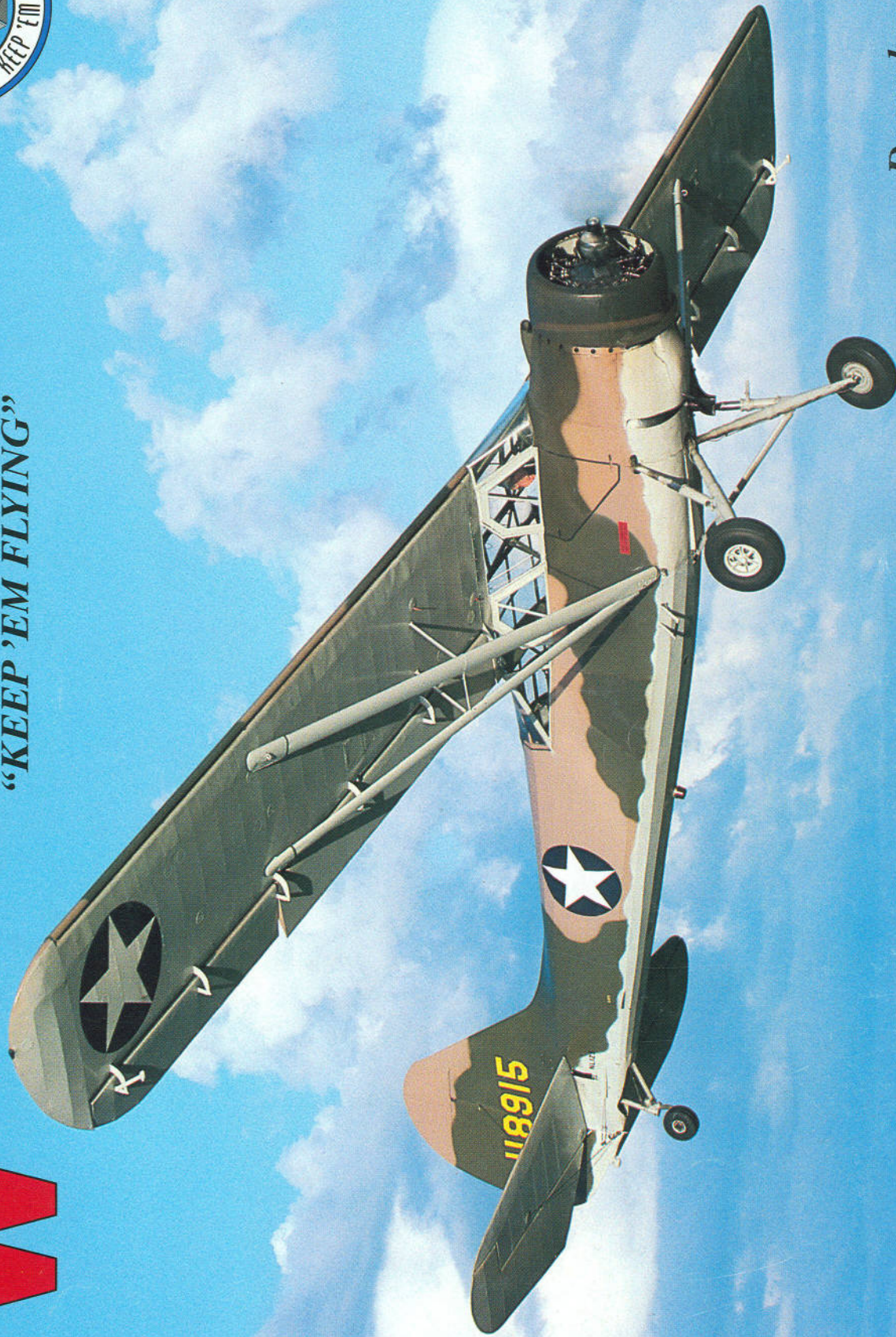


WARBIRDS

"KEEP 'EM FLYING"



December 1993



COCKPITS IN CAPTIVITY

**Article and photos
by John W. Wood, Jr.**

"Slap the fuselage with both hands before you climb into the airplane," he said with arms raised. "Owls live in some of these planes. Going up the ladder, you don't want to meet one that wants out worse than you want in." Soon I settled into the left seat of the Navy patrol bomber. I could see many of the eighty others parked at odd angles in the salvage yard. Tucson is where old airplanes go to seek reprieve or die.

