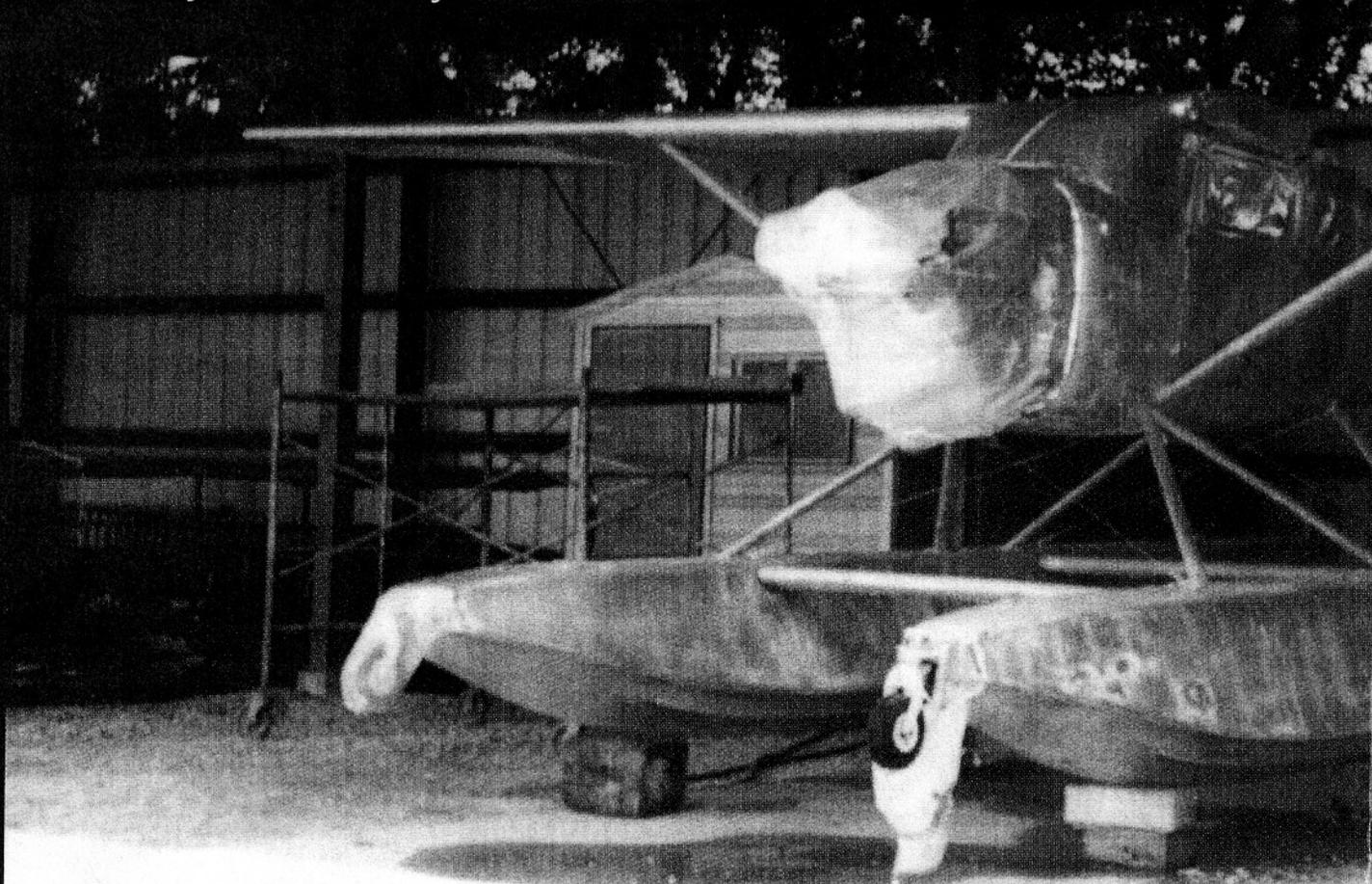


A Floatplane Rises From

Story and Photos by James Gardner



I'm a big fan of Cessna 185 floatplanes. In fact, I'm on my second one, although if it had been up to me I'd still be flying my first. You might remember an article I wrote entitled "An Autopsy of a Wheels-Down Water Landing" that appeared in the September/October 2004 issue of *Water Flying* (page 10). At the end of the article I mentioned that I was in

