



Tonry's Tiger

This snappy little four-seater was so far ahead of its time, it's hard to beat the amount of fun you can have flying it!

By Bud Corban

Every pilot loves the Tiger. It's hard not to. The airplane is one of the ultimate concessions to fun flying, a sporty, eager, little single with just enough practical application to justify it in the minds of those who would never buy a pure fun machine.

But that's not a problem for Tiger owner Roger Tonry of Camarillo, Calif. A director of photography in the film business, Tonry has a passion for military airplanes and once dreamed of owning a P-51.

Economic realities ruled out the Mustang, so today, Tonry flies a military-painted Grumman-American AA5B Tiger—along with a Marchetti SF-260.



Tonry regards the two airplanes as interchangeable. Of course, the Marchetti is aerobatic and the Tiger isn't—at least, not legally—but the Tiger is still a tough bird with four seats, a quick elevator and the fastest ailerons in the class, contributing to its substantial image as a sport machine.

The Tiger is regarded by some pilots as being well ahead of its time. Perhaps in keeping with the bonded construction characteristic of Grumman's U.S. Navy Cat series of shipboard fighters, the Tiger and its predecessors, the Cheetah, T-Cat and Lynx, plus the later twin-engine Cougar, were among the first-production general aviation airplanes to feature bonding of wing and fuselage skins.

The upside of bonded structures is that they're hellaciously strong and produce remarkably smooth, aerodynamic surfaces; the downside is that should you happen to break one, you can't have it repaired at your local A&P shop. On top of that (or, actually, beneath it), the Tiger's wing spar is a two-inch, steel pipe that interconnects through the center section from one wingtip to the other, so it's a safe bet that the wing will take more stress than you will.

The Tiger's ground handling is via a non-steerable, full-castering nosewheel. Directional control at low speeds is strictly dependent on asymmetric braking. This allows the airplane excellent maneuverability in tight spaces. Locked wheel turns are never a sharp idea for pilots who respect their tires, but if you had to, you could reverse direction in a Tiger in as little as 20 feet. A non-steerable nosewheel also

means that good braking action is mandatory for ground handling until the rudder takes effect.

Perhaps the Tiger's most recognizable feature is its signature sliding hatch. There are no doors. The entire cabin roof translates aft almost three feet to expose all four seats for entry and exit. If you're riding left front, you merely step over the sidewall, tip up the seat's bottom cushion with your toe and settle in. If you're climbing aboard in rain or snow, you'll need to be quick to avoid soaking the interior, but the sliding hatch makes it relatively easy to drop into any seat.

You can even fly convertible-style (sort of) with the hatch open a few inches for extra ventilation, provided you can stand the noise. The hatch can only come back about eight inches and then only at speeds up to 112 knots, a sensible limitation. Back in the 1970s, when I was shooting air-to-air photos for *Plane & Pilot*, *Homebuilt Aircraft*, *Air Racing* and, later, *Ultralight Aircraft Magazine*, a local Tiger dealer delighted in using one of his new demonstrators as a photo platform, and he flew it regularly with the hatch full aft at max cruise. I shot my pictures from the Tiger's backseat, looking aft. The dealer assured me that there was no chance the hatch could come off and take out the tail. Fortunately, it never did, or I might not be here to revel in the wonderfulness of the Tiger. (No, don't try that at home or anywhere else.)

The AA5B's fuel system is simplicity itself. There are two wing tanks, and the selector points at the fuel gauge for the tank in use, so there's no question which container is draining to the engine. Max usable fuel is 25.5 gallons per side, although if you need to carry more cabin pounds, you can fill to the tabs and know that you're flying with only 19 gallons per tank. A typical max cruise fuel burn is 10.8 gph, so expect a top-off to last about 3.3 hours plus reserve at high cruise. Pulled back to 55%, you should endure for 4.5 hours.

With a fixed-pitch prop and only 180 carbureted horses out front plus laminated, fiberglass, fixed gear below, Tigers are, by far, the fastest airplanes in their class. Tonry reports that his Tiger is easily capable of 135 knots on a smooth day at an optimum density altitude of 8,000 feet. That's an easy 10 knots quicker than an equivalent horsepower Piper Archer or Beechcraft Sundowner, as well as the modern-generation Cessna Skyhawk SP. The Tiger also is notably quicker than a Cessna Cardinal. Perhaps more surprising, the AA5B's real-world cruise is significantly faster than the old 195 hp Cessna Hawk XP and not far behind most of the 200 hp retractables, the Piper Arrow, Commander 112 and Beechcraft Sierra. Only the Cessna Cardinal RG and Mooney Ranger, Chaparral and Executive offer any significant cruise advantage.

