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Whelchel's Tiger Moth: Low-time, high fun

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Meg Godlewski | News | January 18, 2011

Most airplanes are fun to fly, but there are some that are just more fun than others. Leon Whelchel of Vinton, Iowa, believes he's on the high-side of the fun scale when he flies his 1942 de Havilland DH 82A Tiger Moth.

The open-cockpit biplane was a trainer during World War II. When Whelchel taxied into the vintage parking area at last summer's AirVenture decked out in a tan flight suit, leather jacket and helmet, he looked like a page from history come to life. The attire is de rigueur for open cockpit flying, he noted, as he carefully parked the airplane in the grass.



You can tell that Whelchel cares for the Tiger Moth. In many ways it looks as though it just rolled out of the factory, when actually it was delivered to the Royal Air Force in 1942.

"I've owned it for 37 years," he said. "De Havilland built 8,000 of them during the war. There was also a factory in England and when the war started they had factories in Canada, Australia and New Zealand. This particular one was built in Australia."

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According to Whelchel, the Tiger Moth is sort of the British version of the Stearman, as it was the primary trainer for air corps.

"My airplane was part of No. 6 Elementary Flying Training School in Tamworth, New South Wales," he said, adding that part of the fun of having a vintage airplane is learning about its history. For that, he had to take a trip to England.

"I went to the Royal Air Force Museum in London and found a picture of the squadron. I painted it like the airplanes in the

picture," he said. "Those are authentic markings and the authentic serial number that the Australian Air Force gave it."

The markings include a red kangaroo on the side of the fuselage, the red, white and blue roundel, and the striped tail.

Most of the cockpit instruments also came from England.

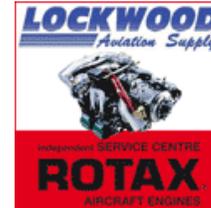
"De Havilland built so many of them during the war that parts are still pretty easy to come by," he said.



The first thing that people notice when they peek inside the cockpit is the magnetic compass. It's huge by American standards and looks more like something that you would find on a ship.

"That's what they used. It's very British," he said. "The airplane also has a standard inclinometer, which is basically a triangular tube with fluid in it. The angle gives you the rate of climb. It also has a turn and bank indicator. The bottom tells you the rate of turn and the top tells you if you are slipping or not."

The magnetos are activated with blip switches. The plane is powered by a 140-hp de Havilland Gypsy Major inline 4-cylinder inverted engine.



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Since the airplane was designed to be a basic trainer, it's not exactly a speed machine. "Cruise is 90 knots on a good day," Whelchel chuckled. "Landing is done at 52 or 53 knots."

Whelchel has made a few changes to the airplane to make it more user friendly. For

starters, it has a modern radio and, instead of a tail skid, he has a tailwheel.

"During the war the airplanes had tail skids on them because back then there were wonderful grass fields to land on," he said. "Today if you have a tail skid, landing on a asphalt or cement runway will grind it down, so I put on a tailwheel."

The fuselage frame is tube steel with plywood decking and Dacron covering. The wings are wood.

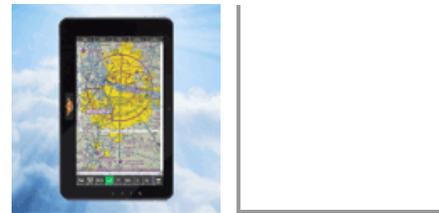
"Those are the original wings," said Whelchel. "I recovered the airplane about 10 years after I got it and we found the wings were just about perfect — all they needed was varnish."

The airplane holds 234 gallons of fuel. The fuel level indicator is a float.



Considering its age, Whelchel's airplane is relatively low time.

"It has about 2,900 total time now," said Whelchel. "I put about 2,000 of that on it. The reason that it is so low time is that it was the squadron commander's airplane and all he did was give



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Over the years Whelchel's Tiger Moth has won awards at several air shows and fly-ins, but still hasn't taken home an award from AirVenture.

Maybe next year?

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Chris Manthe

And also congratulations to Leon for being a Wright Brothers Master Pilot Award recipient! He has been an active pilot for at least fifty years! You can find an application for the Wright Brothers or Charles Taylor Award on [FAASafety.gov](#).

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Dan Colburn

I was about to comment on that 240 gallons of gas, Buck beat me to it. I flew a Tiger Moth in New Zealand. What fun! It reminded me of the Stearman in the Navy in 1943.

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Buck

I think 24gal would be more accurate. I maintained a couple of DH-82A's and this one doesn't have the anti spin strakes, which the A's had. Flew one to Newark on the 50th anniversary of the airport, around the Statue of Liberty and back north over NYC, had great fun..

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