

Not Just Another



Cub Story

The Bair Wings J-3

BUDD DAVISSON

“Oh, no!” someone out there is saying. “Not another story about yet another ridiculously expensive J-3 Cub!”

Yes, we have to admit that this is a story about a J-3 Cub, but hang in there. It's not just *any* J-3 Cub, and you might learn something. We certainly did. Plus, we met some interesting folks, and you will, too.

Every airplane type in history has a circle of enthusiasts around it who know all the historical nit-noids about it. However, quite often those of us outside the circle never hear those tales, and that's the case with the Bair Wings Cub. Not only

is the airplane itself unique, but it also brings up a subject not many of us know much about: airplanes that were produced for unusual purposes and how those that have survived compose an interesting collector's area within vintage airplanes.

The Cub in question, NC37946, is a 1941 model that came into the Bair family's life in 1978, when Jerry Bair of York, Nebraska, bought the airplane from its 19th owner. Jerry and his father, Don, were aviation institutions in that part of the Plains states, having been ag-operators almost from the beginning of the concept. In addition, they operated an FBO and flight school on the York Municipal Airport. Jerry's

son, Craig, who now owns the airplane, received a gift of 10 hours of dual with his grandfather in the airplane. So, to say this airplane has been a part of the family for a long time is an understatement.

In 1983 they decided to re-cover the wings, but in the process discovered dry rot in all four spars, so the wings needed a complete rebuild. Not wanting to take time from their ag operations to do the work themselves, they farmed it out to a local mechanic who took the airplane to his shop to work on it. That turned out to be a mistake; the mechanic moved to the East Coast, and it was 10 years before the Bairs were able to pry the airplane loose and return it home.

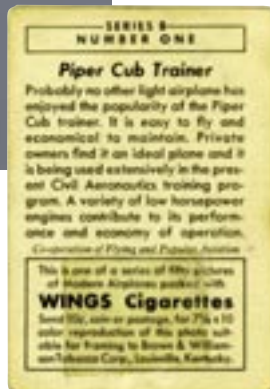


ABBOTT STUDIO, INC., YORK, NEBRASKA

Craig Bair and his supportive wife, Teresa.

Craig, who continued in the family business and is now a third-generation ag-operator, took custody of the airplane and in 1995 began to work on it. He has done an excellent job of telling the Bair Cub story on the signboard that accompanies the airplane, and it's well worth reading.

"I decided that I wanted the aircraft to be completely original, so I began research on what a 1941 Piper Cub should look like. I had heard about a pre-war program in which one Piper dealer in each state could acquire a Flitfire. Those were Cubs painted silver with British markings. I thought it would be pretty neat if my Cub was one of those Flitfires, but I couldn't figure out how to check on that.



COURTESY EAA AIRVENTURE MUSEUM



"In the summer of 1996 someone recommended I contact Clyde Smith Jr. about what my Cub should look like to be original. Clyde gave me some very good information but suggested I attend one of his

restoration workshops."

Smith runs a series of ragwing Piper restoration clinics that take place in various locations around the country. They are considered a "must do" for those serious about that kind of restoration.

"I attended his workshop in September of 1996 in Fort Collins, Colorado. I told Clyde I wanted the airplane to be absolutely original, but he took that with a grain of salt because he'd heard it many times in the past, and people apparently didn't follow through.

"I asked him about the possibility of my aircraft being a British Flitfire, and he said he would look into it when he got home after I gave him my registration and serial numbers.

"About two weeks went by, and I got a call from Clyde. He said, 'I have good news and bad news. What do you want first?' I said, 'Give me the bad news.' He said the Cub is not a Flitfire, but the good news is that it is rarer than a Flitfire: it is a Wings Cigarettes Cub. I asked him how he knew this, and he said it was written in the Remarks section in the original factory records.

"I asked him what he knew about Wings Cigarettes Cubs, and he said, 'Not much, other than they were given away by the cigarette company in 1940 and 1941.' He recommended that I call John Stahly in Indiana because he had done a lot of research on Wings Cubs. I contacted John, and he said he had a Wings Cub, but it wasn't restored to original. He then sent me copies of everything he had on the promotional program that was called Wings of Destiny by the cigarette company."

Finding out he had a rather rare airplane, Craig then became a real Wings-aholic and started scratching around for everything he could find out about the Wings airplanes and what he'd have to do to make his absolutely authentic, right down to the tiniest details. Then he got a boost in the originality department



JIM KOEPNICK

Brown & Williamson Tobacco Co. sold the Wings cigarette brand, and sponsored a number of aviation-related promotional items. In addition to the Wings collector cards that featured illustrations of the modern aircraft of the day, the company sponsored the Wings of Destiny radio program on the Red Network of the National Broadcasting Company (NBC). Each Cub was delivered to an airport nearby the winning contestant's home, and each side of the airplane featured the special logo you see here on.



when Clyde Smith asked to hold one of his workshops in Craig's facility in York, Nebraska.

