

The Aztec prior to its makeover.

Creating the Perfect Piper

The Refurbishing of a 1966 Aztec

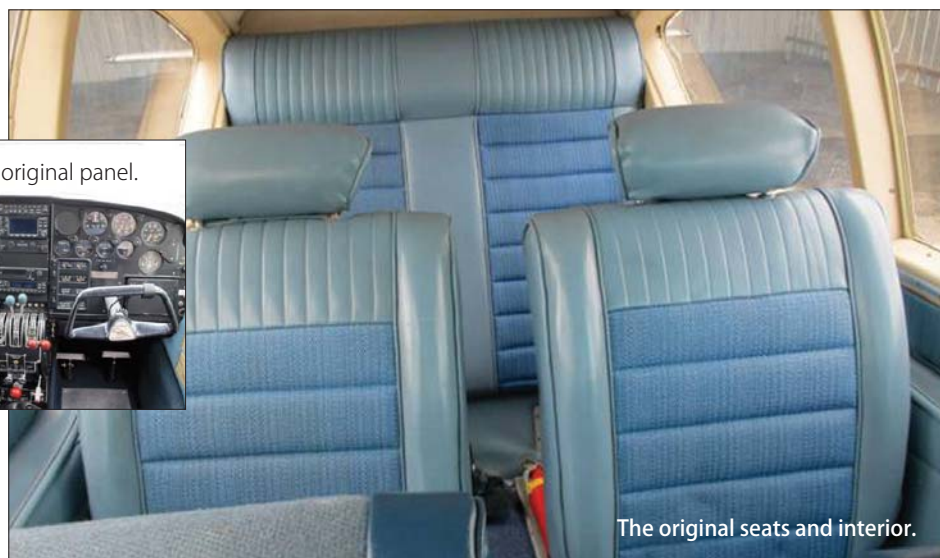
By Roger S. Battistoni

I have been able to enjoy flying personally and professionally for many years.

I have owned a multitude of aircraft, from single-engine, fixed-gear Cessnas to Mooneys to various Pipers to SOCATAs. Most recently, I had a very rare, pressurized, cabin-class twin; it was a Rockwell Commander 700. In 2000, I decided to turn my passion for General Aviation into a business, MultiCorp Aviation, which specializes in helping people purchase and sell their aircraft, manage corporate flight departments, and provide full refurbishment project management and consultation.

Unfortunately, in the first quarter of 2009, my wife and I made the very difficult decision to sell our pressurized twin. We knew full well that, due to the fall of the economy, the market for pressurized twins would plummet within the next few months.

After being without an aircraft for almost a full year, my wife and I realized



A view of the original panel.

The original seats and interior.

that not only did our decision to sell our convenient mode of transportation affect our quality of life, but it also became apparent that life without an aircraft complicates business travel for my MultiCorp Aviation. In early 2010, I embarked upon a search for the perfect airplane to fit within our budget, carry the amount of

baggage my wife manages to pack in a matter of minutes, and provide the comfort we were used to when traveling in the big pressurized twin. My wife wanted pressurization and cabin class. However, still looking at the falling values of those aircraft, we nixed that idea. The financial institutions were not enthused with the



Removing the old panels and insulation.

idea of lending money for a pressurized twin unless one had the cash in the bank to pay for the aircraft a few times over even with excellent credit, so that made the decision easier.

My wife liked the cabin configuration of our former Turbo Lance. However, I wanted to keep the purchase price below \$100,000, so the Seneca was out.

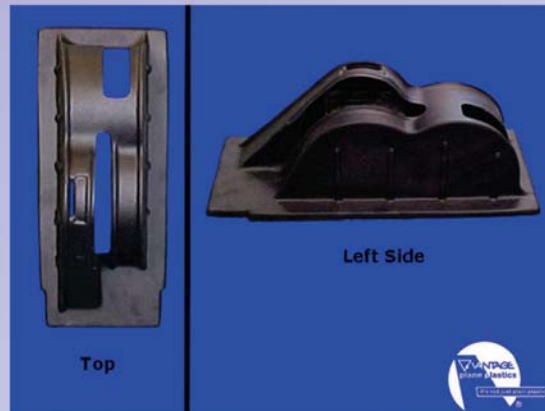
I ran across a nice 1966 Aztec. Usually, I don't purchase an airplane this old, but this one had only 3,800 hours on it, and the current owners were two professional pilots. The paint was original, as was the interior, which showed very little wear, and the panel had been upgraded with a Garmin 340, Garmin 430, and Gamin GTX 330 transponder with traffic. It was a nice base aircraft. After showing it to my wife, she was a little less convinced, but relented. Actually, what she said was, "Honey, that's fine. Just don't show me anything until it's out of refurbishment; and please don't forget to make a special glove box for all my stuff."

