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Fig. A. Left Engine.

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Fig. B. Right Engine.

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FEATURES

- 54 The Tiger Roars Again**
After years of hibernation the sporty Tiger is back in production and is still the fastest, sportiest airplane in its class.
By Russell Munson

**Traveler Pilot
Pines For Tiger**
By Nancy Bink

Learn To Fly Month

- 84 Upgrade Your Flying Skills**
- 86 How To Find Good Instructors**
By Nigel Moll
- 88 A Dozen Ways To Pass A Written**
By Fred George
- 94 IFR Training Versus Reality**
By J. Mac McClellan
- 98 Learjet Type Rating In A Box**
By Fred George



PAGE 94

- 106 Citation X Is A 10**
Due to take to the skies in March '93, it will be the world's fastest bizjet, featuring Allison turbfans.
By Nigel Moll
- The Best-Selling Business Jets: A Cessna Family Tree**
By Nigel Moll



PAGE 98

COLUMNS

- 50 Editorial**
Why People Become Pilots
By J. Mac McClellan
- 133 Left Seat**
Dodging The Single Dots
By J. Mac McClellan



PAGE 136

- 136 Vectors**
Plunges And Air Pockets
By Len Morgan
- 138 Bax Seat**
When Readers Become Writers
By Gordon Baxter
- 140 Pro's Nest**
Hush Up And Climb
By Michael Maya Charles
- 142 Technicalities**
How Fast Are You Going?
By Peter Garrison

DEPARTMENTS

- 6 Flying Mail**
"Eliminating The Investment Tax Credit"
- 12 Reporting Points**
AD Bans Malibus From The Clouds
- 42 Training**
Can You Count On An Airline Job?
By Amy Laboda
A Brit Trains In The Colonies
By Jerry Tracy
- 116 Aftermath**
End Of A Rule-Breaker
By Peter Garrison
- 120 Airwares**
Electronic E-6B and Skymaster Spoilers
- 144 I Learned About Flying From That**
A Fool And His Fuel
No. 612 by Johan Vejby
- 148 Unicom**
First, You Take The Door Off
Edited by Nigel Moll



On the cover:
Russell Munson
shot this Tiger over
the Mississippi River.
But don't worry,
American General
has saved the Tiger
from extinction.