"While he was there we made a list of everything I'd need to make the Cub original. The biggest items I had yet to locate were an original cowling, carburetor airbox, three-piece windshield, and the black-faced instruments. We then discovered by looking at other Cubs that this one had the cathedral ceiling.



Craig's meticulous work on the Continental engine is apparent in the fit of the cowling and the "eyebrows" above each bank of cylinders.

JIM KOEPNICK PHOTOS



Because of his profession as an agricultural sprayer, Craig Bair couldn't make the trip to Oshkosh for EAA AirVenture 2004, so his friend Dan McNeill of Placerville, California, brought the Wings Cub to the convention.

"I began looking everywhere for any original, pre-war Cub parts. I found the oil temperature gauge and compass in a friend's Cub that was in the rafters of his hangar. Clyde found an oil pressure gauge. I already had the airspeed and altimeter, and Keystone Instruments supplied me with the Waltham tach and overhauled the other instruments.

"For a long time I didn't have an original primer, then found one just sitting on a bench at another friend's shop in Missouri."

The search for parts for an airplane such as this often takes weird and serendipitous turns. For instance, Craig was asked to ferry a 1929 Great Lakes from New York state to Kansas for a friend. While he was weathered-in in New York, he called Mac MacVicor, who had been recommended to him as someone who might have Cub parts.

"I told Mac I needed a three-piece windshield, and I could hardly believe it when he said he had a brand new, 60-year-old one that was still in its factory wrappings. The Pyralin plastic was good only for patterns, but the windshield strips were perfect.

"I also told him I needed original-type cables that had a braided splice. Mac said he hadn't done the five-tuck splices he thought they needed for years and recommended I contact Ken Cassens at [Old] Rhinebeck Aerodrome about it. Ken in turn recommended I call Andrew King.

"We called King's father, who said that Andrew was out of town for about a week and to call back. So, that was that for the time being. The weather was lifting, and I headed west.

"I stopped in Kankakee, Illinois, for fuel and was at the counter paying for my fuel when a gentleman came





JIM KOEPNICK

Noted restorer Andrew King was enlisted to create a set of accurate control cables, complete with Roebling roll splices.

up and asked me if I was the one flying the Great Lakes and wanted to know who I was delivering the airplane to. It turned out he knew both the seller and the purchaser. I about fell over when he introduced himself as Andrew King.

"I told him he was just the guy I'd been looking for and had been told he could splice up cables for my Cub. He said he would be happy to and corrected me and said the original cables were not five-tuck spliced, but Piper used the Roebling roll splice. I sent him my old cables for patterns, and a month later I had a beautiful set of brand new control cables just like they had been made in 1941."

In the course of trying for originality, Craig wanted to re-cover the airplane in Grade A cotton, but was unsuccessful in finding a supplier. Then in a chance conversation with Dip Davis at Superflite, Davis said he'd gotten a brochure from someone who was making certified cotton, but he'd thrown it away. Sensing Craig's concern, however, Davis went through the garbage, found the brochure, and the Bair Wings Cub now had a bolt of aircraft cotton on the way.

Besides scrounging around for Wings Cub parts, Craig was constantly doing the same for Wings Cigarettes memorabilia.

"I was at a flea market in Lincoln,

Clyde Smith Jr., Ragwing Detective

Clyde Smith Jr. provides a service analogous to being a genealogist: he has all the Piper records for all ragwing Pipers and can tell you things about your airplane you never suspected. He can also point out special models many of us never knew existed.

For a paltry \$15 he can supply you with such obscure information as the serial number of the prop that was originally on your airplane when it rolled out of the factory. Or the engine's original make, model, and serial number. He can also tell when it was manufactured and when it actually rolled out the door, which are sometimes quite different. He can also verify the original color, the color scheme, and how the airplane was originally equipped.

One of the most important services, however, is in the records column marked Remarks. This is where factory personnel recorded anything unusual about the airplane. This is where it indicated that the Bair's Cub had been built for the Wings Cigarettes Company to be used in its Wings of Destiny program.

Clyde said, "What I need to work from is the airplane's N number and the serial number. However, people should know that the serial number and the fuselage number aren't the same thing. Often, people call all panicked because their fuselage doesn't match the serial number, and they think they have a problem when they don't. The serial number is on the dataplate, while the fuselage number could be a number of places, depending on the model and age of the airplane."

What kinds of things does Clyde sometimes ferret out for his customers?

"In checking this one particular J-4, I found it had been built specifically for the CAA with a full electrical system, IFR instrumentation, and radios. I sometimes theorize it was headed for the Forestry Service or something, but don't know that for a fact. "The airplane was painted orange with black trim and had the CAA logo on the door."

Some of the better-known Cub variants like the Flitfires pop up from time to time.

"I show eight Flitfires still on the registry and just recently had the fun of telling a lady in Seattle that her Cub was an original Flitfire. At this point, I think I've located all the Flitfires."

A Cub variant that is practically unknown was identified by Piper as a Cub Sport.