After a quick annual inspection to verify the engines (which were overhauled by Teledyne Mattituck Services, Inc.) and the soundness of the airframe, I flew the airplane from New York to Tampa, where all of the work would take place. The goal was to turn this 1966 aircraft into an airplane that looked like it rolled off of the production line in 2010.

In a sit-down meeting with my team of companies that I use to refurbish all of

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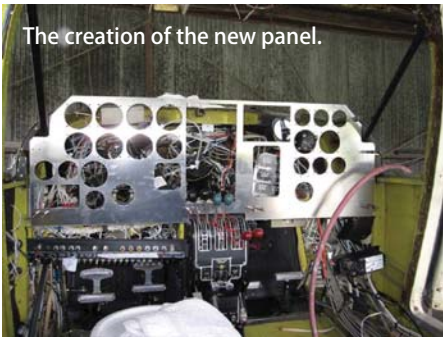
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The creation of the new panel.



Installing the new insulation.



Real air conditioning!

the aircraft that MultiCorp Aviation represents, as well as my own personal aircraft, I laid out a plan for new paint, new interior, air conditioning (desperately needed in Florida), new metal panel, upgrading some of the avionics, new windows, new insulation, new exterior lighting, and upgrading some of the key accessories on the engines. Having so many refurbishments under by belt, I always knew to expect the unexpected, and this aircraft did not prove me wrong.

The first step was the disassembly. Every panel, window, and piece of the interior was removed. After that was the removal of all of the aircraft's insulation. With the panels off and insulation removed, it was time to bring in Richard Todd, my avionics and electrical system expert. He performed a great deal of work. To summarize, after four weeks of working six days a week, 12 hours per day, Richard finished the creation of the new Diamond Aire metal panel, panel-mounting the Garmin 696, installing Electronics International R-1 digital tachometers, installing a J.P. Instruments FS-450



The final product. Wow, what a difference!

fuel flow and totalizer system, and installing an Insight twin-engine graphic engine analyzer; rewiring most of the avionics; installing new LED post lights; wiring up the air conditioning; installing new exterior LED lights, a new XeVision HID landing light, and a new Whelen LED taxi light; and finding and correcting more than a dozen wiring issues that could have caused a major fire.

As you can see, there were many lights installed. My wife and I do a lot of night flying, and my primary concern is safety. The aircraft did not come with a strobe system, and after looking at all the options, I settled on the three-in-one nav/LED lights from AveoEngineering. The great thing about them is that they don't require a strobe power pack; it is all done by LEDs. Richard simply had to wire a data wire from each light, and all the lights communicate with each other to flash the LEDs in sequence. In addition, we replaced the tail beacon with a drop-in Whelen LED beacon to finish off the system. The landing lights were a different story, considering the Aztec only has one, and there are no STCs to add additional landing lights. We ordered a new 50-watt HID landing light and a 50-watt HID taxi light from XeVision;