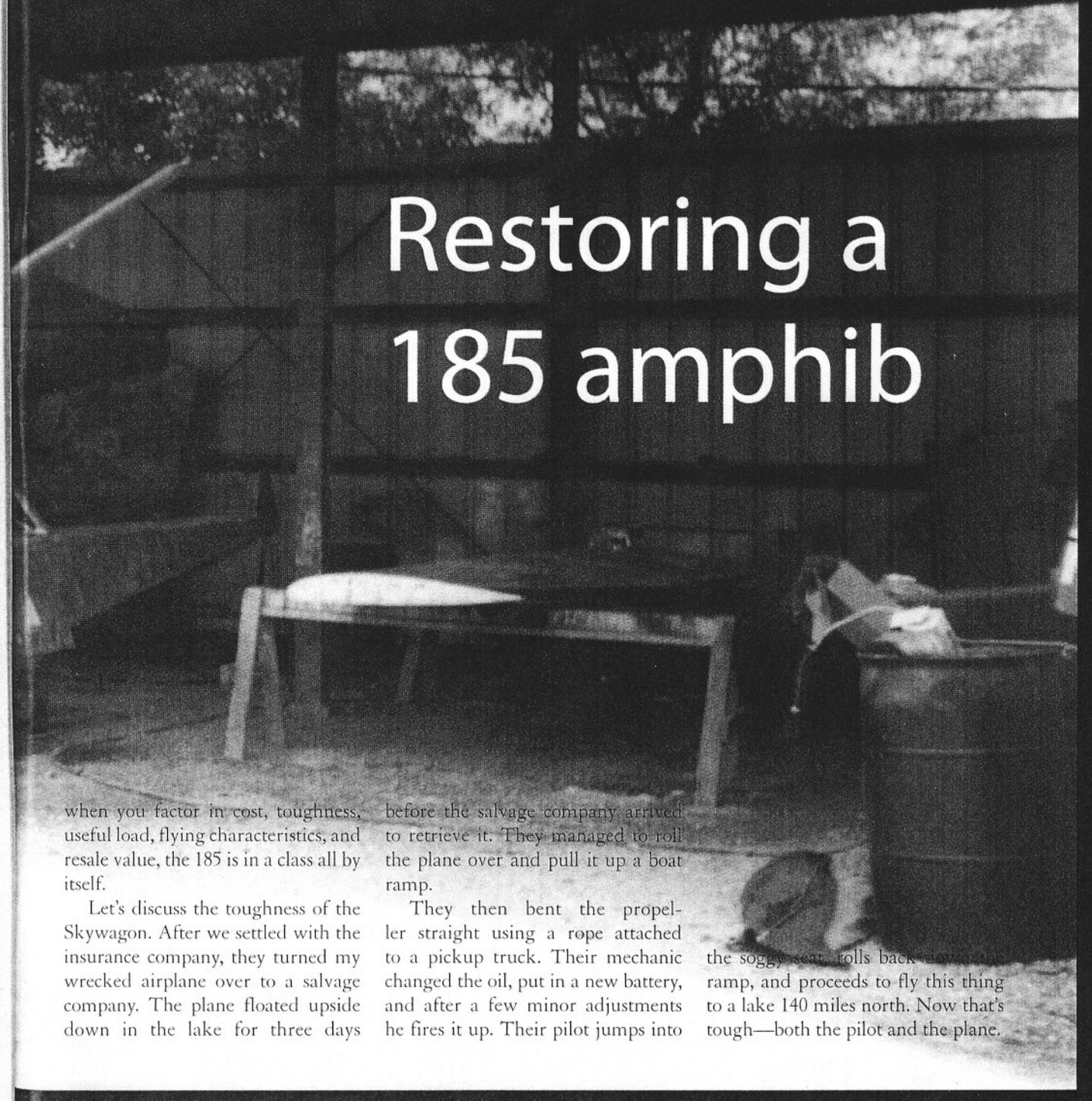
the process of restoring another 1979 Cessna 185 amphibian. This is the story of that restoration.

