



A Tale *of* Two Clippers

by Budd Davisson

At Sun 'n Fun 2001 there were two very different Piper Clippers parked side by side. One was a glistening red beauty with the look of an airplane that had had much time spent on it. The other was gray and a little frayed around the edges. It looked as if it had had a lot of time spent in it, rather than on it...



1/3 PHILIPPO

Gilbert and Barbara Pierce fly The Red Lady, while their son Steve owns the well-worn gray Piper Clipper. Barbara and Gilbert along with Steve and his friend Cathy all came to Sun 'n Fun 2001 in their Clippers.

The name tags on both airplanes identified them as being owned by a man named Pierce. Gilbert Pierce, of Germantown, Tennessee, owns the red airplane, which he and his wife, Barbara, call The Red Lady. The gray machine is owned by Steve Pierce, Gilbert's son, from Graham, Texas. As different as the two airplanes are, their stories are entwined as much as the story of a close father and son can be.

Gilbert, the elder Pierce, was a career Navy man (an aviation radio technician) who, "...stopped at airports constantly to watch the airplanes take off and land. I was always looking at little airplanes. But, I had three kids and was in the Navy, so...." We all know the rest of that story.

When he retired from the Navy, he started on a second career by going to school to get a degree in mechanical engineering. That career, most of which was spent with Cummings Engine, came to an end last May when he retired. But back

in 1989, his avocations took a 90-degree left turn when his wife Barbara surprised him with a Christmas gift he didn't expect. "She went out to the airport and found out how much it cost to get a license and paid for it. She gave me my pilot's license for Christmas!" Now, what had been a dream became a reality.

Barbara said, "When I got him the lessons, I thought he'd get his license and that would be that. He'd never talked about actually owning an airplane, but as soon as he had his license, he started talking about buying an airplane."

Gil looked around, but his natural ability to build things began to change his perspective. He began to look at building an airplane, which received his wife's blessing. "Somehow, it just made sense to me that you could build an airplane cheaper than you could buy one," she said.

They decided the Kitfox made some sense, so soon there was an airplane going together in their garage. "Besides," she said, "I didn't want

him to have any regrets left in life, and not building an airplane would have been a regret."

Building things and taking stuff apart runs deep in the family. His son, Steve, was heavy into cars while in high school, which was good. What was not good, according to Gilbert, was that the youngster would wheel a car into their garage and take it apart, and it would take them forever to get their garage back.

"We went away for a trip once," Gilbert said, "and to make sure the kids didn't do anything in the garage, I parked our car in there and took the keys with me so it couldn't be moved." Barbara laughed as he told the story.

"We came home, and when I threw the garage door open, it was just like cockroaches scattering when the lights were turned on. Kids and car parts started moving every direction. They had jacked up my car and took it out of the garage so they could move one of Steve's friends'

cars in to change the engine."

Of course, Gilbert can take some blame for Steve's mechanical bent. When it came time for Steve to have a car of his own, Gilbert bought an old Plymouth that had a bad engine. He towed it into the garage and said to his son, "You want a car? There's the car; there're the tools," and walked out.

After Gil got his certificate, he naturally started taking his kids for airplane rides, and the aviation bug bit Steve really hard. When he graduated, he went to Dallas to get his A&P certificate. "While we were doing the dope and fabric part of the course, I started hanging out around the Confederate Air Force (CAF). They were looking for volunteers to do fabric work, so I jumped right in."

After he got his A&P certificate, the CAF asked him if he'd go to shows with them, as a mechanic. Then he went down to Graham, Texas, to help maintain and restore CAF airplanes based there. In a short period of time, he found himself working on warbirds full time at

Nelson Ezell's well-known restoration shop in Breckenridge, Texas.

"I worked for Nelson for about five years, but decided it was time to move on, so with Nelson's blessing, I set up a shop of my own where I now maintain and rebuild everything from J-3s to a prop-jet Malibu. It was about that time I started thinking about learning to fly and getting my own airplane. When I talked about this, Nelson always started talking about a Piper Clipper he had owned and what a great airplane it was. He kept hounding me about the Clipper until I started looking for one." He already knew the airplane fairly well because when he'd been working at Graham there were four Clippers based there.

Just as Gilbert had an effect on Steve, Steve had an effect on his dad. Because he talked so much about the Clipper, Gilbert decided he had to have one, too. The great Clipper hunt was on!

Steve found his airplane up in Utah. "It was a fisherman's airplane that had no interior, and the way it was described, it sounded a little

doggy. But, it was a flyable airplane, although it was out of license. He had a friend look at it and found that it had been described accurately, so we took a trailer up and brought it back down to Breckenridge.

"I wanted to learn to fly in the Clipper, and it wasn't easy finding an instructor who would go along with that. In fact, after a bunch of lessons, I was still having problems. The instructor tried to talk me into learning in something easier. I said, 'I own a Clipper, and I'm going to learn to fly in it' and that was that! Then, one day, the lights came on, and it's been great ever since.

"I guess it's a little bit like the cobbler's kids. I'm so busy working on other people's airplanes, I don't have time to work on my own. Not much anyway. When I got it, one wing wasn't painted, so I took care of that, but I still don't have the headliner in it.