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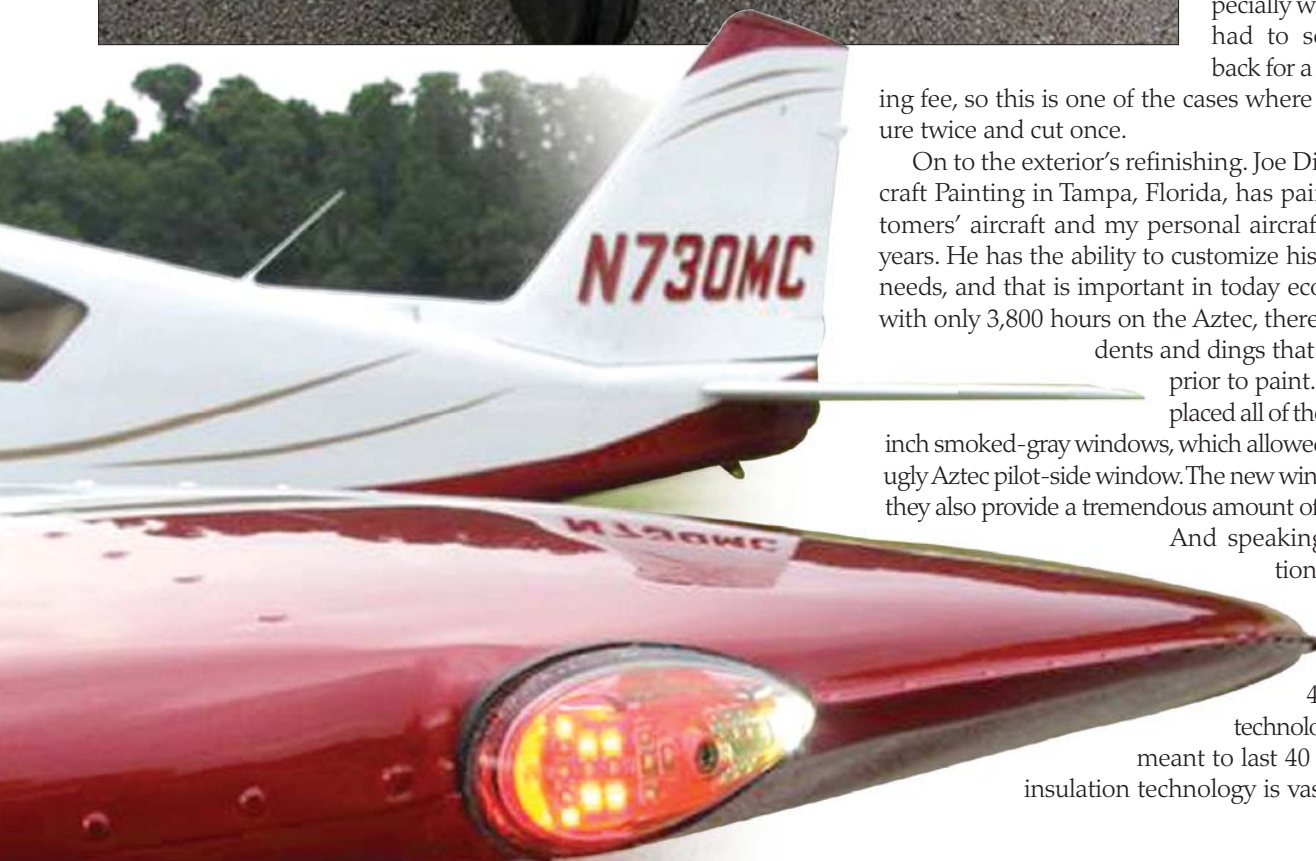


they would be much brighter and use fewer amps than our current lights. XeVision has higher-wattage HID's than LoPresti; however, make sure you check the dimension, especially with the taxi light. We had to send our taxi light back for a 15-percent restock-

ing fee, so this is one of the cases where you need to measure twice and cut once.

On to the exterior's refinishing. Joe Dinolfo of Hawk Aircraft Painting in Tampa, Florida, has painted all of my customers' aircraft and my personal aircraft for more than 10 years. He has the ability to customize his prices to suit one's needs, and that is important in today economic times. Even with only 3,800 hours on the Aztec, there were still plenty of dents and dings that had to be removed prior to paint. In addition, Joe replaced all of the windows with 1/4-inch smoked-gray windows, which allowed me to get rid of the ugly Aztec pilot-side window. The new windows look great, but they also provide a tremendous amount of sound insulation.

