

C-180: At the Beginning



Red and Marilyn's Oldest 180

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Every legendary airplane has to start somewhere. There has to be a first one. But in the case of utility airplanes, like the omni-present Cessna 180, the very early airplanes seldom survive. Working airplanes are exposed to operating conditions that often preclude long-term survival. Ditto the tailwheel—taildraggers tend to have lower survival rates. Still, miracles do happen and that is the case

with Red Hamilton and Marilyn Boese's Fort Bragg, California-based C-180: it is the first Cessna 180 to leave the factory and only the third one produced (the first two stayed at the factory). Even more amazing, it never deteriorated to the point that it had to be fully restored.

The C-180 was a logical outgrowth of the C-170. In fact, the prototype was exactly that: a C-170 with a 225-hp, Continental 0-470A

stuffed in the nose, plus and modified, rectangular tail surfaces, which were needed to handle the higher horsepower and speeds. It's not known how much input the marketing department had on deviating from the curved outline of the C-170 tail surfaces, but it was a radical departure toward the modern. Art deco was out, cubism was in. The result was that, although the new airplane was clearly based on

the 170, the 180 stood out in a crowd as being something new and different.

Internally, the 180 is essentially 170, with a little extra beef here and there. It's often thought that the 180 is a bigger, wider airplane but that's not the case. Not only are they the same width, but also for the first several years of production, many of the parts numbers were the same.

Factory test pilot Hank Waring made the first test flight of the prototype in January of 1952, and it went into production even before the full type certificate was issued. The first airplane rolled off the production line in October of that year and full type certification wasn't granted until December. A year later, a total of 641 C-180s had rolled off the line at a base price of \$12,950 1953 dollars.

The first two production airplanes were retained by the factory. Initially, they were pressed into service as demonstrators and personnel hacks. In 1956, however, the factory was updating the 180 line and one of the updates involved modified landing gear legs. As part of the testing they did what was essentially a test-to-destruction and the airplane chosen for that test was old Serial No. 30000. They kept dropping it from higher distances until at 12 feet, the airplane itself was damaged to the point that it wasn't economically repairable. The

The oldest Cessna 180 in existence, this 180 was the first one delivered to a customer. Continental Motors bought the airplane brand new in 1952.



second airplane produced was destroyed in an accident leaving N2802A (the first airplane the factory actually delivered to a customer) the oldest surviving C-180.

Incidentally, the first 600 airplanes reportedly had sequential "N" numbers beginning with N2800A, with the only exceptions being the occasional custom number for a customer. The last two digits in the "N" number match the last digits in the serial number.

The airplane was an instant hit. With what was blazing performance for the time, it was hailed as a true "Business Liner" and sales were strong, peaking out in 1955 with an astounding 891 airplanes built. The next year, however, Cessna introduced the C-182. This was the C-180 with a training wheel up front

and no cowl flaps, and sales dropped sharply on the taildragger as the rank and file pilot discovered the joy and simplicity of the nosewheel. By the 1960's approximately 150 airplanes a year were being delivered to those pilots who still saw the taildragger as the ultimate utility airplane and capable of going places the nose-dragger didn't dare go. Production continued until 1981 when the last 180 rolled off the line September 10th of that year.

The first airplane delivered, N2802A, went straight to Continental Motors who put 788 hours on it over the next three years.

Then it went through a succession of owners until Red Hamilton saw it listed for sale. Red freely admits that he is mechanically fixated on older machinery. In fact, that's how he has always made his living.

He says, "I just like old stuff that works."

He's always had an interest in airplanes but it wasn't his primary passion when younger.

"I suppose I shouldn't admit it, but I never did build model airplanes as a kid. I was into cars, and still am. Especially flathead Fords. When I was in my teens, in the 1950's, I started rebuilding Stromberg carburetors. In those days, the old Flathead V-8 wasn't old. A lot of folks were still driving them and the hotrod community, which I was closest to, still used lots of them. My first V-8 was a '39 Deluxe coupe and, after driving Model A's, it made me feel as if I had really arrived."

In his twenties Red went to work for an aerospace company where he found himself working with anything but antique hardware.