As a refresher, let's go back to the sad tale of how I lost my first Skywagon. "Knothead," as I like to call him, was a friend who flies his own Citation jet. A few years ago he managed to land my amphibian in Lake Okeechobee with the wheels

down. There it was on the local television news, floating upside down with its wheels pointing skyward, looking like a dead mallard. Do I sound slightly bitter? Anyway, it was time to move on, so I started my search for another amphibian.

Why buy another Cessna 185? I've talked to dozens of bush pilots who reinforced my suspicions that

Phoenix the Ashes



Restoring a 185 amphib

when you factor in cost, toughness, useful load, flying characteristics, and resale value, the 185 is in a class all by itself.

Let's discuss the toughness of the Skywagon. After we settled with the insurance company, they turned my wrecked airplane over to a salvage company. The plane floated upside down in the lake for three days

before the salvage company arrived to retrieve it. They managed to roll the plane over and pull it up a boat ramp.

They then bent the propeller straight using a rope attached to a pickup truck. Their mechanic changed the oil, put in a new battery, and after a few minor adjustments he fires it up. Their pilot jumps into

the soggy seat, rolls back down the ramp, and proceeds to fly this thing to a lake 140 miles north. Now that's tough—both the pilot and the plane.

The author's Cessna A185F had about 4000 hours total time and possible underwater damage history when Southern Seaplane acquired it for restoration. The results speak for themselves.



A LITTLE HANGAR RASH

I started my search for a replacement like most prospective buyers do, by using the monthly *Trade-A-Plane*. Talking with seaplane pilots from around the country was very interesting. When you ask a seller if the airplane has any damage history, they give you a fairly standard answer. "Damage history? No, nothing serious. Well, maybe a little hangar rash." This means the airplane has probably been involved in an incident. Incident sounds more anti-septic than crash.

I talked to one Canadian who gave me that answer, but after a more careful interrogation he admitted he had flipped his plane over in the water not once, but twice. He was selling his seaplane at his wife's suggestion. He ended our conversation by confessing, and I quote, "You'd be surprised how good you become at getting out of those things when you crash the second time."

I always like to ask the seller, "Can you give me the useful load?" Their answers usually go something like, "Let me see now, you know, I don't have that information right in front of me but I can tell you, if you can stuff it in her, she'll fly with it!" That's amphibian lingo for, "If you put full fuel onboard, a life raft, a few tools, and the POH, you have an unmanned drone at best."

It's always fun to ask about airspeed.

Seaplane pilots always refer to speed in miles per hour and never in knots. I guess it sounds faster. The C-185 amphibian is a 110-knot airplane. That's with a Continental 520 or 550 engine at 50 feet or 5000 feet. Remember, it's not a Bonanza.

Older Cessnas attract corrosion like bees to honey. Seaplanes operating in saltwater will have corrosion; there are no exceptions. An amphibian charter pilot once told me that, "Operating a Cessna in saltwater is a losing proposition. You just have to try to slow down the unavoidable." Most 185s have had multiple owners and as such, it's virtually impossible to get a good read on the corrosion issue. Even a detailed inspection can be misleading. There are a lot of creative ways to cover it up.

FINDING A GOOD ONE

After talking to seaplane owners from as far north as Alaska and all the way down to Old Mexico, I started to get a feel for the market. At the time, a clean Cessna 185 amphibian from 1973 to 1980 varied in price from around \$150,000 to \$225,000. Of course, total time on the airframe, engine time, and damage history all affect the selling price.

I seriously considered making an offer on a low-time 1980 on EDOs in California, but found out the airplane was never corrosion-proofed, which

apparently is the custom for many airplanes sold in Alaska. Seems it's too cold even for corrosion.

I came close to buying a clean 1974 in Winnipeg from a heck of a nice guy. The problem was that the airplane wasn't exactly what I wanted. So it was back to square one.

