

The Deatons' Beautiful Family



Bonanza

Creating a Grand Champion, one step at a time

by Sparky Barnes Sargent

JIM KOEPNICK

6 SEPTEMBER 2010



If you were at EAA AirVenture Oshkosh this past summer and ambled through the vintage field, you may have noticed a beautifully restored 1954 Bonanza E35 nestled next to a friendly bivouac of enthusiastic aviators. Owners Jeff and Suzette Deaton kept N3214C's cowling and door propped open so that passersby felt welcome to peer inside the immaculate engine room and plush, well-appointed cabin. After all, N3214C is a two-time Grand Champion winner at national fly-ins (see sidebar for list of awards). The Deaton family, of Morehead City in coastal North Carolina, are frequent fliers in their Bonanza, and Oshkosh is just one of their destinations.

As a youngster in southern Illinois, Jeff loved going over to the local airport to watch the airplanes land. "My dad worked for Ozark Air

Lines, and I was just fascinated by airplanes," he recalls with a smile.

"I started flying with my dad when I was 15, soloed a Cessna 150 in my 20s, and then joined the Marine Corps. My first of many jobs in the Marine Corps was a plane captain on A-4s and Harriers, and one of my many responsibilities was to make sure the airplane was safe to fly—so that has carried over into my own flying during and long after retiring from the Marine Corps."

Suzette, a reading specialist teacher who teaches K-5 reading remediation, is a willing passenger in the Bonanza. "As for learning how to fly, that's on my list. Right now, he says I know just enough to be dangerous," she shares, laughing and adding, "Even though I don't fly, I am such an aviation enthusiast, and I support Jeff 100 percent. I don't want to know how much it costs, though—when people ask me how much it cost to restore it, I just say, 'Beachfront property!' But the airplane takes me to the beaches—and many other places!"



JIM KOEPNICK

The Bonanza has clean, sleek lines—and completely restored retractable gear.

Adopting Charlie

When the Deatons adopted N3214C in the late 1990s, they didn't really think of it as a restoration project. It was a bit bedraggled appearancewise, but it didn't seem to have any visible corrosion or major structural items that needed repair. "I went through the log-books, so I got the general idea that it's rough-looking, but there was a good foundation under there," recalls Jeff. "The guy had flown it 12 hours in the previous six years, and there was a lot of haggling over the price—finally he came down, and I bought it. It wasn't really flyable at the time; I couldn't get the gear up, and the radios only worked intermittently—it took six weeks just to get it safe to fly. Then after that, as we flew it on short trips, all the little demons and gremlins we didn't know about started rearing their heads."

Committed to the concept of continually improving the airplane as needed, Jeff diligently and carefully guided its restoration, accom-

plishing much of the work himself. Throughout those nine years, he continued flying the Bonanza, setting aside time primarily during the winters to tackle those gremlins one by one. "Usually I'd down the airplane in late November, until around April," shares Jeff. "I would spend all that time doing my major projects and then bring it back up and fly in the spring. And maybe I'd do one medium-size project in the summer."

Along the way, one incidental item became the source of N3214C's nickname. It was a special-order prop cover with the plane's registration number. Jeff had placed the order over the phone, and after announcing "C," which wasn't clearly understood, casually stated it again as "you know, 'C,' as in 'Charlie Girl.'" Lo and behold, when he received the finished cover, it had been embroidered with "Charlie Girl" instead of "C." Jeff removed the stitching for "Girl," but left "Charlie" intact, and the name stuck.

Twins!

During those nine years, the Deatons welcomed two more into their family. No, not airplanes, but twin baby boys who made their premature arrival on May 30, 2001. Blake and Shane were born at 24 weeks, and each weighed less than 2 pounds. Since Suzette and the babies were in a hospital nearly two hours' drive away from home, *Charlie* quickly fulfilled the role of commuter plane. "I'd been up at the hospital in Greenville for three days, and I'd just gone home and had five hours of sleep when they called and said, 'We need you up here fast.' So the fastest way for me was the Bonanza; I got up there in about 18 minutes, but I had already missed the birth of the babies. I continued using the plane as a way to go back and forth from Greenville, so I did that through the end of September."