"These airplanes were produced in 1938, '39, and '40 and were greatly upgraded airplanes. They had red leather interiors, spinners, strut cuffs, and wheelpants. Considering that 6,600 out of the original 14,000 Cubs built are still registered, there are probably a lot of undiscovered Sports out there.

"There are also a bunch of TG-8 gliders around that have been converted with the addition of an engine. They are easily identified because the fuselage number, not the serial number, starts with a G. I know of only four TG-8s left in their original configuration."

Another rare variation is the HE-1, an ambulance model based on the J-5/PA-12 airframe.

"There were 100 HE-1s built, but I know of only eight left. But who knows what may turn up in a barn somewhere."

So, do you have a special airframe hiding under that fabric you fly around on weekends? Call Clyde and find out.

Clyde Smith Jr.

570/748-7975

Box 721

Lock Haven, PA 17745

E-mail: cubdr@chillitech.net

Nebraska, and found a Wings Cigarette poster and asked the dealer if he had anything else having to do with Wings. He asked why, and I told him about the Cub. A lady in the booth behind us asked me if it would be okay if she tried to find the family who had won the Cub in 1941.

"It was only a few days later when I got a call from the nice lady who was really excited. She had found the Nivers family, and Richard Nivers had been the winner. His brother, Robert, was still living in Omaha. The family couldn't believe the airplane had survived all these years and were very excited to hear from me. They said Richard was still alive, but in a rest home in Burbank, California, suffering from Alzheimer's disease.

"Robert collected everything he could find about the Cub and sent copies to me. He said that he remembered the day of the Cub giveaway vividly because he sat in his parent's 1938 Buick and listened to the news about the attack on Pearl Harbor: the presentation giving the Cub to Nivers took place the morning of December 7, 1941."

While researching the screws and bolts for the airplane, Craig had been told by reliable sources that all of the screws were slotted, not Phillips, and of course it was all Type One cad-plated, not Type Two. So, he bought enough bolts and screws to do the entire airplane and sent them all to United Plating in Tulsa, Oklahoma, to be re-plated in Type One.

"Clyde Smith overhauled the engine for me in Lock Haven and had a new nose bowl made by Freeman Aviation. He was almost done with the engine when a friend and I drove over to help him finish. While there, I went through the literally tons of Cub pictures Clyde has. While doing that, I found an original picture of a 1941 instrument panel and noticed that Piper



JIM KOEPNICK

used Phillips screws on the instruments and to fasten the panel to the boot cowl. The photo also clearly shows black wrinkle finish paint on the instrument panel, carburetor heat well, throttle plates, and fuel shutoff well. We would have never known that without that photograph.

"When finishing the airplane, we followed Piper Report 381 with two exceptions: we didn't use nitrate dope, and we painted all metal parts with Air-Tech poly paint."

The Wings Cubs were clearly identified by a distinctive Wings of Destiny logo on the side, and that had to be duplicated exactly.

"Clyde had an original photograph of a Wings Cub, and between that one, others supplied by the Nivers, and my original posters, we had solid references to work from. My helper's brother, Greg Elliott, is a professional sign painter, and he said he really wanted to paint the sign on the Cub. Greg made up a full-size drawing from the posters and pictures and sent it over for us to proof. It looked identical to the originals. In December of 2003, Greg drove over from western Nebraska on a Friday and began to hand-paint the sign on each side of the Cub. By Sunday morning, we had two exact duplicates of the Wings of Destiny signs on 37946."

According to Craig, the reassembly after painting was easy because they had completely assembled the entire airplane before it was covered, so all the fairings had been trimmed and drilled and the rigging was done.

"The first test flight was on March 20, 2004, and went without a hitch.

We only had to adjust the right rear strut to correct for a slight wing-heavy condition. I have test-flown many aircraft, but this one meant the most to me. It was just like my first solo flight. Flying around in this airplane reminds me why I learned to fly.

"In June of 2004, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Nivers drove over to see the airplane for the first time since 1941. Robert even went for a ride. He also brought along several pictures and other bits of memorabilia about 37946 for me to keep. It was quite a thrill for us."

The story of the Bair Wings Cub shows that many threads of history can weave themselves together into an artifact that simply can't be duplicated: the Pearl Harbor connection, the fact that the Nivers survived along with the airplane, the discovery that the Bair's family Cub was a rarity, those first 10 hours of flight with granddad.

These kinds of things can't be orchestrated. Fate somehow made a series of decisions that combined to say that this airplane and these people should survive, and they would find their way into the hands of someone like Craig Bair, who wanted to see that those bits of history should be treated with the care and respect they deserve.

Like we said, this isn't just another J-3 Cub story.

P.S.

Did we mention that the Bair Cub tied for Antique Reserve Grand Champion *and* won a Silver Lindy at EAA AirVenture Oshkosh 2004? Not too shabby! And did we mention that in the course of the interview it was discovered that Craig's father gave this writer his first three hours of dual instruction in the late 1950s? The threads of aviation history often cross in unexpected places. 