

Skyhawking Howard Flying Magazine Tells The Story

My last assignment of the 1980s was to summarize industry forecasts for the 1990s given by a Flying-sponsored panel of general aviation leaders. The group's members were fairly upbeat in their predictions - save for one category. All of them agreed that light plane aviation was in trouble and that prospects for improvement were bleak.

That collective view troubled me. Has the idea of owning a personal airplane become so unattractive and so unsatisfying that the number of people who pursue it don't constitute a viable enterprise? Do people no longer wish to invest their time, money and hearts in general aviation? Is it all over?

To all those who would answer, "Yes," Howard Van Bortel says, "Hogwash!"

He knows that people are still eager to own airplanes. That's because he makes his living buying and selling used Cessna Skyhawks, and he makes a good living. Last year Van Bortel Aircraft sold 200 Cessna singles, posting revenues of \$7.5 million. Not bad for a guy just four years out of Ohio State. Clearly, this is a man with special insight into light plane aviation, a man I had to meet. So I headed for Arlington, Texas, and a hangar with a tall sign proclaiming "The World's Largest Cessna 172 Dealer." It's not as though Van Bortel has some special tie to Cessna - in fact he traces his whole enterprise to his search for a Piper Super-Cruiser.

That was back in 1975, while he was still learning to fly at Canandaigua Airport, a turf field near his home in upstate New York. Inspired by his tail dragging mentors, the teenager became determined to buy a PA-12. He studied the airplane, reading everything ever written about it, quizzing pilots and even calling the executives who first promoted it. "I learned that airplane cold," he says.

For the next 10 months he pored over each copy of Trade-A-Plane and called every listing for a PA-12. He estimates he called 100 owners. "When I get onto something, I don't let go," Van Bortel says. No kidding.

He eventually found the right airplane, a 1947 version with just 1,100 hours logged, and bought it for \$1,100. He still owns it - and it's one airplane in his life that's not for sale.

Van Bortel says his search for the elusive PA-12 was key to his later success because it taught him how to evaluate an airplane and to appreciate the predicament of a potential airplane buyer.

After graduating from high school, Van Bortel took a three-year sabbatical to restore airplanes for resale. He did well, accumulating enough money to pay his way through college. When he graduated, he returned to the airplane business.

He began as a broker, flying his Pacer to airports throughout upstate New York during the day, looking for airplanes to market. His pitch - a non-exclusive listing and a three-percent commission - was impossible for owners to refuse.

His listings grew quickly. Van Bortel's pattern was to search out airplanes in the daylight and then sell by phone late into the night. Because of his hands-on experience with many different light airplanes, Van Bortel was able to carefully assess the condition of each of his listings and then give a precise accounting of them to prospective purchasers.

"I wouldn't B.S. about the condition of the airplane even a little bit. In fact, if anything I'd downplay it. That way the people would be happily surprised," Van Bortel says.

The method worked. Within a year he was doing \$500,000 worth of business and had to move out of his first "office" (a table in his sister's living room) and into a real one at Rochester Airport. Then he switched from simply brokering airplanes to buying and selling. He traded in all brands at first, but the appeal of the 172 became undeniable.

"People love that airplane," he says. "It's the safest airplane ever built. It's reliable. Easy to fly. And every time I had one, it was good to me. They always sold easy."

By 1987 Van Bortel Aircraft was moving Skyhawks exclusively and business...well, "it just went crazy." The year-end tally was \$2.5 million. The Van Bortel name grew in part because of direct mail and advertising, but also because its airplanes were consistently above average. Van Bortel says he ensures top stock by following his "no's." He buys air planes with no corrosion, no damage history, no new paint, no more than 2,000 hours total time, and no "no name" overhauls (factory or Mattituck Aviation overhauls are preferred). He typically buys one out of every 25 airplanes offered to him, and for those he pays top dollar.

Once the airplane is purchased it's returned to the Van Bortel operation in Texas (too much snow prompted him to abandon Rochester last year), where it undergoes a detailed inspection and any needed maintenance.

The company guarantees a full refund to any buyer who returns an airplane within 10 days or 10 hours of flying; if the buyer returns the airplane up to a year or 100 hours later, the company still promises to refund the purchase price less 15 percent.

Van Bortel is proud of those guarantees because they fly in the face of the typical used-airplane warranty, what he calls "the 34 guarantee: as soon as the airplane leaves Runway 34, the guarantee is over."

Van Bortel makes the buying decision even easier by offering a variety of financing packages, and he'll also deliver the airplane to the buyer with the sale subject to inspection by the buyer's mechanic. "We put the customer in a position where he can make an informed decision," he says.

"Marketing and sales in general aviation are 50 years behind the times. The auto business couldn't exist if it trickled along this way. Consumers are smart - they want these things."

And despite the 172's popularity, they want more than just Skyhawks. So Van Bortel has expanded his offerings to cover the full range of Cessna piston singles. A recent check showed 34 airplanes in his inventory, which ranged from a 30-year-old Skyhawk for \$16,000 to a 1982 T210 listed at \$164,500. Van Bortel's customer base has expanded into Australia and Europe, and he foresees tremendous growth on both continents. A problem in satisfying those markets, however, is the lack of new airplanes. Van Bortel faults the manufacturers.

"They're all trying to market to the same little subset of pilots," he says. Rather than build relatively few airplanes with high sticker prices, he believes it would be more effective for a manufacturer to build lower-priced airplanes in volume. The consumer base would expand, he says, because the desire for personal aircraft is high and growing.

Demand for good used airplanes is strong, and prices reflect that fact. For example, Van Bortel recently listed a four-year-old IFR Skyhawk with 270 hours at \$89,500, a price level formerly reserved for new metal.

If the pool of good machines gets too shallow, Van Bortel says he might even build new ones himself. But he'd prefer selling new machines built by others. And his preferences are clear. Dial 1-800-SKYHAWK and you'll get Van Bortel Aircraft. Dial 1 800-MOONEY-I and you'll get the same. "I know I could sell 250 Mooneys a year," he says.

Van Bortel's vision of general aviation in the 1990s is quite different from that of those who struggled through the 1980s. Not only is there demand in the U.S., says Van Bortel, but the activity elsewhere in the world "is just starting to blossom." And he intends to be a part of it.

"I really feel like I'm gearing up for something big. I see the people come in here with a gleam in their eyes. Everything I see says the business is going to come back even stronger. It's not over," he says. "It's just on its way up."

That's a forecast I can live with.

By William Garvey
Reprinted from FLYING March 1990
Copyright 1991 Hachette Magazines. All Rights Reserved.