After both twins had made the transition home for about a month, Jeff and Suzette took them flying—more from necessity than a desire

to introduce them to aviation at such a tender age. “At that time, they were having checkups at Duke Eye Center every six months,” explains Suzette. They had to have eye exams under anesthesia, because when babies are born at 24 weeks, they have something called retinopathy of prematurity, where the retina detaches. So we had all those trips to do, which would have been three hours away by car. Blake’s retinas are fine now after surgery, but Shane has had 11 eye operations, and the retinas are still detached. So he has to see a retina specialist in Detroit once a year, and if Jeff is not able to fly to Detroit, Miracle Flights for Kids will fly both Shane and I there.”

In between all of the medical appointments early on, Jeff continued to work on improving various aspects of the Bonanza, and safety was foremost in his mind. “Now, I’m not only flying my wife in there, but also my babies,” says Jeff, “so it becomes even more important to make sure it’s safe, and Suzette was real good about supporting the work on *Charlie*.”

Competitive Spirit

It just so happened that one afternoon in 2001 there was a fly-in at Michael J. Smith Airport in Beaufort, where N3214C was based. Jeff, back from a morning flight, was persuaded to register his airplane for judging. He did so, rather hesitantly, and went home to do some yard work. Later that afternoon, he and Suzette went to the airport and discovered that their Bonanza had been selected as Grand Champion.

Jeff, a former football player, felt his old competitive spirit awoken. A few months later, he flew to another local fly-in in New Bern, where the Bonanza won again. Inspired by these awards, Jeff asked if the airplane might qualify to win an award at a national fly-in. The answer was a resounding no, but Jeff took that as constructive criticism. “I took the advice of tech experts in the American Bonanza



SPARKY BARNES SARGENT PHOTOS

Jeff spent numerous hours detailing the engine compartment.



Close-up view of the old “towel bar” antenna and stinger tail mod, which is designed to give the plane a longer look.

Society and read the articles of others who had completed projects in order to acquire the knowledge to push forward on this endeavor,” says Jeff. “I took two years of really fine-tuning, tweaking, building, and replacing components, redid the interior, and just went through the entire airplane. I took what Beechcraft gave us and polished out some of the areas that I thought would enhance it. I haven’t [personally] done all the work on it, but I’ve been involved in 95 percent of it. If I haven’t been turning a wrench, I’ve been right

there quarterbacking the situation, or being a part of it and learning as I’ve gone along.”

Mix of Original and Mods

Jeff strived to maintain the Bonanza’s originality to some degree, while incorporating functional modifications and technological advances. *Charlie* still has a Continental E225 engine, generator, its original propeller, art deco instrument panel (repainted with new avionics), windows, the two-piece windshield, and its “piano key” switches along the bottom panel.



This is how the landing gear looked right after Jeff “adopted” the Bonanza.



Now that’s a clean nose gear well.



A nice and clean wheel well.

JEFF DEATON PHOTOS



Close-up view of the new Whelen LED strobe on the fuselage, which draws less than an amp.

SPARKY BARNES SARGENT

One of the first improvements he made was the paint scheme. Suzette wasn’t fond of the original Bonanza scheme of polished aluminum with orange trim, so Jeff decided he’d like to paint it white with blue and gold trim. Suzette designed the paint scheme by looking at numerous photos of other airplanes and then coloring in an outline of a Bonanza with color pencils representing various schemes. When they settled upon one they really liked, Jeff turned to Brian Strong at Blue Sky Aviation for the initial paint job.

When it came time to revitalize the cabin interior, Jeff did the hands-on prep work of stripping the panel and painting the interior. Then he turned to Dennis Wolter at Air Mod in Batavia, Ohio. Jeff discussed several items that he wanted to modify, including replacing the

bench seat with individually adjustable seats, to allow him more legroom and a comfortable viewing distance from the panel while flying instrument flight rules (IFR). And he wanted plush, leather upholstery in the cabin, along with shoulder harnesses for safety’s sake. “I told him I wanted it to be gorgeous,” says Jeff, smiling, “and that I wanted to take what Beechcraft gave us and very tastefully complement it. He did a phenomenal job.”

The old electrical wiring system—which had evolved over the years into a veritable rat’s nest of bad wires—was completely replaced. New avionics were installed by Bill Betts and crew of Sparkchasers Aircraft Services Inc. of Smithfield, North Carolina (see sidebar for equipment list), and the battery box was moved forward of the fire-

wall to accommodate the new radios. Jeff puts his instrument rating to good use with all of the cross-country flying that he does, so new avionics were important to him. "I fly hard IFR, minimum approaches, and I work it when I fly it," he explains. "It is a nice-looking plane, but it does get flown!"

