety pilot, and health permitting, may buy a light sport aircraft.” Should Phil Role have invested 91 hours and a year of his life becoming a pilot at age 49? Who could doubt it!

Greg Brown is an author and a former National Flight Instructor of the Year. [Visit his Web site.](#)