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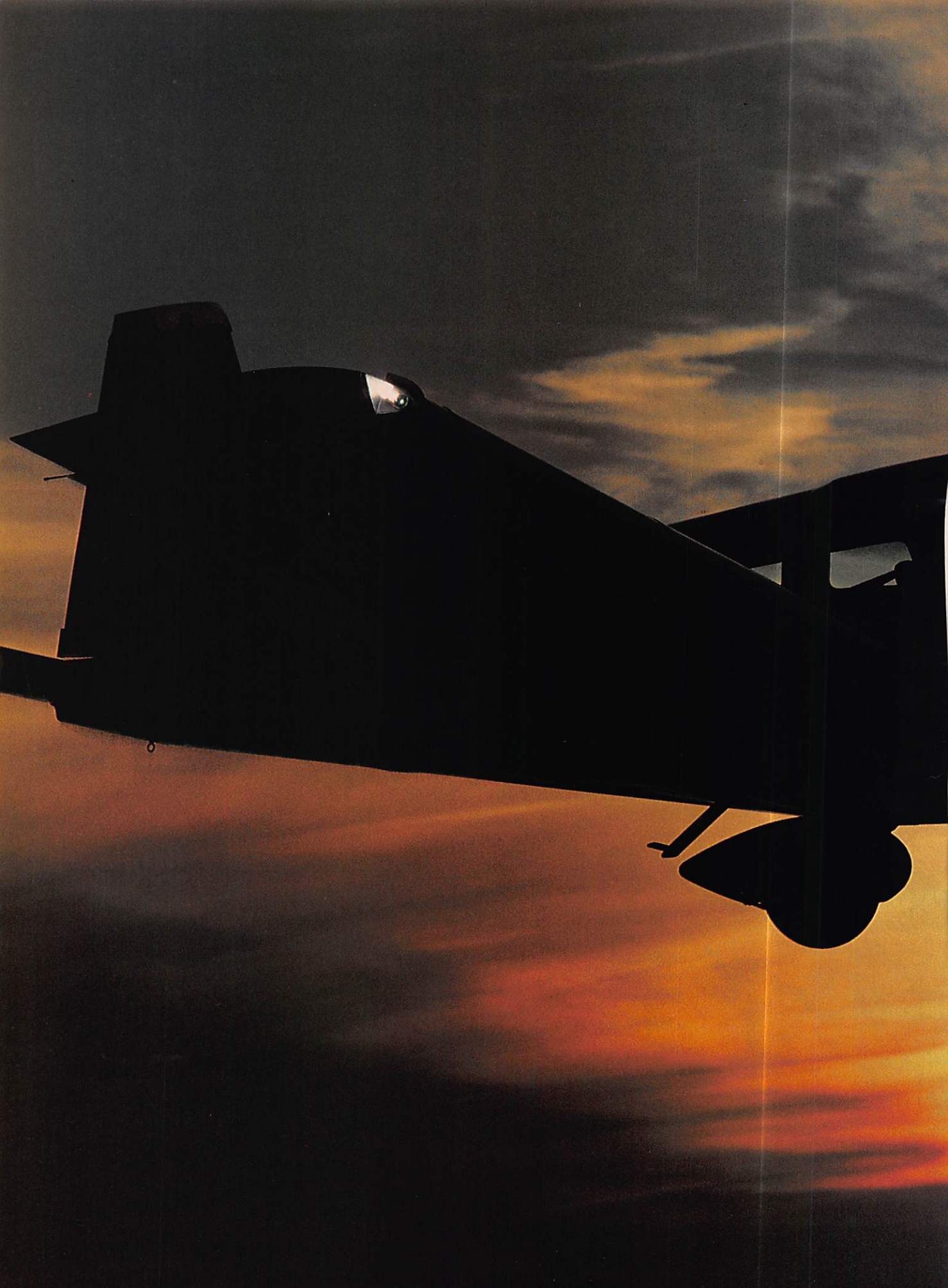
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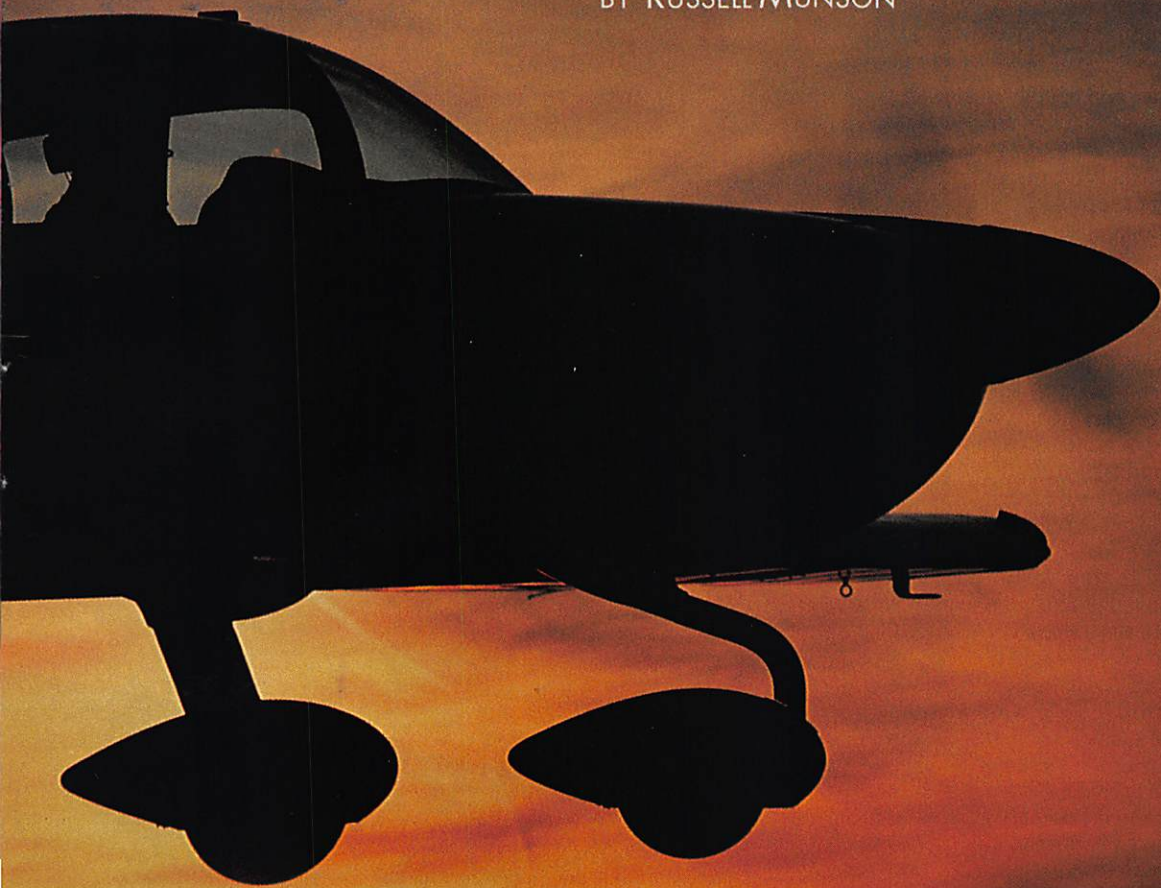
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THE TIGER ROARS AGAIN

After years of hibernation the sporty Tiger is back in production and is still the fastest, sportiest airplane in its class.

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY
BY RUSSELL MUNSON



RESURRECTIONS HAVE occurred like hiccups throughout general aviation history. Let's bring back the Ercoupe, some will shout, or the Navion, Swift or Champ—well-intentioned dreams that were often supported more by hope than cash or demand, and as such slipped from grasp in the light of day.

Jim Cox, president of American General Aircraft Corporation, of Greenville, Mississippi, is betting that history will not repeat itself in the case of the American General AA-5B Tiger. There are three important factors in his favor: an apparent market need for a single-engine, four-place, fixed-gear airplane; financial backing sufficient to already be building and selling Tigers; and an excellent choice of aircraft for resurrection. Outside of the Cessna 172 or 182, there is probably no better candidate for a successful revival.