Other easily visible mods include the paint scheme, stinger tail, and V-35 ventilation system (since N3214C is based in a hot, humid coastal environment). Met-Co-Aire Hoerner wingtips have also been installed, along with Whelen LED strobes. "In the cockpit, the PS Engineering 8000B audio panel powers the certified PS Engineering PAV80 DVD system that is custom mounted in the rear headrests, which is great on all the long trips we make," says Jeff. "We also have a screen that deploys from the front glove box for the front passenger. Combine that with satellite weather and XM radio, and *Charlie* is very well-equipped to also entertain its flight crew."

In 2007, Jeff tackled the landing gear. "We took the entire gear system out, replaced the struts, stripped paint, primed, and repainted all of the gear components and the entire belly of the airplane," he says. "In my line of business with yacht restoration, I've done a lot of painting over the years, and I used a HVLP system to paint this. Another project was doing a top overhaul on the engine, and I literally spent years doing an extraordinary amount of detailing work."

Just one glance in the engine room reveals the results of that detailing—such as the polished baffling and firewall. The old baffling was in pretty sad shape, so Jeff ordered a new FAA/PMA baffling kit from Structural Repair Specialists LLC in Minnesota and used the old pieces as templates when it came time to fit and trim.

Throughout those years of hard work, Jeff remained open to suggestions about improving his Bonanza. In addition to help from his



SPARKY BARNES SARGENT

The well-appointed cabin.

“... I wanted to take what Beechcraft gave us and very tastefully complement it.”

—Jeff Deaton

type club's technical counselors, he also paid close attention to several other folks who were knowledgeable about vintage aircraft. "H.G. Frautschy, Steve Bender, and the late Dean Richardson took the time to help me—I think they saw that I had dogged determination, and a lot of heart," recalls Jeff. "They took the time to give me pointers to make the plane safe and better—not just to win awards. They really helped and encouraged me—and now it's my turn to give to somebody else coming up."

Family Bonanza

Now that the twins, Blake and Shane, are beyond the threshold

of constant medical attention, the family flies *Charlie* on a regular basis up and down the East Coast visiting family, as well as on vacation trips to the Bahamas and to national fly-ins. "We love going to the shows," says Jeff, smiling, "and this [aviation] fraternity that we're in is just a wonderful organization to be a part of. I can't tell you how many people have come up that say, 'I used to have one of those when I was 19 years old,' and they'll get teary and weepy. I think it's just like opening a time capsule for them. The thing that makes me feel the best is that I've never heard somebody say, 'Gosh, you really took it too far; I wish



you'd kept it original."

Jeff enjoys "putting Blake up in the cockpit with me, and pointing out things to him so he'll know the instruments. I hope Blake can fly one day; I do try to involve him as much as possible, because I want him to be a part of it." After all, *Charlie* isn't just an airplane to the Deatons; it's a member of their family. This 1954 Bonanza is richly entwined with their family's history, and because of that, N3214C's presentation book can't help but resemble a family photo album.

Thanks to *Charlie*, 8-year-old Blake is already enamored with flying. "I want to be a pilot," he says, "and fly a warplane—like a Harrier—or fly an aerobatic plane. I like coming to Oshkosh, and this year, I got to go in the Lancaster—it was pretty awesome!" His brother, Shane, wasn't with the family during AirVenture, and Suzette explains, "He is so visually impaired and dealing with possible autism, it's very difficult...that's why he is not able to be here at the show with us—but he does travel with us

on many other trips that we know he would enjoy."

Suzette emphasizes that *Charlie* is a family plane. "The kids go flying with us. I have parents that live in West Virginia, so we fly there to visit, and Jeff's mother lives in Illinois, so we fly there, too. The airplane just allows us to go places quicker, and Shane isn't able to sit in a car for 10 hours—so the plane has been a lifesaver, because it allows him the comfort to get there faster. Restoring it really has been a labor of love, and we're hoping to



JIM KOEPNICK

pass this down to Blake one day. No matter if we get another airplane—we'll always keep *Charlie*."

