

AOPA

February 2002 Volume 45 / Number 2

Waypoints

The Tiger's nine lives

By **THOMAS B. HAINES**

From blimps to business jets, Pilot Editor in Chief Thomas B. Haines has been flying for more than 20 years.

Over the years, I've flown many unusual and most every mainstream general aviation airplane out there. I have yet to find one that has no redeeming qualities. Still, there are some that are more endearing than others. The Polish-built Pezeta Wilga 80, for example, is so homely that it is charming, but as for flying characteristics. Well, a road grader handles about as well.

Certainly one of my favorites over the years has been the Tiger. As you can see on [page 64](#), the Tiger is on the prowl again, this time hailing from Martinsburg, West Virginia. My introduction to the then-Grumman Tiger and its lower-powered brother, the Cheetah, came in the late 1970s when I was learning to fly. One of the aviation magazines was giving away a Cheetah as part of a subscription sweepstakes. With its sliding canopy and smooth, bonded wing, I thought that was one of the slickest airplanes out there. Alas, I didn't win the sweepstakes so it would be more than a decade before I would get my first chance to fly one of the little Grummans, only it wouldn't be a Grumman at all.

Instead, in May 1990 I landed a Piper Saratoga on 7,000-foot Runway 18R at Greenville, Mississippi, and taxied up to the doors of a mammoth yellow hangar built by Boeing for a big military contract that never materialized. When the deal fell through, Boeing more or less donated the facility to the City of Greenville. The city fathers set about recruiting companies to fill the space. One such company was American General Aircraft Corporation (AGAC), which had recently obtained from Gulfstream Aerospace the rights to start building the former Grumman singles. Gulfstream was busy churning out business jets and was anxious to unload the type certificates and the accompanying product liability associated with the piston singles and the twin-engine Cougar. A"AC, headed by Robert Crowley (who is also running the Martinsburg operation), set up shop in Greenville with plans to take the GA market by storm.

Had the economy been just a little stronger in those days, they might have made it. There certainly was a void of new, affordable light airplanes in the early 1990s. Cessna had left the piston-engine market four years earlier. Piper was on the verge of bankruptcy because of poor management. Beech and Mooney were selling a few high-performance airplanes but had no interest in the lighter end of the market.

Meanwhile, big flight schools and aviation universities had been flying their Cessna 150s, 152s, and 172s for many years, accruing more than 10,000 hours on some airplanes. They were anxious to buy new airplanes, but the new airplanes had to be affordable and available. Cessna wasn't interested because of product liability fears. Piper attempted to penetrate the trainer market with the Cadet, a stripped-down Warrior, but priced the early models so low in order to get the sales that it lost money with every delivery. The laws of economics soon caught up with it, and it filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection on July 1, 1991.

As it turns out, 1991 was one of the worst years ever for modern general aviation. The industry delivered only 1,021 aircraft that year, a dramatic decrease from 1978 when factories pumped out more than 17,000 airplanes. Of the total in 1991, 613 were piston-powered models.

Many factors contributed to the dismal performance: product liability concerns, a glut of those late-1970s models still in good condition, the loss of federal tax breaks for aircraft purchasers, and a lethargic economy.

Surprisingly, it was in the late 1970s — the heyday of such airplanes — that Grumman pulled the plug on the Tiger and the Cheetah, causing some to wonder if the airplanes couldn't make it then, how could they make it in the dark days of the early 1990s? Still, believing that timing is everything and that the market was hungry for new airplanes, the crew in Mississippi soldiered on with the Tiger project. They made a number of enhancements to the original product and found several large flight schools interested in trying out the Tigers as trainers — the first time the aircraft had been used in that role. Through 1990 and into early 1991, the company delivered litters of Tigers to the Florida Institute of Technology, Vincennes University, and other large schools.

As with many other small companies, it wasn't necessarily a lack of orders that began to trouble AGAC, it was an inability to spool up production in an efficient way. Cash flow problems soon emerged. A new investor, Teleflex Inc., stemmed the tide with a cash infusion in early 1992. But the general aviation market continued in the doldrums, and by the end of that year the Greenville plant was mostly shuttered.

Of course, when I taxied up to the big factory in the spring of 1990, none of that history had been written yet. There was a great deal of enthusiasm at the facility then. The rollout of the first new Tiger built by AGAC had occurred just a month before. I flew the airplane and wrote about it for a feature article in the July 1990 issue of *Pilot*, fulfilling that dozen-year-old desire to fly one of those sleek airplanes. I was not disappointed. The shiny new Tiger roared through the sky. Its crisp handling offered a welcome relief from the heavy Saratoga I'd flown to Mississippi. And I was amazed at how tightly you could turn the airplane on the ground, thanks to that castoring nosewheel.

In need of another delicious catfish dinner, I returned to Greenville a little more than a year later to fly another Tiger for another feature article. Only this time I would get the chance to put the airplane to the test — a cross-country flight from the factory in Mississippi to Frederick, Maryland, home of AOPA. AGAC wanted to display the new Tiger at AOPA's first fly-in during August 1991. (The fly-in has since become an annual event on the first Saturday in June. This year, it's June 1.)

I left the factory late in the afternoon in N1193E, a brand-new Tiger with only 14 hours on it. Just for fun, I slid the canopy partway open during the climb and enjoyed the summer breeze. Leveling off at 7,500 feet to enjoy the view of the catfish farms as I headed northeast, I pulled the canopy closed and began recording performance numbers. The airplane performed right at book specs at various settings. It seemed most comfortable at about 70-percent power, where it cruised at 133 knots true airspeed on about one gph less than the book called for.

In 1991, panel-mount GPSs were mostly a thing of the future. A few airplanes had them, but loran was still state-of-the-art. The Tiger carried the pilot-friendly Northstar M1 loran. I dialed in LOZ — London, Kentucky — as the fuel stop and arrived just at sunset. The line crew at Emerald Aviation made a big fuss over the shiny new airplane; it was the first new Tiger they had seen.

The flight service station on the field -ad closed for the night (it's now closed permanently). I debated spending the night in London, but a call to flight service confirmed that clear weather lay ahead, so I set out into the dusk for home.

By the time I got to West Virginia, it was pitch black on that moonless night. The stars seemed especially bright in the darkness. Below, a touch of summer haze caused halos around the lights strung all along the coal mining operations. Mile after mile, the mine lights led me northeast. There I was in my well-windowed cocoon tooling through the night. Flying the nimble Tiger, I couldn't help but feel like a fighter pilot on patrol.

I was using VFR flight following and was soon handed off to Washington Center, a sure sign that home wasn't far away. Next came the Dulles Approach controllers. I passed right over Martinsburg, West Virginia, the place that would a decade later be

the new home for the new-again Tiger factory. Finally I set the agile Tiger down on the runway at Frederick at 12:15 a.m., exactly six flight hours after I had left Mississippi.

No, I didn't win that sweepstakes, but for a few hours I enjoyed an airplane that I had only dreamed about and one that so many pilots rave about. And now I understand why.

E-mail the author at thomas.haines@aopa.org.

© Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association 421 Aviation Way Frederick, MD 21701 Phone 800/872-2672 Fax 301/695-2375