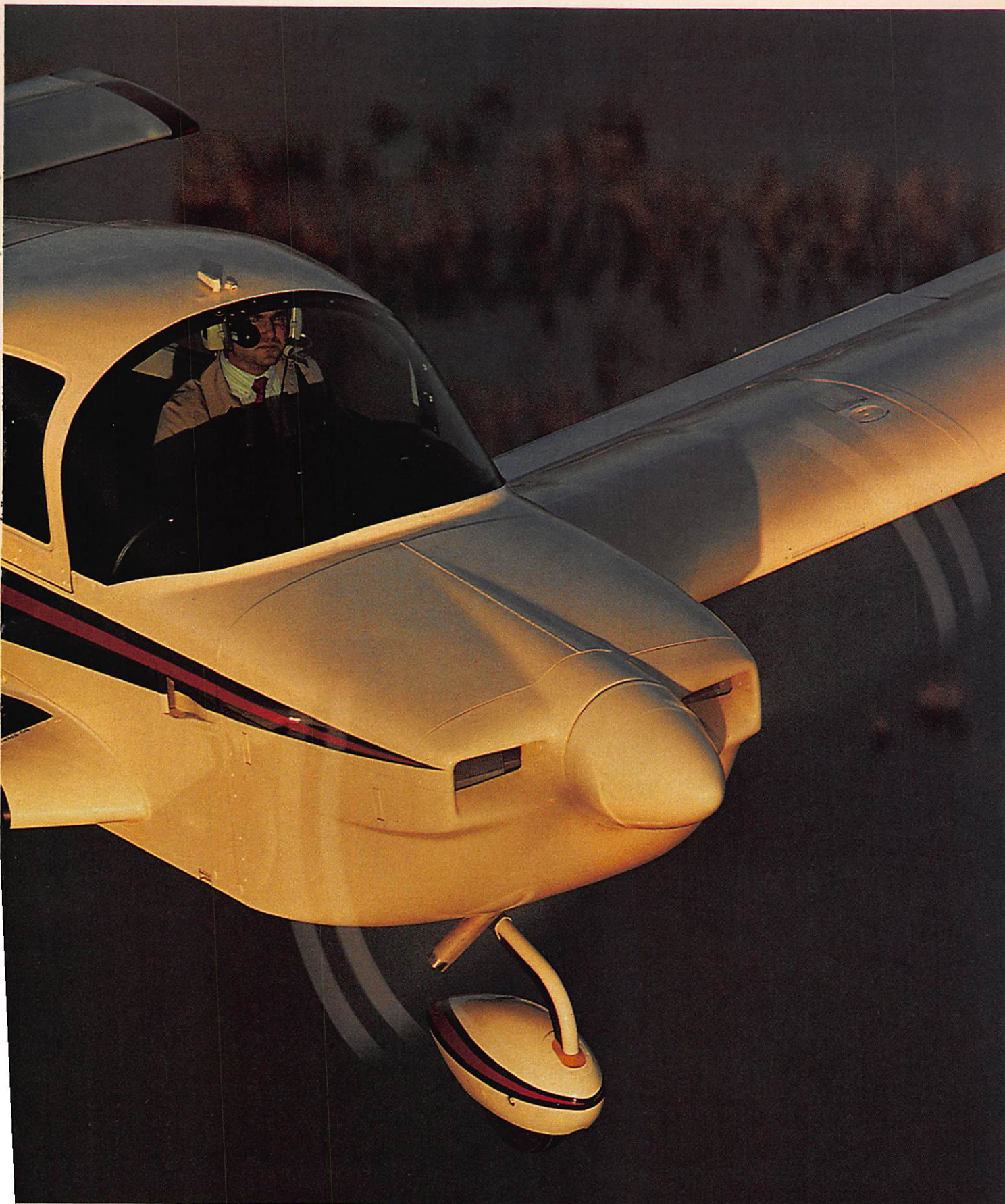
The Tiger always was, and happily is again, a delightful machine that lifts the spirit at first sight. On the ramp it has a cheerful, eager stance set apart from the crowd by a sliding canopy and elegantly shaped vertical stabilizer. With an efficient airframe, staunch 180-hp Lycoming engine, bonded honeycomb construction and pleasing control response, the Tiger has a blend of performance, economy, looks and personality that is hard to resist.

The AA-5B's heritage traces back to the imagination of one of general aviation's all-time dreamers, James R. Bede, a man that many flying enthusiasts loved to love or loved to hate, depending on which Bede dream they bought. Passions aside, few would deny that he is an innovative designer. Bede sold the rights to his 1962 BD-1 design, a two-place, side-by-side sport/trainer, to the American Aviation Corporation in Cleveland, which was formed in 1964 for the purpose of certifying and manufacturing the airplane as the AA-1 Yankee. Its president was a lawyer and avid pilot named Russell W. Meyer, Jr. He later found a better job in Wichita as chairman of Cessna.

Certified in 1967, the frisky Yankee made the Cessna 150 and Piper Cherokee 140 trainers seem matronly in comparison. The ship was hot. It cruised faster, stalled faster and, with power off, sank remarkably faster than the competition. But it was great fun to fly, and provided good training, especially for pilots moving on to higher-performance machines.

A four-place development of the Yankee, the 150-hp Lycoming-powered AA-5 Traveler, was certified in





November 1971 by the Grumman American division of Grumman Aircraft Corporation, which had in the meantime acquired American Aviation. The Traveler was an immediate hit, with a significant speed advantage over the competition, and features that included fold-down rear seats to greatly enlarge the baggage area when needed. Hanging a 180-hp Lycoming up front, plus considerable aerodynamic tweaking by engineer Roy LoPresti, produced the Tiger in 1975. In 1976 the Traveler inherited the cleaned-up airframe and was renamed the Cheetah. More than 1,300 Tigers had been sold to a loyal following when its next owner, Gulfstream American, discontinued light-aircraft production in 1979.