"I was in the R & D lab and we were building all sorts of stuff for the space program, including parts for liquid fuel rockets and ablative materials.

"Outside of work, I was doing a fair amount of official and unofficial drag racing. Among other cars I had, and still have, was a 427 Ford Galaxie on which I built the head-



Red and Marilyn with their Cessna 180.

ers. I'd found on the flatheads that the best thing you could do for horsepower was get rid of the manifolds and go with tubing headers to make the exhaust flow easier.

"I was rebuilding a lot of engines, the majority of them flatheads and I equipped just about every one with headers. Then, in 1974, J. C. Whitney, my primary source for headers, stopped producing them, so I started making them myself and that's where my present business got its real start."

As improbable as it sounds, today the old flathead Ford engine is enjoying a major resurgence courtesy of the nostalgia boom in hotrodding as well as the growing interest in early V-8 Ford cars (1932-1953). Hamilton's company, Red's Headers (22950 Bednar Lane, Fort Bragg, CA 95437, 707-964-7733, www.reds-headers.com) was ideally positioned and became part of the boom. The activity was partially fueled by the discovery of hundreds of new flathead Ford engines the French military released in the '90s. Besides his signature tubing headers, he supplies virtually every part necessary to rebuild or hop-up a flathead Ford as well as doing custom rebuilds himself.

"When we were starting a family I made it a point to avoid airplanes because I knew they'd suck me in, and I couldn't afford them. By '84, however, things were going well enough that I started working on my license and did a lot of flying in our club's J-3, 172, etc.

"We bought our first airplane, a 180, in '86 and had two partners. Unfortunately, one of them totaled that airplane so when it came time for a new airplane, we didn't have a partner."

When Red and his wife, Marilyn, went looking for another airplane the 180 was on the top of their want list.

"We called Charles 'Bomber'



Many have speculated that the Cessna 180 was bigger than the 170, but they are the same size. The early 180's instrument panel is nearly identical to its earlier cousin.



Bombardier, founder of the International Cessna 180/185 club. He told us about an airplane that was for sale and told us where to find the ad for it. The ad read ". . . oldest C-180 for sale . . ." The word "oldest" is probably what drew us in.

"That was about 1987 and no one was interested in whether an airplane like a 180 had any significance or not. It was just another old airplane to most people. We, however, really liked the idea of owning the oldest Cessna 180 and especially liked the fact that it was the very first one sold. In production airplanes it's hard to come up with something unique.

"In some ways this airplane is a celebrity because it is one of the airplanes shown in the 1953/54 pilot's handbook.

"In the course of owning the airplane we've tried to find out as much as possible about the airplane and while doing that we ran across an ex-Cessna engineer who had lots of old records about our airplane.

"During the first few months, from October 1952 until January 1953, the factory did a lot of rework on the airplane. In fact, the paperwork generated by Cessna on this one airplane during that time is a stack of paper about an inch thick.

"When we got the airplane it was actually in pretty good condition and most of what we've done has been in the area of cosmetics and making sure it is good mechanically. We wanted it to look original so we bought a copy of the original paint

scheme drawings from Cessna and had it stripped and put back in its 1952 paint scheme.

"I'm an engine guy so I did the engine, an O-470U, myself under the supervision of an A & P. I love doing crankshaft and rod work so I brought the engine up to my standards. That was 600 hours ago and the engine has been trouble free and super smooth during the entire time.

"Being a hotrodder at heart I added a Snyder speed kit to the airframe that added five to six miles per hour so it cruises at an honest 160-165 mph. It already had the pants on it.

"We also cleaned up the panel. The top half is original, including the "hockey puck DG" and antique artificial horizon. The original plastic work is still on the bottom center and we found an original glove box door through the C180/185 club.

"Basically, we've just enjoyed the airplane and fixed things as we needed to."

Red, however, is the kind of hands-on guy who always has to be building/fixing/modifying stuff. And that's what drove him to his current project.

"I bought a 150-hp Tailwind project that I finished and just started flying. It may be a little odd looking compared to more modern airplanes, but it flies really well and is quite fast for a 50-year-old design. Like I said, I like old things that work."

And that pretty well sums it up, doesn't it?