"Mostly what I do is fly the airplane. I finish work and tell my girl, 'I'm going to be out,' and I crank up the Clipper and head for the run-

Piper's Little Four-Place Job

By H.G. Fruitsch

The Piper PA-16 was the first four-place version of the short-wing Piper series of aircraft. When directed to create the Piper PA-15 Vagabond, from the start the Piper engineering staff had an expansion of the design in mind. Howard "Pug" Piper could see there was still a place in the postwar market for a light, inexpensive four-place airplane. When, in late 1947, they finally got the go-ahead to expand the Vagabond, an added bay and door were added with a bench seat. While at a maximum gross weight of 1,650 pounds, the Clipper, powered by the 115-hp Lycoming, could cruise at 112 mph. Equipped with dual controls and a bungee landing gear (the early Vagabond depended completely on the shock absorption capabilities of its Goodyear Airwheel tires and the skill of its pilot), the Clipper was just the ticket for the fellow who wanted to take along the



wife and kiddies. Seven hundred thirty-six Clippers were built before the design became known as the Piper PA-20 Pacer, partially due to the objections of Pan American Airways, which held the trademark/copyright to the Clipper name. Piper had already been working on a revised version of their lightest four-place airplane, so the name change was no big deal.

The Piper PA-16/PA-20/22 series, which included the Tri-Pacer and its variants, still remains one of civilian aviation's most memorable designs. More than 450 of the PA-16 Clippers remain on the FAA registry.

way. It's so light, just over 900 pounds, that even with the stock O-235, it really performs. I take off out of there at max rate, and whatever was bugging me during the day disappears. I absolutely love slipping it around the corner to a landing. It does it so well."

At this point, Steve has more than 1,000 hours in the airplane, so he definitely has been flying the wings off it.

Gilbert took a little longer to find his airplane. "We looked at a few of them, including one that was touted as an award winner," he said and grinned. "Even as we walked towards the airplane, we could see runs in the paint. It was definitely not an award winner!"

Airplanes show up in the oddest places, and Gilbert ran across a "For Sale" notice for a Clipper. He called the owner and asked, "How long has it been for sale?"

The owner responded, "Two years."

Of course that got Pierce concerned, and then the owner added, "At least it's been two years that I've been telling my wife it was for sale."

The airplane was described as a nine on the outside and a five on the inside. So, Gilbert hopped on a Northwest flight to Seattle, looked at the airplane, wrote a check, and headed for home.

He and Barbara flew the airplane for a while, and then Steve came home for Christmas and started to help him do an annual, which showed that the wings needed re-covering. The interior was "...1950s red and black Naugahyde," which they didn't like, so it was time to take the airplane apart and move it into the garage.

The intent was not to re-cover the entire airplane, but they were going to repaint it, which meant stripping as much paint as possible. Much of that fell to Barbara. "Getting the

Gilbert bought an old Plymouth that had a bad engine. He towed it into the garage and said to his son, "You want a car? There's the car; there are the tools," and walked out.

paint off was really tough, but one day I stumbled into a secret. I had been soaking rags in methyl ethyl ketone (MEK) and letting them lay on the paint to soften it. Then, one day, I forgot and went to lunch after putting the rags on. I came back, and the MEK had evaporated, and the rags were stuck to the paint. When I yanked the rags off, every bit of paint under them came off right down to the silver. From that point on, that's how I stripped the paint."

Steve said he now uses the same method to strip paint on the airplanes he's repairing or restoring in his business.

While re-covering the wings, Gilbert also took the opportunity to repair damage resulting from two different ground loops the airplane had suffered in the past.

For a while, both airplanes had the same 115-hp, O-235 Lycoming the Clippers came with during their single year of production in 1949. Then, Gilbert and Barbara went to the Short Wing Piper Club convention in Denver. "We took off, and

we thought we'd never get any altitude."

Barbara said, "He had been talking for a long time about putting a 150-hp engine in The Red Lady, and after that takeoff I told him, 'Go ahead and put the engine in.' Of course, I didn't think to ask what that was going to cost."

You'd think that having an A&P as a son would be a great advantage when it came time to build up an engine, and to a certain extent it was. Gilbert found his engine and shipped it down to his son to help him rebuild it. When he walked into his son's shop, Steve said, "You want an engine? There are the parts; there are the tools." Something about payback time fits here.

Steve laughed when he told the story. "It took him a while, but he finally got it together, and it runs really well."

At the beginning, Steve's Clipper would easily outperform his dad's because it was so light. He said he figures about 110 mph on 6.3 gph. Now, Gilbert's can outclimb him and cruises at 117 to 120 mph on 7.8 gallons.

Steve summed up both of their feelings about the airplanes when he said, "We always have old guys walk up to our airplanes and say, 'I used to have a Clipper. Man, I wish I'd never sold it.' Our airplanes aren't for sale and never will be. There is just too strong of an attachment there."

Steve is now talking about putting an O-320 Lycoming in his airplane, too, because he can't stand to see his dad outperform him. Also, the Short Wing Piper Convention is in Alaska this year, and who knows what kind of terrain they'll be facing.

The Short Wing Piper clan has a strong bond, and nowhere is that bond stronger than between the father and son short-wing team of Gilbert and Steve Pierce. ◆