Throughout this evolutionary process, the resultant Tiger retained the best of grandpa Yankee's features instilled by Jim Bede: simplicity, tubular spar, aluminum honeycomb construction, metal-to-metal bonding, distinctive sliding canopy, responsive controls and superlative performance. Deserving to live, the Tiger instead languished out of production for more than a

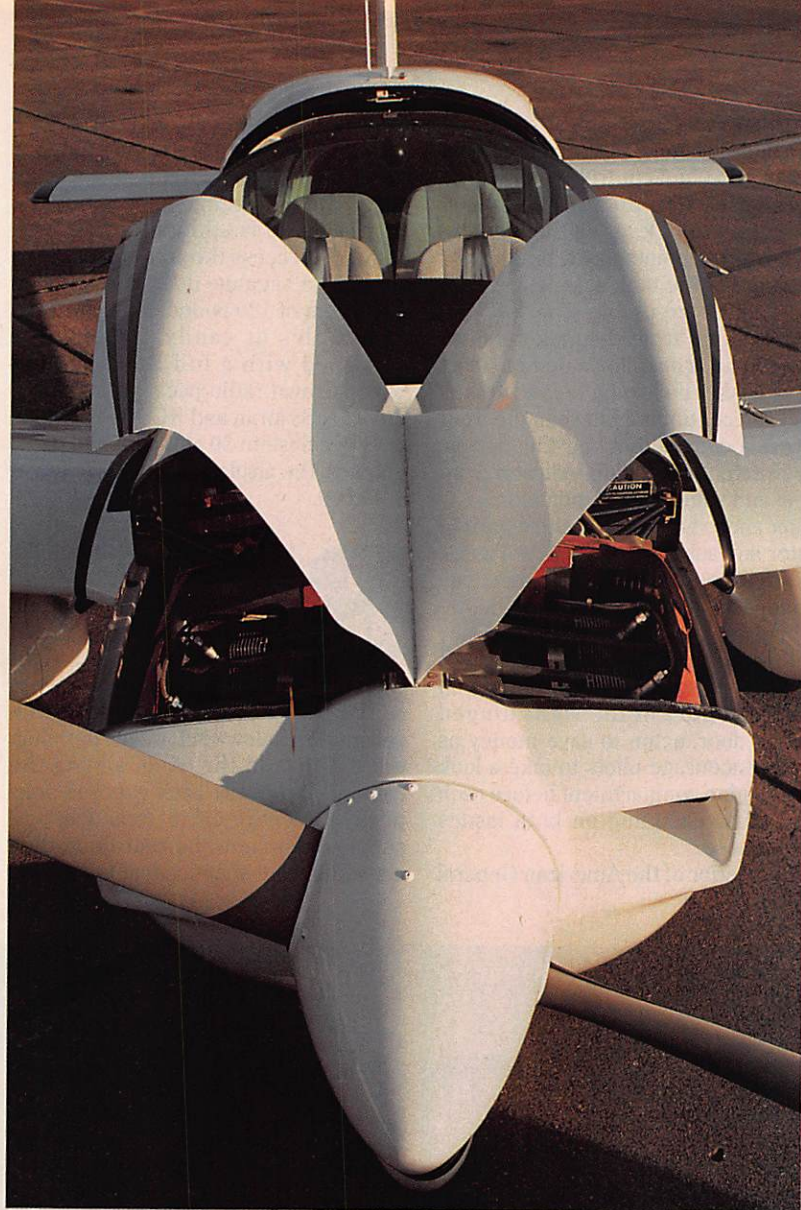
decade, missing the 1980s entirely.

Then along came Jim Cox, a Georgia man with a passion for aviation since boyhood that has spanned turns as a flight instructor and cropduster and many years at Cessna. An earlier Cox resurrection effort with the Helio Courier proved unprofitable, but he is convinced that the Tiger will be a winner. He began talks with Gulfstream in 1987. By the summer of 1989 Cox had lined up financing, leased a huge Boeing-built manufacturing facility at the Greenville, Mississippi, airport, and purchased rights to the former Grumman American aircraft including the Cougar light twin. All tooling, parts and documentation were loaded into semitrailers at Gulfstream's Savannah, Georgia, plant and shipped to Greenville. Thirty-eight trailer loads, nine months and 20 days later, on April 20, 1990, to be exact, the first American General AA-5B Tiger rolled out of the cavernous hangar. Old Man River, still rollin' along nearby, didn't seem to notice, but there were mighty cheers at

the airport that day. None were louder than those of the many American Yankee Association members present, whose ranks include supporters of all the Grumman American models.