I was drawn to the Tucson boneyard by frustration with air museums. I've never been completely happy in one. I memorized the outside shapes of the planes long ago but the cockpit, behind the rope, was my goal. What pilot hasn't wished to sit in the Spirit of St. Louis for a while? Belt fastened, controls free, chocks set, mags off....

(Above) After years of storage and an auction, Albatross 914 loses engines, props, landing gear and instruments.

(Right center) The Tucson boneyard—a tattered rudder of one DC-3 frames another.

(Right) A tired Grumman Albatross awaits the end. The tail was used to fix a plane damaged after drug-running. The cockpit has been marked for cutting and conversion to a desk.





I returned to the boneyard with a new purpose — to make furniture out of airplanes. I've built a coffee table, wall hanging, office chair and writing desk from cockpits made by Convair, Boeing, Lockheed and Grumman. It is more noble to convert aircraft into furniture than beer cans.

Tucson is a living museum, the petting zoo of airplanes. Snoop around a bit and you are in the worn cockpit of a magnificent old machine. Not a flashy creature from the warbird circuit but an enormous workhorse such as the Boeing Stratotanker — four piston engines and two jets. At the cockpit door you are met with the sensuous aroma of hydraulic fluid, oil and plastic — Eau d' Avion. You find the checklist where the pilot left it, after the last flight twenty years ago.

My trips to Tucson are usually a detour from a business trip — old clothes and work gloves packed in with a business suit. I arrive late after the high desert has cooled off. The motel is just off the interstate and has two automobile carriers parked outside. At dawn, the boneyard, surrounded by a mountain rim, comes into view. Behind a foreground of wrecked cars are the tails of big airplanes and smelter stacks — endangered species and the tools of their destruction. During the summer, the work day starts at 6:30 a.m. and ends early. By midday, the temperature inside the planes is over 150° F.

Don Howell is my contact at the salvage yard. He has been around old airplanes for thirty years. Don remembers chopping up acres of B-29s. "We didn't even have enough sense to cut the nose art off," he said. "Think what a collector would pay for genuine World War II nose art." Don's goal is to extract maximum value from his aircraft and mine is to pay the least. We dickered for a year over the nose of a Grumman Albatross — Don wanted to sell it to a movie company. He supplied airplanes and parts for several films. He sold a C-123 transport later blown to bits in *Die Hard II*.

After three smaller projects, I thought about making a desk from an entire cockpit. The Albatross was not my first choice. I wanted to find the cockpit of a DC-3, the classic airplane, but they are far too dear. I found a cockpit in Texas but they wanted

(Above) After cutting aluminum skin, control cables, hydraulic lines and electrical wiring, the cockpit is gently hoisted free.

(Left) Airplane yields to the saw-the cockpit is trimmed for shipment.

(Right) Daughter Diana tackles the project with a putty knife. A protective covering was applied to the windshield when the aircraft was put in storage.

(Center) An improvised hoist helps handle the nose section in my basement. The cockpit has been stripped for restoration and a new floor added.

