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Believers congregate to praise the old and vow devotion to the new Navion.

by Susan S. Weinberg

Navions Unite

IT IS NOT UNUSUAL to see one Navion parked at an airport; it is not extraordinary to see two or occasionally three; but 86?

It happens once a year when the American Navion Society gathers for the annual Navioneers' fly-in. It happened the last time around at Boyne Mountain Lodge, a ski resort and airstrip near the far northern shores of Michigan.

For four days Navioneers attended clinics, lectures and parties; they raced, flew formations and gave and took checkrides in their own and each others' Navions.

But mainly the Navioneers talked and looked. In small clusters they strolled from plane to plane stroking Hartzell props and Brittain tip tanks and exuding eternal devotion to the Navion.

The American Navion Society and its annual conclave were the brainstorm of Californian S. Dan Brodie—"Big Dan." A congenial, energetic industrial engineer and a pilot of only eight years' standing (in this case that's 3,000 hours—mostly in Navions), Dan saw a definite need for a central source of written and verbal information on the care and feeding of Navions.

The need stemmed from the Navion's production history. In 1946 North

American built the Navion to sell cheap, which it did (\$6,100), but the company's heavy military commitments prevented production of Navions in profitable volume. Ryan bought the manufacturing rights, but as fortunes of war would have it (Korean this time), Ryan suspended Navion production in 1951 to attend to military contracts. Tusco of Houston took over in 1955 and formed the Navion Aircraft Company, a fantastically mismanaged operation that went into bankruptcy. Later it emerged as Base Industries, Inc., and moved to Harlingen, Texas.

Over the years, the changes of manufacturer had made information about the Navion so confused and hard to come by that, says Brodie, "I'd owned my Navion for two years before I ever knew what model it was!"

With a mailing list of Navion owners—whom he assumed were similarly distressed—Brodie set to work. Before its first Newsletter came out six years ago, the American Navion Society had 140 members. Today the society has 1,200 member planes (Navioneers count spinners not noses) representing 80 percent of the potential membership, or about 60 percent of the approximately 2,000 existing Navions (including those in military use).

Through its monthly Newsletter, Brodie's book, *What to Look for When Buying a Navion*, and the annual fly-in where members exchange the latest scoop on the Navion, it became possible to fill in some of the gaps made by the Navion's rocky production history.

The formation of the society unearthed a wealth of valuable information. For instance, not many Navion owners knew about Bob Douthitt and the Douthitt step. President of the El Centro (California) Imperial Valley Navion Society, which he founded in 1954, Douthitt developed a retractable step (it retracts with the landing gear) partly to eliminate the little bit of drag caused by the Navion Rangemaster's standard stirrup that hangs from the trailing edge of the wing, and partly to streamline the Navion's in-flight appearance. When in use, the step locks into position well behind and below the trailing edge of the left wing. On Rangemasters this means easy access to the door.

The most appreciative recipients of the Douthitt step seem to be the women, especially the wives of pre-Rangemaster owners. Before the Rangemaster's appearance in December, 1960, all Navions were characterized by the sliding canopy plus over-the-wing, over-the-side, over-



Terry Gardner opens the canopy of his 18-year-old twin conversion, proving that despite conversion and modification, a Navion remains unmistakably a Navion.

the-pilot's-seat entry and vice versa for deplaning. To the women this guaranteed runs in their stockings and skirts flying. Now, at the annual fly-in, the little lady can talk to Bob Douthitt then scurry back to ask hubby either to buy a Rangemaster or to add a Douthitt step to his Ryan.

Though the formation of the Navion Society had provided Navion owners with a means of communication, Navioneers still needed a source of spare parts and they needed a source of tender loving care for their planes. Very few mechanics were familiar with more than a few of the variety—no two Navions are exactly alike—of Navion models and conversions. And they still needed a source of information and technical assistance in making modifications and conversions—after all, the Navion had been built with enough room under the cowling to add 100 hp to the original 185-hp Continental engine.

Again, S. Dan Brodie, president of the American Navion Society, stirred Navion owners to action. He obtained permission from the SEC to sell stock in the Navion Aircraft Corporation and, backed by members of the society, took over production of Navions in July, 1965.

"When we bought the Navion Aircraft

Corporation and began to set up shop in Seguin, Texas," Brodie recalls, "it took us a year to figure out exactly what we'd bought."

But despite the confusion, Navioneers bought stock. They bought into the corporation not because Base Industries had developed a money-making enterprise—anything but!—but because they wanted to keep the Navion flying.

The results of their efforts? Well, Navions—old and new—are still flying. The newest one, N2500T, and the first produced by the new Navion Aircraft Corporation, was certificated July 13, 1966. At Boyne, Navioneers were able to gaze lovingly upon it, examine its 285-hp fuel injection Continental engine, its five-place interior and its Brittain single-axis autopilot, then bid it farewell and good luck on its upcoming trip to Nairobi, Kenya. That's the East African home of John Hall, OOT's first owner, who read about the then proposed Model H in *What to Look For When Buying A Navion*. (The book is available to anyone, Navioneer or not, who requests it and sends \$1 to The American Navion Society, Box 2503, Airport Station, Oakland, California 94614.)

Although John Hall could not make it from Nairobi to Boyne to discuss his rea-

sons for buying a Navion—how devoted can a Navioneer be?—the old guard was on hand to conjecture.

Terry Gardner, age 18, but old guard in spirit, described the Navion as "the most dependable plane going." Terry eyed his family's red and white twin, 8680H, that he'd flown IFR to Boyne from St. Louis. "Our bird was built by North American in 1947—the year before I was born—and converted to a twin in '54; it'll probably outlive me. On two Lycoming 150s, using 75 percent power at 7,500 feet, it'll do 148 knots (170 mph) and burn 18 gph. It carries a useful load of 1,100 pounds, which is really helpful when we have to carry luggage plus Dad's camera equipment and cases of food for Flying Tiger (our Yorkshire terrier).

"It's such a sturdy plane that what maintenance it has needed I've been able to do myself. I had to learn because I've flown 80H in almost every state, and often I've landed at airports where the mechanic's never heard of a Navion. I don't doubt that Mr. Hall in Africa chose the Navion for this kind of sturdiness and dependability."

With all the pride and assurance of a true Navioneer, Terry adds, "I don't blame him." †