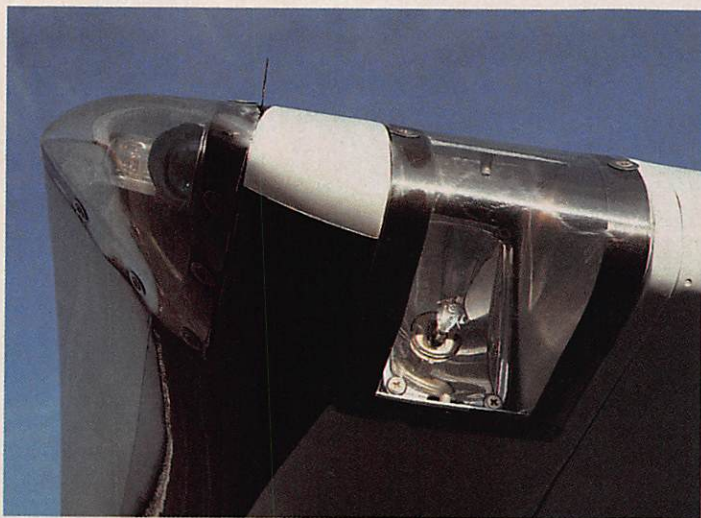
American General Tigers have several improvements over former versions although performance remains the same. The anticollision beacon atop the rudder now resides beneath a slick fairing, blending with the line of the vertical stabilizer. For greater service and easier repair, wheel fairings are now made of fiberglass rather than Royalite. In fact, all Royalite parts throughout the airplane have been eliminated. A landing light in each wingtip replaces the one formerly found in the cowling. The cowling doors still open on either side, giving generous access to the engine, but the new ones are made of composite material for better durability. The best news up front for mechanics is that the entire cowling is now in two removable sections, eliminating the need to first take off the propeller before removing the old cowling. And the McCauley propeller has been replaced by a Sense-





Was there ever a perkier, friendlier-looking airplane on the ramp (far left) than a Tiger?

The American General Tiger's cowling doors (left) still provide generous access to the engine, and are now made of composite material for greater strength. Landing lights (lower left) and the anticollision beacon (below) are housed in new fairings on the wingtips and vertical stabilizer.



nich that does not have the 1,850-to-2,250-rpm caution zone, nor the airworthiness directive, of the former.

A 28-volt electrical system is new, and fuel and oil pressure are transmitted to the instrument panel gauges by transducers rather than wet lines. Even priming the carbureted Lycoming is performed without fuel lines coming to a conventional panel-mounted hand plunger. When the electric auxiliary fuel pump is turned on, priming is done by pushing a small red button on the panel. This trips a solenoid near the fuel pump, routing fuel directly to the cylinders for as long as the button is depressed. Clever. Two radio speakers on either side of the cockpit replace the old one mounted under the forward glare shield.

The new instrument panel is all metal, cleanly and logically laid out, with nice touches such as combination toggle switch/circuit breakers, electric outside air temperature gauge and an electrical load meter. Rather than retaining the old Tiger's push-pull knobs, American General has relocated the throttle, mixture and carburetor heat

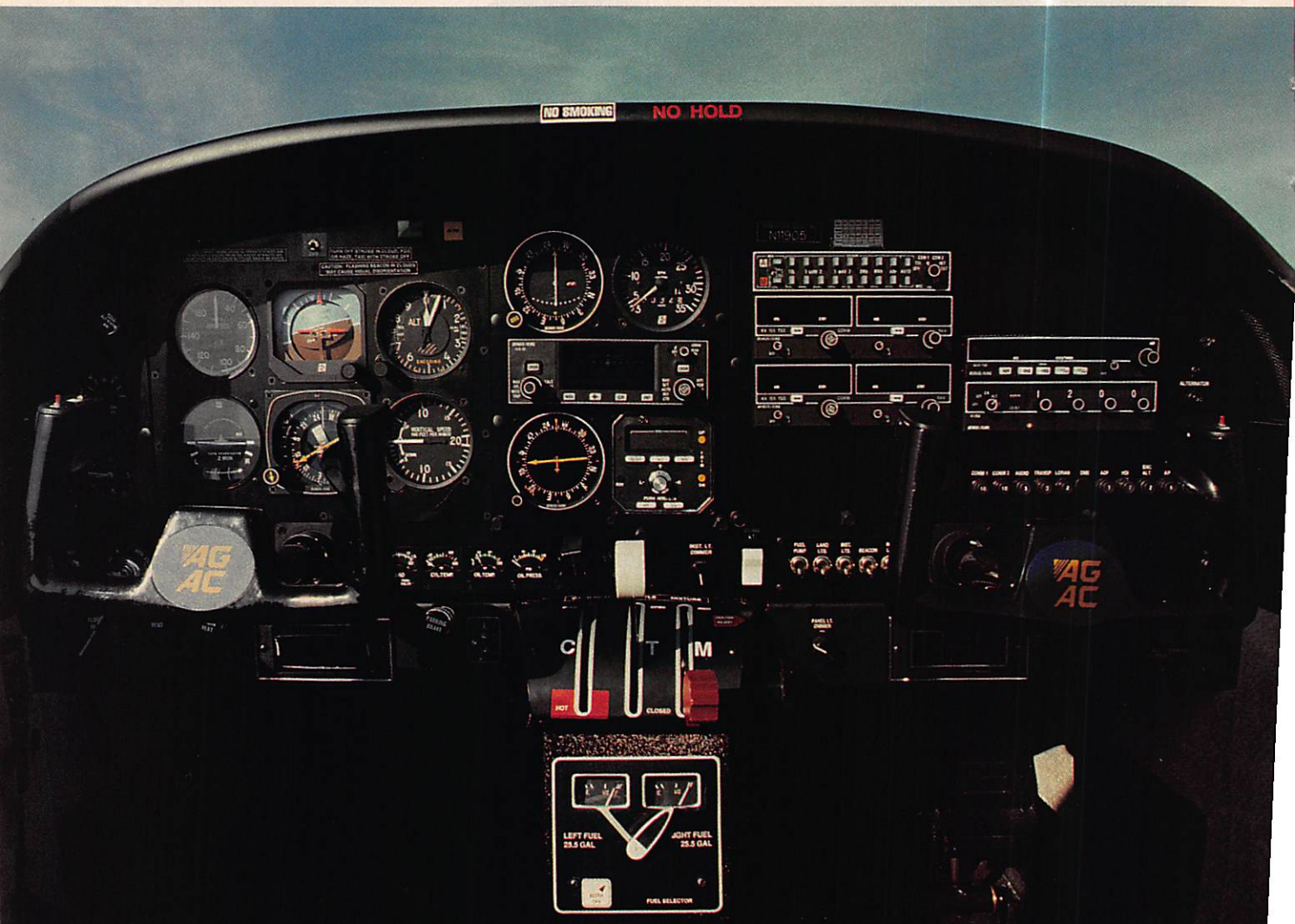
controls to a central power quadrant like a big airplane. Below that is a large, hard-to-miss fuel-control panel with a gauge for each of the two 26.3-gallon tanks, and a long lever on the fuel-control valve that points like a bird dog to the gauge of the tank selected. A total of 51 gallons are usable. The "off" position is so far from the tank detentes that even an armadillo could not select it by mistake. Following below the fuel panel and continuing between the front seats is a console holding the electric flap switch, flap-position indicator, trim wheel and trim-position indicator.