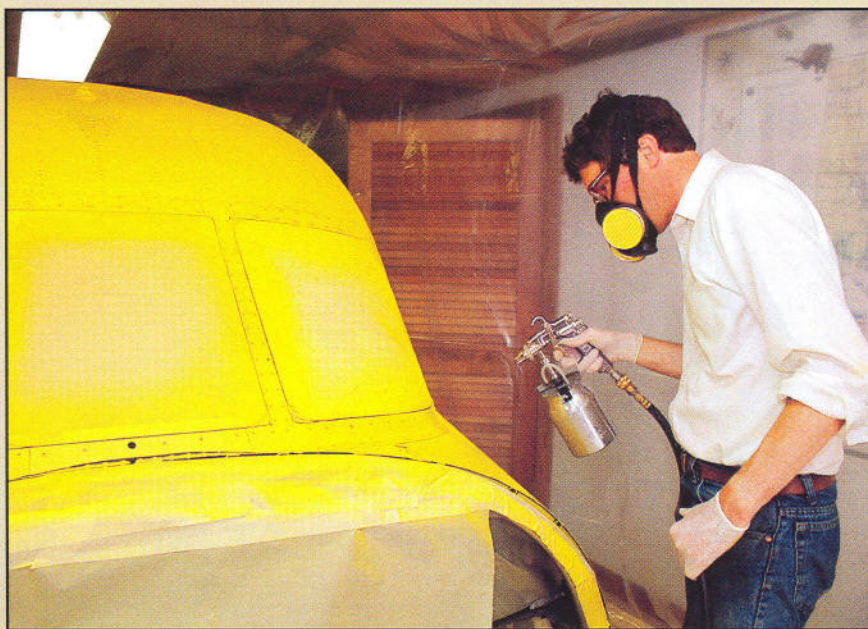
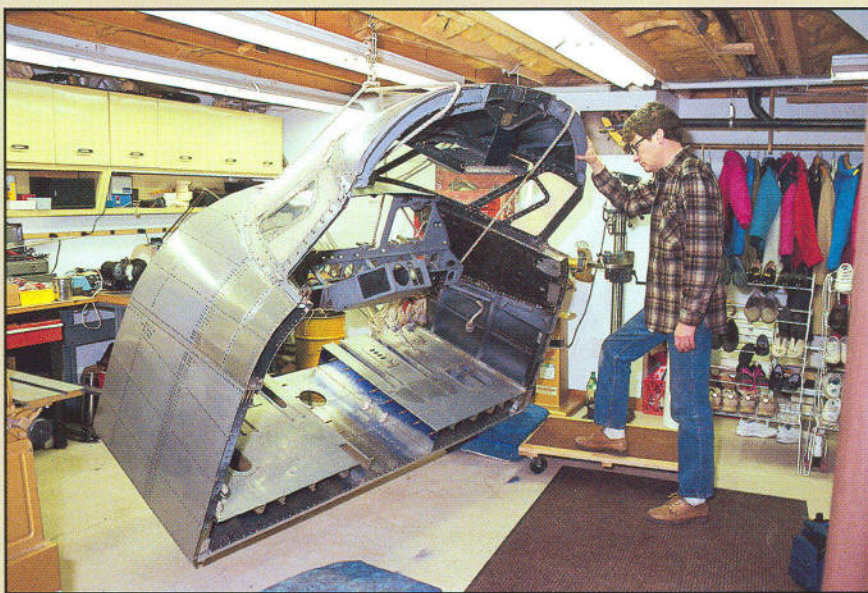
(Below) The basement becomes a spray booth.

\$6,000. Too many DC-3s are still flying. When one tangles with a fuel truck or ground loops it may need a new nose, hence the high price.

The Albatross' first owner was the U.S. Naval Academy where it served from 1953 to 1960. It flew 3,637 hours for midshipman training and transportation. Salt water was hard on this airplane and it retired early. After being stored in Arizona for twenty-five years the plane was auctioned by the government. The salvage yard cut off the tail and sold it to replace one damaged by a bomb after a drug-running incident. The Albatross looked helpless — aft fuselage missing, nose high in the air and a faded ANNAPOLIS across the wing.