The Deatons are quite pleased with *Charlie* as their family flier—it can carry 725 pounds with full fuel (56 gallons). It cruises at 155 knots with a fuel burn of around 9.8 gph, giving it a range of four hours and 45 minutes. Yet *Charlie* is more than just a mode of quick family transportation, an excellent IFR-cross country machine, and an award-winning showplane. It's also a form of community outreach. "I

N3214C Awards

| |
|--|
| Grand Champion, Contemporary—VAA Chapter 3, May 2001 |
| Grand Champion—EAA Chapter 1171, October 2001 |
| Best Custom Classic over 165 hp—Sun 'n Fun Fly-In at Lakeland, Florida, 2004 |
| Best Custom Classic—Burlington VAA Chapter 3, May 2004 |
| Outstanding Beechcraft—AirVenture Oshkosh 2004 |
| Outstanding Classic—Sun 'n Fun 2005 |
| Best in Show—Burlington VAA Chapter 3, May 2005 |
| Outstanding Custom Class C—AirVenture Oshkosh 2006 |
| Best Custom Classic—Sun 'n Fun Fly-In at Lakeland, Florida, 2006 |
| Best Custom Classic Runner-Up—AirVenture Oshkosh 2006 |
| Grand Champion Custom Classic—Sun 'n Fun Fly-In at Lakeland, Florida, 2007 |
| Charles Lindbergh Award Winner Best Custom Classic—AirVenture 2007 |
| Featured in the EAA movie <i>Spirit of Aviation</i> narrated by Harrison Ford—2008 |

N3214C Equipment

| |
|--|
| PS Engineering PMA 8000B audio panel w/cell phone and MP3 interface |
| Garmin GNS 530W (WAAS certified) |
| NSD-360 HSI |
| King KX 155 including second G/S |
| Garmin GTX 330 transponder with traffic |
| S-TEC 30 autopilot with/alt and GPS |
| JPI EDM-700 engine monitor with fuel flow |
| Digital voice recorder and air traffic control playback |
| PS Engineering PAV80 DVD system with two DVDs mounted in rear headrest and one deploying from glove box. AM, FM, XM, MP3, CD, DVD capable. Each seat can have independent entertainment option |
| Garmin 696 hard wired to panel and 530 with XM weather, traffic, and terrain |
| Bose X headsets |
| BAS three-point harnesses for front seats |
| Custom glare shield with selectable red/white lighting with dimmer by Air Mod |
| PAI-700 vertical card compass |



Suzette and Jeff Deaton with their son Blake at AirVenture.



Blake, with his autographed Team Oracle cap perched atop his head, shows one of his favorite toys.

used to fly a lot of Young Eagles, and I've probably flown about 500 people in *Charlie*. We used to have an airport appreciation day, and I'd fly seven or eight hours, taking 50 to 60 people flying in a day."

Encircle the Family

The advantages of owning and restoring a vintage airplane and using it as a family traveling machine are numerous, and the Deatons both offer some suggestions about how to accomplish that. "I would say, from my perspective, that you don't have to start big. If you can find an airplane that has the potential—you've got to be willing to put in the work, of course—you don't have to throw your wallet at it immediately. It is affordable to buy an airplane," declares Suzette, adding passionately, "and I would especially encourage someone to buy an older airplane and restore it, because [otherwise] these airplanes are going to end up abandoned in a field someplace—and then the future generations are not going to see what a 1954 airplane could look like."

"I just think they built things better back then. Technology and avionics are better these days, but

“...I would especially encourage someone to buy an older airplane and restore it, because [otherwise] these airplanes are going to end up abandoned in a field someplace....”

—Suzette Deaton

these airplanes were built with craftsmanship and attention to detail. You can't polish plastic, but you can make this airplane look like a gem, if you put a lot of love and sweat into it," explains Jeff. "You need to make sure and do your research on what you're going to buy, and know that you don't have to fix it all at once. I did it as I could afford it; I never borrowed any money. Get your family involved; take them on a nice trip or do something that shows useful-

ness of the airplane. If you do those things, I think it encircles your family in the whole process. Don't just keep it in the hangar, where all you see is money going out and not much return for it. I always say it's like a bank—you get out of it what you put into it; it's a relationship and takes a lot of love. For me, I get out with interest." Indeed; *Charlie* continually pays the Deaton family back with dividends they would hardly have imagined the day they first adopted it.