Cox chose to eliminate the cigarette lighter and ashtrays in the new Tigers, both to save \$250 to \$300 in manufacturing costs, and from a belief that the cabin of a small airplane is not the place for lighted objects. He has also not yielded to suggestions of including an oil access port in the right hinged cowling door, again to save money as well as encourage pilots to take a look at the engine compartment before each flight. His reasoning on both issues makes sense.

The interior of the American General

demonstrator was attractively upholstered in blue-gray fabric, and the rear seats still fold down to provide a large cargo area. Luggage space with the rear seats up is still quite sufficient, with good access through the cabin or an outside baggage door. It will hold a maximum of 120 pounds of bags, fruit, vegetables or candy. Nicely IFR-equipped with a full Bendix/King Silver Crown radio package including the KLN 88 loran and KCS 55 HSI, plus an S-Tec System 50 autopilot and other goodies, the airplane had a price tag of \$119,000.

But enough of these dry details. My immediate and overwhelming urge upon seeing N11905 sparkling on the ramp was to fly it right then and there. Pilot and passengers can climb aboard either wing from a fuselage step below each inboard trailing edge. Once on the wing, sliding the canopy all the way back exposes practically the entire cabin. Rear-seat passengers step onto the rear floor, then sit, while front-seat occupants may flip





Instrument panels on American General Tigers (far left) have been redesigned and faced with painted aluminum rather than the tacky Royalite formerly used.

Have more bags than people? No problem. Just fold down the rear seat backs to provide a cavernous cargo area (above).

With the seat backs up (left) there is still sufficient baggage space behind them. Excellent visibility gives the cabin an airy feel.

up the seat cushion with the toe of a foot to protect the upholstery, step on the seat frame and then the floor. If the front seats have been left in the rear position, it is easier just to step over the cabin sill onto the floor and sit down. Even if you are wearing a dress, which I wasn't, you can enter the Tiger without fear of later seeing yourself on *World's Funniest Home Videos*.

Lloyd Montague, American General's director of research and development, and himself a former cropduster, did a preflight inspection with me, jumped in the right seat and closed the canopy. My first impression after settling in was of how great the visibility was, and how that aided the roomy feel of the cabin. Three seconds on the primer button was encouragement enough for the 180-hp Lycoming to catch quickly, and we were soon taxiing out of the American General compound. Steering the free-castoring nosewheel is by differential braking, which I tended to overdo for the first hundred feet or so, but soon I was tracking the taxiway centerline with just a toe tap now and then.

There is no need to spend much time

at the run-up pad in a fixed-gear, fixed-pitch prop airplane. If the controls wiggle, the trim is set, the mags check, the fuel selector is on a tank with gas, and the carb heat works, your chances of getting airborne and staying there awhile are reasonably good. Turning on the fuel boost pump for takeoff and landing is the only thing extra the Tiger requires over a simple high-wing ship.

Greenville Tower cleared us off, and the little Tiger accelerated nicely down the runway, needing only slight right rudder to track true. Rotation takes a little more tug than a Cessna 172's, say, but not unpleasantly so, and we were soon showing a strong 1,000-fpm climb at 90 knots indicated, the best-rate-of-climb airspeed at sea level at the maximum gross weight of 2,400 pounds.