Next I had to answer some questions and do some engineering. By convention, a writing surface is 28 inches high. Could I find room for a sheet of glass at the proper height in the cockpit? Could I fit the finished product through a three-foot door? Where should I have the plane cut and what would the piece weigh? How would I get all this back to Massachusetts? Armed with aircraft drawings, tape measure and camera I worked these questions into an answer. This airplane could become a piece of furniture. The Albatross proved a better choice than the DC-3. With throttles overhead, it allowed a full two by six foot writing surface. Don and I came to terms on money. I would keep this plane from being blown up in another sorry movie sequel.

Next came the surgery. Don's mechanics performed a cockpitectomy with power saw, cutting torch and crane. They made rough cuts; I would do the finish work back home. Someone had pulled the instrument panels out of the Albatross and emptied them. I planned to restore the cockpit to factory-fresh condition. Don unlocked a shed and we sorted through his collection to find forty instruments. Altimeters are worth \$75 each — I needed two. I scavenged two other Albatross hulks for little bits and pieces. After a trip to the lumber





(Above) The finished writing desk along with an office chair made from a flight crew seat. Visiting aviators always accept when asked to sit down and flip the master switch. The inset photo shows the entire antenna mast.

yard, we built and packed a crate four by eight by eight feet that weighed a thousand pounds.

Two weeks later the crate sat in my driveway in Concord — both family and neighbors had questions. My first task was to strip the cockpit down to a shell of aluminum and glass. I pulled out control yokes, throttles, radios and hydraulics. I sprayed hot water and soap to remove a twenty year accumulation of mud, grease and animal droppings. After stripping the paint, I removed a basement door and dragged the cockpit inside. It was a fixture there for the next two years — the subject of curious inspection by visiting children, parents, friends and a plumber.

Before proceeding, I needed to master a new skill — aircraft riveting. An instructor at the local aircraft mechanic school was sympathetic and within an hour I was riveting nearly as well as Rosie. The piece cut from the airplane was similar to a piece cut from a beverage can — surprisingly fragile. I reinforced the fuselage and built a new floor. Thousands of rivets later, it began to look less like scrap and more like a cockpit.

Since it would never fly again, I took a few liberties. The windshield wipers and de-icing gear were too far forward and would be lost. I moved them aft. The intercoms, flares, oxygen regulators and hand pump were too far aft. I moved them forward.



(Above) My first project -a coffee table make from the cockpit of a Convair T-29 Navigator trainer-a post-war military cockpit frozen under a sheet of glass.

(Below) The instrument panel of a KC-97 Stratotanker hangs over my desk at home. It also serves as a flourescent desk light and a clock. This aircraft finished its flying with the Wisconsin Air National Guard.



Call it artistic license.

I opened all the instruments, cleaned them and changed some dials. I decided to make many of the gauges work and modified them to do so. I added a power supply, pumps and motors to provide electricity, air and sound effects. The back of the instrument panel resembled an airworthy plane — a maze of wiring and plumbing.

I wrote the Naval Academy and the librarian sent back photos of the same airplane from the 1956 yearbook. With plastic sheet, fans and filters, I converted our basement into a paint spray booth. A body shop mixed paint to match the original — glossy sea blue. Grumman Aircraft

still supports the aircraft, forty years after its manufacture. They supplied parts I was unable to find at the boneyard. Using the aircraft manuals for reference, during two years I brought the cockpit back to the condition it left the Long Island factory in 1953.

After weekends in tight spots with bleeding knuckles, it seemed more like a terrible obsession than an elegant experiment. I kept a log — it took 800 hours and \$6,500. The day came to transport it twenty miles to my office. It took four of us with dollies and a truck. We eased the hundred pound sheet of glass in place, the last step. I slid into the seat and flipped on the master switch. A hundred lamps lit, gyros spun up and the

altimeters began a slow climb to altitude.

The nose of this craft sits in my office, the tail is grafted to another plane in Arizona and the rest will be scrapped. Do these old airplanes have souls? What happens when they are melted down? I believe that spirits flee to the minds of the pilots who flew them. Pilots remember younger years, tense and idle moments aloft, when it seemed they would fly forever.

* * * * *

John Wood manages a high-tech business near Boston and flies a Beech Baron.