

The World's Best Kept Secret
This man wants to sell you a Skyhawk.

Howard Van Bortel is a modest fellow who, in promoting his business, makes immodest claims. Consider, for example, the advertisement in which Van Bortel declares that he is "seeking every good Cessna in existence for the most cash." Or the slogan painted in large blue letters over his hangar doors: "The World's Largest 172 Dealer."

No one has yet disputed his claim to the title of used-Skyhawk sales king, according to Van Bortel, but then, who keeps track of these things? Besides, what does it matter? No question, the guy buys and sells a lot of Skyhawks. Since he got started in the business a short seven years ago, Van Bortel estimates he has sold about 700 airplanes, the vast majority of which have been 172s. Skyhawks are his specialty - low-time Skyhawks in particular - but as the supply of pampered, seldom flown ones dwindles, he is expanding his field of view to include any and all Cessna piston-powered singles and, recently, a few 310s.

Van Bortel conducts his business from a large, sanitary hangar on the northeast corner of the Arlington (Texas) Municipal Airport near Dallas. Two long rows of international flags hang from the rafters of his hangar, a colorful travelogue of all the countries Van Bortel aircraft have gone to.

The hangar and ramp are chock-a block with used airplanes. Nice ones, too. The inventory at the time of our visit included 35 airplanes, ranging from a 150 Aerobat that was going through a prepurchase inspection for a buyer to several 172s, a Hawk XP, various 182 models, a 206, and a pristine late-model 310. The only one not a Cessna was a very nicely restored Piper PA-12. It's Van Bortel's personal airplane, the first one he ever bought. He was 16 at the time.

Van Bortel takes us on a walking tour of the merchandise, patiently noting the various attributes of each airplane in the inventory. Here's a 1984 Skyhawk, a nice blue one with all of 310 hours on it. "Factory corrosion proofing," Van Bortel notes. The price is \$84,500. And over here, a green-striped 1963 172 with 600 hours total time. He's asking \$29,500, including the Narco MK 12A and King KX 150 radios. And there's a burgundy and tan 1981 with 1,000 hours and an interior that rates a 9.5. Van Bortel can't quite remember the exact price. It's either \$59,500 or \$63,500.

More are parked on the ramp: a 900-hour 1974 with most of the interior or removed-it's being cleaned. Van Bortel's asking \$44,500. And a 1978 with 1,400 hours. This model has the O-320-H engine, which suffers from a well-publicized propensity for chewing up camshafts. "This is probably one of my best buys," Van Bortel notes - \$44,500. Then he shows us a nice 1979 that lists for \$57,500. It, too, has the H-engine, but only 600 cared for hours - and a leather interior.

Van Bortel's prices are, in many cases, well above what is quoted in various used airplane price guides. In fact, he claims to not use price guides, either in buying an aircraft or selling one. His approach to buying airplanes to resell is simple: "There are no new airplanes (Cessna singles, that is), so I handle the best ones available."

Van Bortel was born to sell something, and by all rights, it should have been cars. His father was a Rolls Royce dealer in the Rochester, New York, area, and his sister has a Subaru dealership there. But Van Bortel has always been smitten with airplanes. While in high school, he met a flight instructor working out of a grass strip in Canandaigua, New York. Van Bortel started taking lessons - and brokering airplanes, including his instructor's. He also began looking for, and eventually bought, an airplane for himself.

A decade ago, he worked his way through Ohio State University by buying, restoring, and selling airplanes, mostly aging tail draggers. He studied accounting and was taking a course to prepare for the CPA exam in Rochester when he was distracted by aircraft on approach to the Monroe County Airport. The sound of airplanes proved to be a siren's song. "I would sit there and ask myself, 'Do I want to push a pencil all my life?'" Van Bortel asks rhetorically. The answer, of course, was no. "I got up and walked out, and it was like a great weight was lifted from my shoulders."

He immediately started brokering airplanes. Using his PA-12 for transportation, Van Bortel worked the small general aviation airports around Rochester and western New York, wearing a fedora on his rounds. At night, he would return to his sister's house, where he was living, and make telephone calls to follow up the leads he had collected during the day.

Early on, Van Bortel recognized the potential of the Skyhawk. "When I was brokering, I'd get a Skyhawk, and it would sell immediately," he recalls. Eventually, he quit brokering and set up his own shop at Monroe County Airport, selling Skyhawks exclusively.

He reels off reasons why the Skyhawk has been his bread-and-butter seller: It doesn't burn much fuel, it doesn't need much maintenance, every mechanic can work on it (especially important for foreign sales), Cessna continues to support it with parts and customer service, and it is used by government agencies worldwide.

All of that makes the Skyhawk a good sell - and a good buy. "A lot of people," Van Bortel observes, "just don't know how much of a bargain a Skyhawk really is. It's the world's best kept secret."

But not for long, he adds. The demand for Skyhawks is on the increase, he believes, while the supply of low time examples is, naturally, waning. You may wince at the prices Skyhawks are bringing - Van Bortel sold one for about \$100,000 - but the prices will only go up. A buyer who chooses carefully can't lose on the investment, according to Van Bortel. "You will not have a problem reselling it. It's better than money in the bank."

Van Bortel finds airplanes using many techniques. He is known in the industry, and often a new - airplane dealer that has taken a Skyhawk or other Cessna in on trade will call. He also responds immediately to promising classifieds. The secret to getting there before the others is having the cash to make a deal on the spot. Typically, Van Bortel will call a prospect, or one will call him - buyers sometimes sell their airplanes back to Van Bortel when they are ready to move up - and the deal will be agreed to over the telephone. The only caveat is that the airplane pass an inspection by Van Bortel or one of his salespeople. The inspectors know what they are looking at, too. They can detect possible repair work by knowing what kind of rivets were used in various places on the airframe. Nonstandard rivets are a sign of potential damage and almost certain rejection by Van Bortel.

The age of an airplane is not the critical factor in determining its worth, according to Van Bortel. Neither is engine time or condition or the condition of tires, wheels, brakes, or even radios. Those things can be easily replaced if they are worn. No, the critical item is the airframe. "That's our focus totally," Van Bortel declares. An airplane with damage history, corrosion, or a general appearance that suggests lack of care earns a thumbs down from Van Bortel or his agents.

The good ones, though, are snapped up, spiffed up, and put on the lot, with the pilot's door discreetly ajar to entice the pilot dreaming of his first air plane. That's just what Van Bortel wants to see. "The Skyhawk is a good introduction-to-aviation airplane," he says. "We want more people to get up in the air, and what airplane does it better than a Skyhawk?"

BY MARK R. TWOMBLY

Reprinted from the May 1992 issue of AOPA Pilot.

Copyright 1992 AIRCRAFT OWNERS & PILOTS ASSOCIATION