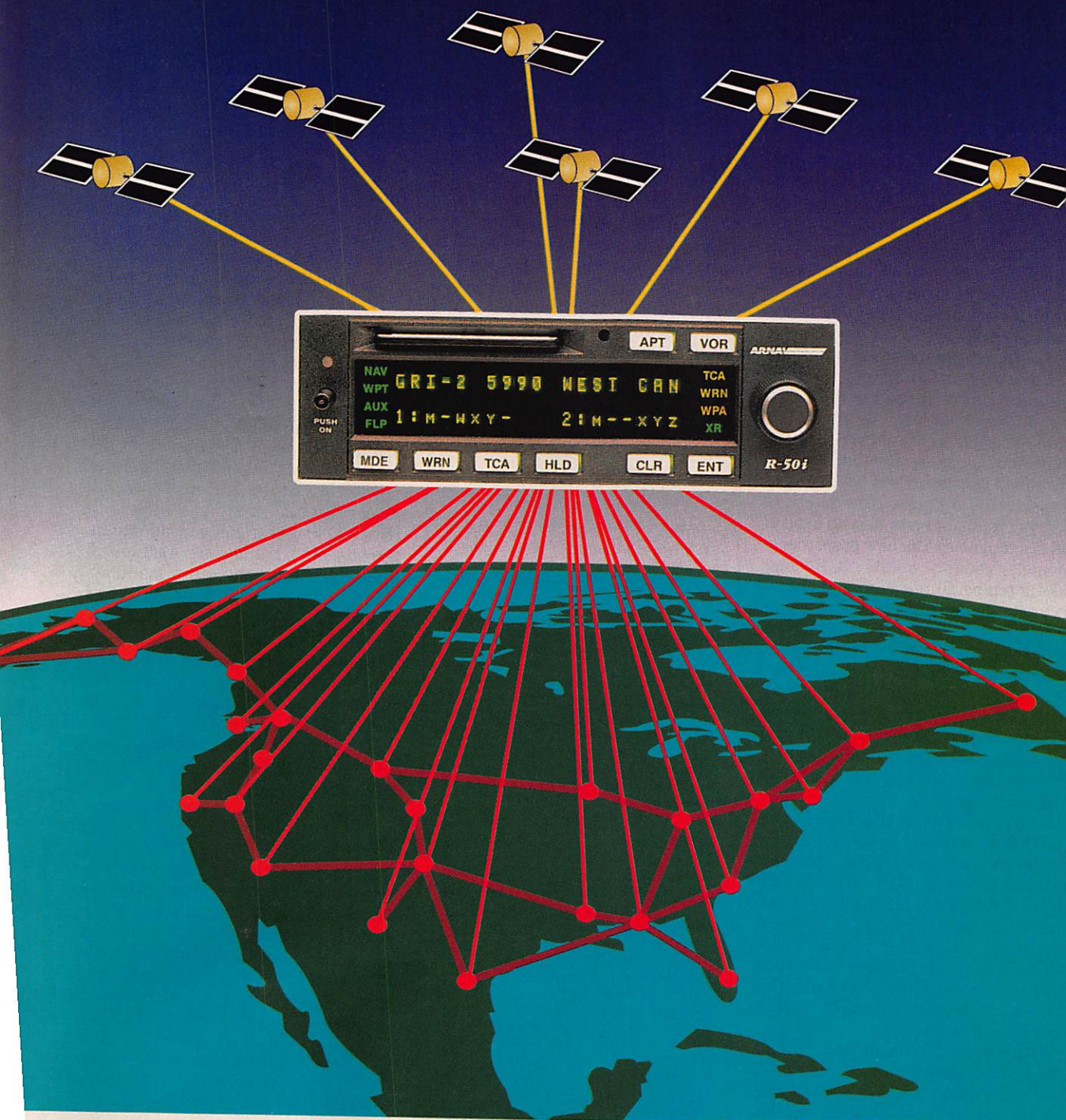
Montague figured our takeoff weight at 2,144 pounds. Equipped as it was, N11905 weighed 1,484 pounds empty, 84 pounds more than the basic Tiger. This Tiger could carry four 170-pound people, no bags and 39 gallons of fuel, or full fuel and 610 pounds of people and bags. For example, a family with a 170-pound father, 120-pound

mother and two children of 110 and 90 pounds could load our Tiger with full fuel and a full 120 pounds of baggage, cruise about four hours at a conservative 130 knots, and land with one hour of fuel reserve. Those are impressive numbers for such an uncomplicated, low-maintenance flying machine.

Buzzing around over the Mississippi, I understood why friends of mine who had owned Tigers and Travelers spoke of them with such enthusiasm. The controls are so light and responsive, and the visibility so good, that you are reminded on each flight of what the fun of flying is all about: freedom. But this little hummer moves right along, too. Montague and I leveled off at 1,500 feet msl and made timed, two-way runs over a stretch of road that he said was exactly one mile long. We repeated the whole process twice. Barometric pressure and temperature were close to standard. Outside air temperature showed 10° C., indicated airspeed was 130 knots, and the engine was cranking 2,450 rpm, which under those conditions should produce



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The New Spirit of
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about 68-percent power for a true airspeed of 126 knots at max gross weight, burning 10 gph of fuel according to the performance charts. I chose 2,450 rpm instead of 75-percent-power rpm for more relaxed noise and vibration levels, and for what might be a typical owner's compromise between speed and economy.

The new Tiger, by the way, is said to be quieter than the old one, but I had no basis for comparison. My impression was that it was about average for a 180-hp airplane. Anyway, assuming the airspeed indicator was accurate, calibrated true airspeed worked out to 134 knots—considerably faster than the book says. Even if you add a rule-of-thumb figure of one knot per 100 pounds under gross weight, rounding out to three knots in this case, the book airspeed would be 129 knots, still five knots slower than we seemed to be getting. But that's not all. Our timed runs averaged out to an impressive 137.5 knots. Now, there is plenty of room for error here to explain the discrepancies: the new prop, the tachometer could be a little off, the outside air temperature gauge could be inaccurate, the airspeed indicator might be imprecise, or all of the above. Nevertheless, based on what I saw, the airplane seems to be faster than the performance charts would indicate. At a more efficient altitude of 8,000 feet, by the way, 68-percent power would produce a book speed of 132 knots, and 75-percent 139 knots, at 2,600 and 2,700 rpm, respectively.