And speaking of sound insulation, the insulation that is in most of the General Aviation fleet is made with 40- to 50-year-old technology, and it was never meant to last 40 or 50 years. Today's insulation technology is vastly superior to that



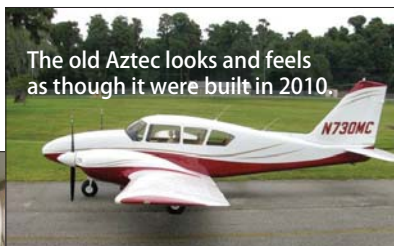


The front seats and new panel.

since overhaul; however, they had been on the airplane for almost 17 years. I decided to contact Art Michaud at Prop Works in Lakeland, Florida, to discuss the propellers. After a brief conversation, we agreed that we would pull the governors and propellers off and have them overhauled. About two weeks later, Art called me to express a problem. Apparently, when the airplane had a gear-up landing back in the 1980s, the tolerances were a little less strict, and the blades were simply straightened. However, because

of this sudden stoppage, it created a small crack in each hub that was not visible to the eye. Over the years, the cracks grew larger, and after Art got a hold of the hubs, the cracks were about 50 hours away from causing the hubs to fail. I was very relieved and lucky. Art went to work for me, located a replacement set of hubs, and had the propellers and newly overhauled hubs to me within seven days. Never take your propellers for granted.

Finally, after 10 weeks, the adventure of the refurbishment process was complete. Our aircraft is now a better-than-new 2010 Piper Aztec. It provides peace of mind to me,

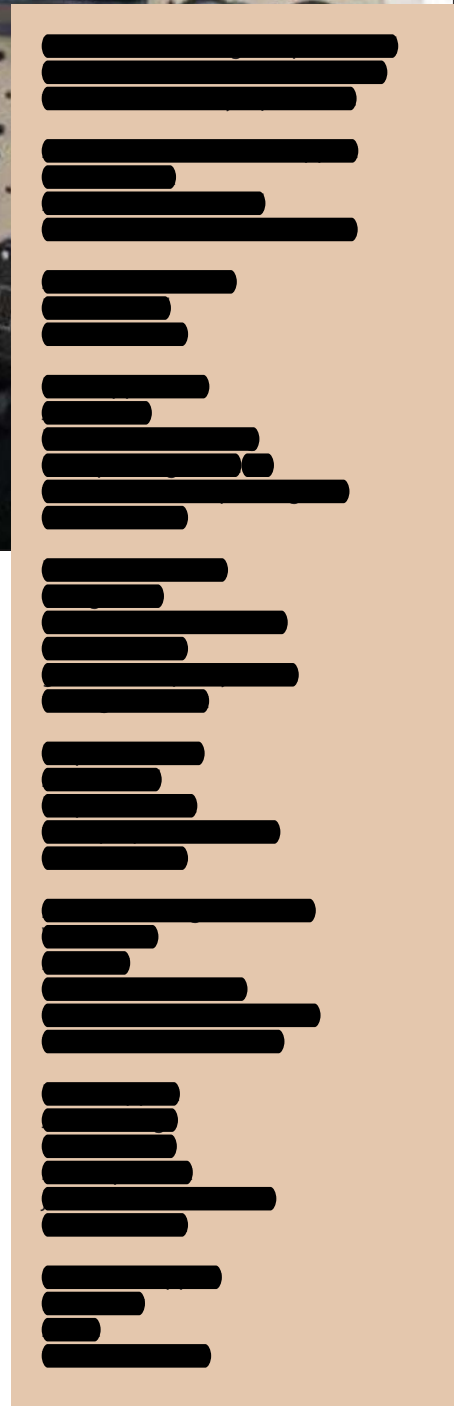


The old Aztec looks and feels as though it were built in 2010.



Passengers ride in luxury!

my wife, business associates, and clients knowing we have removed some of the risk of flying in General Aviation by completing such a thorough restoration on our aircraft. When you think about it, flying is all about risk management; we manage our currency, we manage our experience with weather, we manage our fitness for flight, but very few of us think about a risk assessment of our aircraft. After all, our airplanes get inspected every year, but at the end of the day, these inspections are only



skin deep. As the General Aviation fleet ages, I think it is extremely important to consider some type of complete refurbishment. You never know what could be lurking behind the panel until you take it apart. —