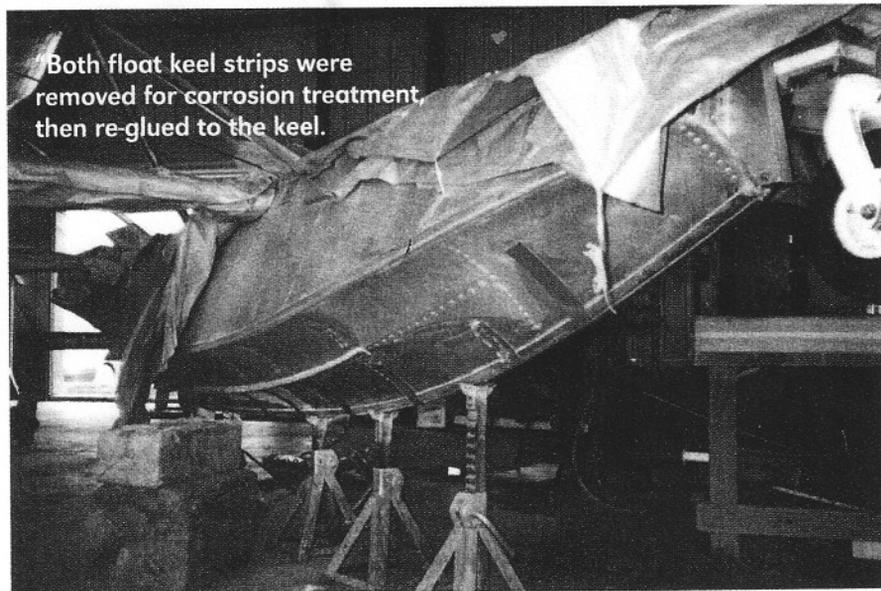
One Saturday I called this guy in Louisiana who was running an ad in *Trade-A-Plane* for two 185 amphibians. Right up front he told me that both had been flipped someplace in Canada. He said, "They ain't very pretty now, but when I'm finished with them they'll be absolutely 'gaajus,'" which is Cajun talk for "gorgeous."

Two days later I flew to New Orleans and after a short car ride arrived at the Southern Seaplane Base in Belle Chasse. The guy I talked to was Lane Panepinto. He said, "Now don't let her scare you, we're just gettin' started."

A Phoenix it was not. The wings looked like Sammy Sosa and Barry Bonds had been taking batting practice on the leading edges. He explained that the stabilizer was off an old 180 and the yokes were from a 172.

AVOIDING A DISEASE

He went on to say that I shouldn't worry about the corrosion because it was all surface and none of it was granular. When he asked me if I wanted to climb



Both float keel strips were removed for corrosion treatment, then re-glued to the keel.

up in this thing, I declined. I guess I was afraid I might catch a tropical disease.

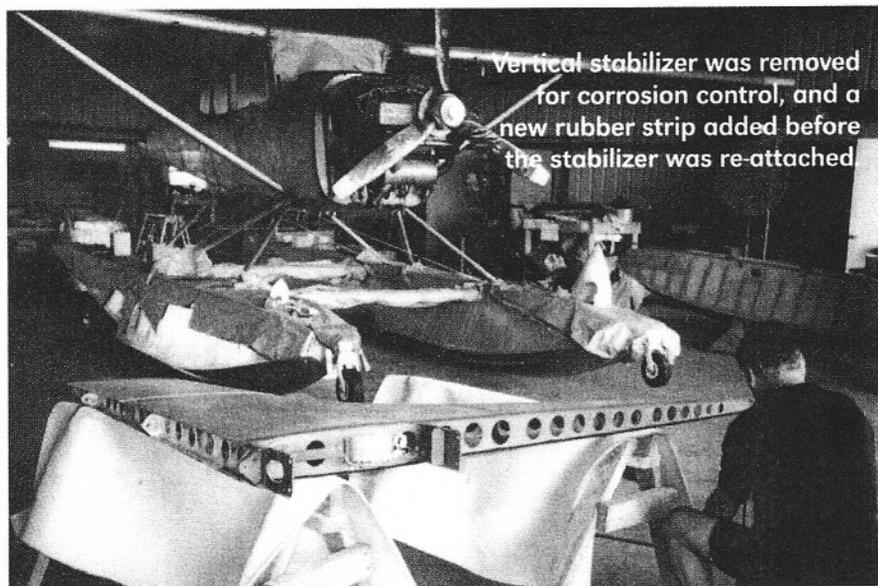
The 1979 did have the 550 Continental engine. The conversion from the IO-520 to the IO-550 increases the take-off horsepower from 285 to 300. As explained by the Wipaire engineers, the IO-520 was rated on a test stand without the engine accessories. The IO-550 is rated at 300 continuous horsepower at the propeller. Matching it up with the wider-chord McCauley Black Max propeller improves thrust and takeoff performance.