As aggressive as the Tiger is in speed, it's a pussycat in stalls. I tried a departure stall: full throttle, climbing left turn, nose way up. At 65 knots indicated, the stall warner horn came on, and at 53 knots the Tiger nibbled gently, the nose settled, and the wings slowly rolled level before I released back pressure. With power off, the horn again came on at 65 knots, and the very benign stall at 55.

At that point, Montague said, "Watch this," which always puts me on guard, and took the controls. With power still off, he stalled the airplane again, but held the wheel full back, and used aileron as necessary to keep the wings level. The nose just stayed in the general vicinity of the horizon, bobbing meekly up and down, and the airplane settled like a leaf. Not much excitement here. Spins are prohibited, but getting into one accidentally would require an absence of nerve endings in the pilot's seat.

Landing a Tiger is perhaps the most fun of all. I flew a short final at 80 knots

carrying just a tad of power and full 45 degrees of flap, which lowers the stalling speed by about three knots. Under these conditions the relationship between the Tiger's sink rate and throttle response makes glidepath control very pleasurable and precise. But from the flare on down is best. The pitch response remains powerful, precise and light throughout. As I eased the wheel back during the deepening flare, I could feel the ship settle softly into the ground cushion, followed by a squeak of the hind rollers touching down. The nosewheel is effortlessly held off for a moment, then lowered slowly and controllably. Touching down nosewheel-first is unforgivable in any airplane and more so in this one. Tigers get mad if you bang down their springy nose gear, and retaliate by bouncing it back up at you in a contin-

uing back-and-forth that can be damaging to both the Tiger and the klutzy pilot's pride.

After telling Jim Cox how much I enjoyed his airplane, we talked about his plans for it. At the time of my visit to Greenville, American General had built 25 Tigers and had about 60 orders, some 15 of those from the Florida Institute of Technology, and about the same number from Vincennes University in Indiana. Cox's goals are quite clear. By next month he hopes to have completed 105 airplanes and to stabilize production at one airplane per day. "The first thing," he says, "is to make the Tiger line profitable. That's our main concern. My talks with the Russians about building the Cougar over there is a separately funded project that will take no resources away from the Tiger. We want to build a strong Tiger marketing organization. I have 30 dealers signed so far, and I'd like to have 100 in a year and expand into international marketing. We want to sell more units than any other manufacturer, broaden our product line, and eventually be the biggest manufacturer in general aviation. Now that's thinking big down the line, but what's wrong with that?" Not a thing. And a lot of enthusiasts hope American General can pull it off.

"You've got to have a vision," says Cox, "but you've got to be realistic in your vision. We've got to get the Tiger profitable before doing anything else."

The test is whether enough people are willing to spend \$100,000 or more for an airplane like this despite its winning qualities. Light-airplane manufacturers are still searching for that elusive magical mix of utility, pleasure and price that can make the product viable in a business sense. Just when they seem on the right track a recession hits, or fuel prices go up, or liability costs skyrocket, or bigger chunks of the sky are restricted in use. Or maybe more people who have \$100,000 today would rather spend it on a Porsche because it's easier than learning to fly. Everyone has a theory for the cause of each slump and no one knows for sure. A Ouija board is probably as good a source of counsel as a board of directors. One thing is for sure: building little airplanes is not for the timid.

"Why," I asked Jim Cox, "do you want to do this?"

"Because it's in my blood," he said.

That's the same reason you and I fly airplanes. □

AMERICAN GENERAL AA-5B TIGER

The airplane flown for this report was serial number 10014. It was equipped as standard with IFR instrumentation and wheel fairings. Options include two Bendix/King KX 155 navcoms, KMA 24 audio panel, KT 76A transponder, KR 87 ADF with KI 227 indicator, KEA 130A encoding altimeter, KCS 55 HSI, KLN 88 loran; S-Tec System 50 autopilot; and avionics cooling fan. Options added 84 pounds, bringing the empty weight up to 1,484 pounds, leaving a useful load of 916 pounds. The airplane's price as flown was \$119,000. Performance figures are taken from the pilot's operating handbook and reflect maximum takeoff weight and standard day conditions at sea level.

Standard price	\$84,250
Engine	Lyc O-360-A4K, 180 hp
TBO	2,000 hrs
Prop	Sensenich, fixed-pitch, two-blade, 76-in dia
Seats.....	4
Length	22 ft
Height	8 ft
Wingspan	31.5 ft
Wing area	140 sq ft
Wing aspect ratio.....	7.1
Max ramp weight	2,408 lbs
Max takeoff weight	2,400 lbs
Standard empty weight	1,400 lbs
Max useful load.....	1,000 lbs
Max landing weight	2,400 lbs
Wing loading	17.1 lbs/sq ft
Power loading.....	13.3 lb/hp
Max usable fuel.....	51 gals/306 lbs
Best-rate-of-climb airspeed.....	90 kts
Max rate of climb.....	850 fpm
Climb gradient.....	567 ft/nm
Rate of climb at 8,000 ft	415 fpm
Service ceiling	13,800 ft
Max speed at sea level	148 kts
Cruise at 75% power at 8,000 ft	139 kts
Fuel flow at 75% power	10.7 gph
Endurance at 75% power	4.6 hrs
Stalling speed, clean	56 kts
Stalling speed, flaps down.....	53 kts
Turbulent-air penetration speed	113 kts