

Vernon's CAA Airmaster

The Bronze Age Outstanding
Closed Cockpit Monoplane

BY NICK HURM



PHIL HIGH

8 JULY 2008



Vernon Heyrman



ernon Heyrman was looking to buy a Fairchild 24. He ended up with a Cessna Airmaster.

Why the change of heart, Vernon?

"I liked the Fairchild 24—but—Ed Wegner has the nicest one out there," Heyrman joked. "I couldn't buy a Fairchild because there is no way you can bring one along and make it look that good."

Ironically, Heyrman's "Plan B," a newly acquired 1940 C-165 Airmaster, sat just a few rows away from Wegner's Ranger-powered plane at EAA AirVenture Oshkosh 2007. And it was Wegner, a fellow Wisconsinite, who gave the new owner quite the compliment.

"Ed told me I have the nicest Cessna on the field," said Heyrman, who took home Bronze Age Outstanding Closed

Cockpit Monoplane at the conclusion of the fly-in.

It was a busy month for Vernon, who bought the aircraft in June from longtime owner Ken Coe of Livermore, California. Heyrman traveled to California with Cessna pilot extraordinaire Jay Baeten, and Coe helped get the two acquainted with the ship before a 22-hour flight back to Heyrman's hanger just outside Green Bay, Wisconsin.

"When I first bought it, I had a little bit of buyer's remorse," Heyrman said. "I kept thinking, 'Did I do something stupid?' When we were flying it back I fell in love with it and knew I made the right decision."



Here's the interior of the Airmaster, complete with tan whipcord upholstery.



AARON LURTH PHOTOS



For anyone who's flown an older Cessna, those rudder pedals sure look familiar.

Custom Colors

NC21914 rolled out of the Wichita factory on February 21, 1940, in Command-Aire green with white trim and a black pinstripe—a far cry from its current look—it now sports 181 square feet of international orange on the wing and jet black on the fuselage.

That paint scheme came cour-

tesy of the Civil Aeronautics Administration (CAA) in 1943.

The airplane was originally bought from the factory by Hanger Six, a flying outfit based out of Stinson Field in San Antonio. Two years later, the aircraft was sold to the Defense Plant Corporation and leased to the CAA. With it came an abbreviated N-number change, 237E, as

well as the new paint scheme.

According to aircraft builder and historian Gar Williams, at least two Airmasters were used by the CAA and a number of others were impressed into the Army Air Force for the duration of World War II. No paperwork is available indicating how Heyrman's Airmaster was used. The CAA performed many duties dur-



AARON LURTH



PHIL HIGH

ing the war, including airway development, which could have been a likely job for 237E.

Airmasters were exceptional camera planes because of their rock-solid stability. One former owner joked the Airmaster can cut through turbulence like a DC-3. Of the 186 built, 23 were sold or converted by the factory for aerial photography. N237E was not one of them on record; however, camera equipment was installed.

"I looked in the belly, and the holes were still there in the wood for the big camera," said West Coast antiquer Don Carter, who owned the airplane from 1961 to 1970. "It was all covered over, but they were there."

As luck would have it, Carter learned a little more history of the Airmaster on a trip to Oakland.

"I was doing some air show stuff during that time in a Bücker and Ryan ST. I had Security Parachute Company in Oakland build me a chute. When I got to the place, there was a picture on the wall of an Airmaster. So I got talking and pulled out a picture of mine, and they informed me they used to own the airplane. The guy said he used



Once hailed as the “world’s most efficient airplane,” the Airmaster was the first production design of Clyde Cessna’s nephew, Duane Wallace. The C-34, the first version of the Airmaster, is acknowledged as the airplane that saved Cessna from becoming just another defunct airplane builder. Vern Heyrman’s Airmaster is one of the last ones built.

to have an aerial photography business he used the plane for.

“He claimed they went to 20,000 feet doing high-altitude photography. That’s with two guys—pilot and camera operator, and one of those big Fairchild cameras. I said, ‘How long did it take you to get there?’ He said, ‘Well, we brought our lunches along!’”

The president of Security was aviation and parachute pioneer John Maggi, who owned the airplane from 1948 to 1955. Maggi was one of the first air show sky divers—we’re talking the 1920s—and later flew Curtiss Helldivers in the Marines during World War II. He was voted into the Aviation Pioneer Hall of Fame in 1998.

The airplane went through a few owners before Carter bought the plane. He said the airplane was in good condition except for one glaring problem. Someone repainted it.

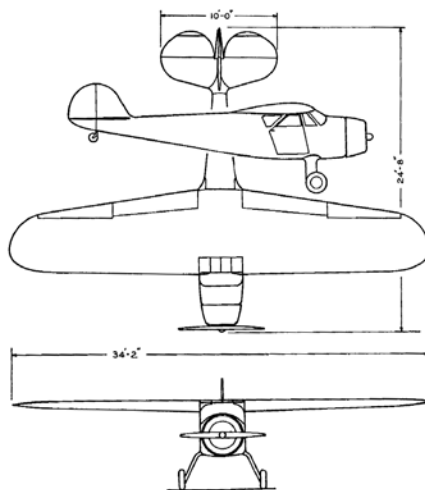
“It was a horrible yellow with light green trim,” Carter said. “I figured I could fix that. Everything was straight on it. I just painted it back to the CAA colors.”

Carter sold the airplane to Coe in 1970. Until June, Coe had owned the Airmaster for more than 30 years and had logged 1,300 hours in it. He re-covered the fuselage in Irish linen in 1976. Rick Atkins of Ragtime Aero in Placerville, California, re-covered the wing in 1994 and maintained the airplane.

Throughout the years Coe owned

it, he was able to keep the airplane ding-free.

“You want to keep the thing going straight on landing and takeoff,” Coe said. “The tail is really heavy. If you



“I kept thinking, ‘Did I do something stupid?’ When we were flying it back I fell in love with it and knew I made the right decision.”

get the thing out of alignment, you can put it in the weeds really easy. I’m proud in the fact that all of the years I flew it, I never put it in the weeds.”

Heyrman and Baeten also got some flying advice from another Airmaster expert, 98-year-old Mort Brown, who was Cessna’s chief production test pilot from 1939 until 1972.

“I called Mort Brown and asked him if there were any quirks,” Baeten said. “He told me the airplane is pretty straightforward. Come across the fence at 75 if you two-point it and 80-85 if you’re going to wheel land it.”

Baeten said during the 22-hour trek back, the 165 Warner sounded good, burning 8 gallons an hour at 1850 rpm. They averaged 120 mph. That’s pretty good efficiency today from the airplane once deemed “the world’s most efficient airplane.”

Back home, Heyrman said everyone seems to be taking a liking to his new airplane.

“When we put it in the hangar it was like the new girl in town,” Heyrman said. “Everyone was coming up to look at it.”

Heyrman also got the thumbs up from the person who matters most, his wife, Cheryl.

“My wife wants to fly in this airplane. I think she likes the looks of it.”

For a guy who doesn’t have the world’s nicest Fairchild 24, it seems like he’s done pretty well. 