The C-185 was on a set of Wipaire 4000 amphibious floats, but overall the airplane was a real mess. Mentally I was trying to find an exit route back to the airport when Lane said he wanted to show me a 172 straight-floater they had restored. He said the 172 had been in

worse shape than the 185. It turned out to be a real beauty. Now this was more like it.

Lane's father, Phil Panepinto, started Southern Seaplane in 1954 to service the inshore oilrig industry. Mr. Phil, as he is called, is 80 but looks and moves like a man 20 years younger, and he still flies charters. Sometimes he sounds like he's auditioning for a part in a "Sopranos" episode and at other times he sounds more like Rhett Butler. Phil's other son, Lyle, is the director of operations. Lane is the director of maintenance.

Southern Seaplane has a certain feel to it. Maybe it's family pride in their work or just their enthusiasm for seaplane flying, but I left there with the feeling that these people really know what they are doing.



Vertical stabilizer was removed for corrosion control, and a new rubber strip added before the stabilizer was re-attached

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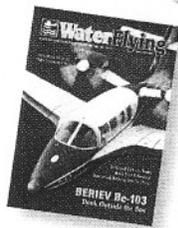
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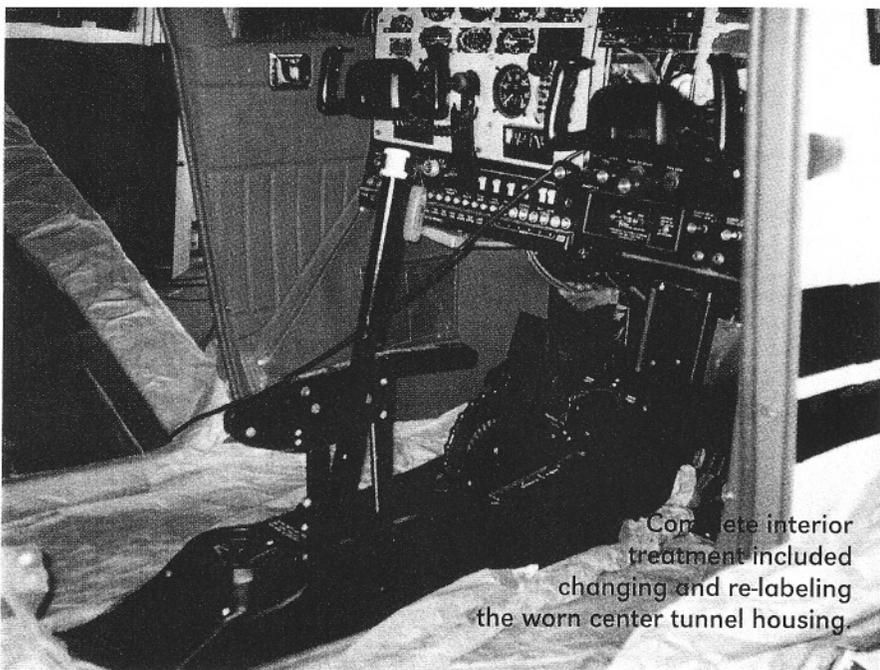
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LUNCH AND A DEAL

Lyle flew me out to a restaurant on some lake for lunch where we discussed the proposed restoration. They planned on replacing the leading edges, stabilizer, and yokes, and doing everything necessary to return the plane to its original state. He explained that the paint job would not be a scratch and shoot but rather, as he put it, "A real fifteen- to twenty-thousand-dollar paint job." Total price for the restored airplane would be \$165,000. In my defense I never offered them less, but I did try to get them to throw in a few extras. I was unsuccessful in my efforts.