Primary credit for the Tiger's and Cheetah's speed (the Cheetah was a virtual Tiger clone, but with only 150 hp on the nose) goes to the late Roy LoPresti, a dedicated aerodynamicist and speed guru who worked at Grumman-American in the early 1970s. LoPresti almost single-handedly improved the old Traveler to the Cheetah and upgraded that airplane to the Tiger, working nights and weekends with virtually no help or encouragement from Grumman-American. LoPresti went on to father the Mooney 201 and lead the team that certified the Beechcraft Starship, but he maintained a soft spot for the efficient little Grumman-American airplanes. The LoPresti family's company, Speed Merchants of Vero Beach, Fla., offers a series of speed mods that can help the Tiger reach even better speed.

Predictably, you'll realize a slight range improvement by flying at 10,000 feet, where 65% is all there is. At that height, intermediate cruise is allegedly worth 129 knots on more like 9.5 gph to push range to 550 nm plus reserve. Service ceiling is only 13,800 feet, so don't plan any high-level aviating, unless you're flying light.

Not surprisingly, Roger Tonry feels his Tiger is a cut above most comparable airplanes. "The Tiger

really is an outstanding machine,” says Tonry. “Many of the lighter-equipped AA5Bs have 950- or even 1,000-pound useful loads, so even with full fuel [51 gallons], you can often load up two couples and fly without undue concern for weight limits or CG. The airplane was never designed as a freighter, but it came standard with fold-down rear seats that allow carrying cargo rather than just people.”

The owner feels that most of the Tiger's other numbers are close to or ahead of the competition. “The Tiger has the shortest wing in the class, but it also has the lowest gross weight, and that helps it climb at a realistic 750 fpm or more with a full load, better than most of the other fixed-gear, 180 hp singles,” brags Tonry. “Short-field performance is good as well, although certainly not in the STOL class. Probably because of my hours in the Marchetti, I'm a handling kind of guy, so I'm especially impressed with the Tiger's aileron and pitch response. Roll rate is probably second only to the Viking's in the non-aerobatic class. Despite that [or perhaps because of it], the airplane manifests good stability in IFR conditions.”

Tonry acknowledges that its stall speed is the highest in the class, but feels that the airplane's easily predictable break and short-field numbers speak for themselves. “I can use the same approach speeds that most of the other airplanes use, 65 to 70 knots,” Tonry points out, “and enjoy the same or shorter runway numbers. No one has ever suggested a Tiger is a bush plane, but it does an excellent job of getting in and out of abbreviated airports.”

Flaps are short-chord and minimum span, and accordingly, they're fairly ineffective at increasing the airplane's descent rate. Even deflected to the full 45-degree down position, they reduce stall by only three knots. Full-flap slips don't risk blanking the tail, and the spoilers do offer the slight advantage of improving over-the-nose visibility during the approach, but other than that, there's little operational benefit.

Aircraft Bluebook Price Digest (ABPD), the standard pricing guide for the industry, suggests that there were 1,323 of the original Grumman-American Tigers built between 1975 and 1979, plus another 150 produced by American General between 1990 and 1993. A few years ago, a Taiwanese investment consortium acquired the Tiger type certificate, established production facilities in Martinsburg, W.Va., and is currently building the airplane again at 1.5 units per month.

In the meantime, there's a brisk business in used Tigers. Check any given 10-day cycle of *Trade-A-Plane*, and you're liable to find a dozen or more Tigers for sale. Tonry's totally tricked-out example is a 1978 model, and the *ABPD* suggests that it's worth about \$55,000 base, average-equipped and in standard condition. Fly his airplane, and you begin to understand why he wouldn't take twice that.

“I think everyone who owns these little airplanes agrees that they're a definite cut above the average late-1970s general aviation single and even the modern generation of fixed-gear, 180 hp singles,” explains Tonry. “What endears most pilots to the Tiger is a combination of excellent handling, superior performance and just plain fun. It's hard to put a price on that.”

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