Back in Florida I carefully designed a contract that laid out the details of the restoration. I faxed it to Southern. Lane returned it to me unsigned with a note attached that said, "If you want the plane, send me a 10-percent deposit." The balance would be due when I picked it up. It was as if I had questioned their southern honor. Didn't they know I had been dealing with Florida boatyards where a felony conviction is a prerequisite for employment. I stewed for a couple of weeks before calling Lane back.

Owen Gassaway, my flying mentor, has owned the FBO at the Lantana, Florida, airport since 1946. Aviation people in south Florida will tell you that he knows as much about piston

engines as anybody alive. He felt that because the 550 had 1100 hours it was an absolute must to get them to agree to do a top overhaul. As he put it, "Some of the valve guides will have to be replaced if it's going to make TBO. And more importantly, better to find a cracked cylinder on their dime." (In fact, four valve guides had to be replaced.) Lane agreed to do the overhaul and I agreed to pay for an engine analyzer and a vertical compass. We had a deal.

METALWORKING DETAIL

The restoration took six months and more than 2240 new parts. Southern Seaplane has a lot of experience in metal work, and it was an essential part of the project.

The ART wing extenders are a great modification. They add another 12.4 square feet of wing and increase the useful load 175 pounds. V_{NE} is reduced to 165 KIAS with the extenders but, as Lyle told me, "If this baby ever goes over 165, you've got a major problem." The bubble windows give better visibility and they add shoulder room to the narrow Skywagon.

It was Southern Seaplane's long history of using the 185 as the workhorse in their charter business that made the difference. The steel fuselage step, stinger, and tail wheel rear steering handles—what Southern calls "corrosion

collectors"—were removed. All the new green-tinted glass, the breathable headliner, the new plastic interior panels, and the upholstery are nice, but it was the attention to detail in the metal work that set Southern apart.

They alodined each new part before putting in the rivets. After they stripped the engine cowling they discovered it had more Bondo than a restored 1932 Ford coup. It had to be totally rebuilt, setting the project back. On the cowling alone they had to:

- Replace the right lower skin;
- Replace the center lower skin;
- Replace the support at the cowl flap brackets;
- Replace the left cowl mounting brackets;
- Re-skin the left cowl flap and sides;
- Replace the right cowl flap mounting brackets;
- Re-skin the right cowl flap and sides;
- Replace the induction drain tube and hardware;
- Replace the cooling hose for the electric fuel pump and hardware;
- Replace side oil door hinge;
- Refit the top cowling; and
- Replace the right and left hinge points.

COMPLETE COVERAGE

Now you know the reason for the two-week setback. The replacement parts list is too long to detail, but here

are a few highlights: rear spar assembly and reinforcement brackets; all elevator bearings; rubber seals left and right; elevator upper and lower skins; and wing leading edges and tips. They also rebuilt the floats and main shock strut assemblies, replaced the tires and brake pads, etc., etc. As Lane noted, "I put my hands on every piece of this damned airplane," and that alone gives me great comfort.

I never visited Belle Chasse during the restoration, nor did I receive any pictures. Thank goodness, because if I had seen the 185 in progress I would have had a heart attack. I did pester Lane with a weekly telephone call. He always said the same thing: "We've been in the seaplane business for more than 50 years. We're not about to ruin our reputation by delivering a bad product. Don't worry, this thing is gonna be 'gaajus.'"

I took delivery of N434JG several months ago. It turned out far better than I expected. It flies as true and straight as my first 185. Great work, but boys, painting the inside of the ashtrays was a bit much.

Florida resident James Gardner has logged about 1,000 hours, of which 750 have been in Cessna 185 amphibis. He used to own a Twin Bonanza, but "found it a bore." He uses his latest 185 to bonefish and skin dive in the Bahamas. He's also been on 25 African safaris. "It's the only thing I love as much as flying seaplanes," he says.



Author (center) accepts his new ride from Southern Seaplane's Lyle and Lane Panepinto.

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