

# AN ALASKAN BUSH PLANE



# A RESTORED CESSNA 185

By Michelle Adserias

**Below and facing page:** Tim Bloom's 1977 Cessna 185 in beautiful, snowy Alaska.



**C**essnas and adventures are in the family blood, which is how Tim Bloom ended up living in Alaska with three Cessnas parked in his hangar.

## Cessna 180: The First Family Plane

It all began on his ninth birthday in Sebago Lake, Maine. His dad brought home a 1979 Cessna 180, on floats, that quickly became the family vehicle. Tim earned his private pilot certificate (PPC) at the former Twitchell Airport (also a seaplane base) in Turner, Maine when he was 17 years old.

While he was earning his degree in aeronautical engineering at Daniel Webster College, aviation was always on his mind. He chose coursework that would also equip him for aviation management. All the while, he continued expanding his aviation know-how. He completed his commercial, his multi-engine and his seaplane ratings. Within days of turning 23, he added his ATP to the list. He has since added his 1900, E145, 727, 777 and MD11 type-ratings to his qualifications.

Tim was only eight months into his career as an electrical engineer when he decided, "This is boring." So, he packed up and moved to Alaska to be a seaplane pilot. He didn't realize,

until he got there, that most companies require their pilots to have 1,000 hours of float experience, which Tim didn't have. He worked as a bush driver making wheel landings in the Kenai Peninsula, Prince William Sound and on the eastern and western side of Cook Inlet instead. After seven years on the go, he accepted an instructor position with Fed-Ex.

In 1998, Tim's father called to say the Cessna 180 needed a new engine and the going price was in the \$30,000 price range. Together they started searching for an engine. "The timing was amazing!" Mattituck Services came to the rescue with a 0470 ready to go — at a discounted price. Another customer had backed out on it.

After replacing the engine, Tim's father flew it less and less. He finally decided to sell the family airplane. The timing wasn't ideal. Tim and his son, Nathan, had just invested a great deal of time and money into restoring the newer family plane, a Cessna 185. Though he didn't really need the Cessna 180, he couldn't let it go to someone else. It held too many of his childhood memories. He and Travis, who is working on his PPC, picked up the airplane from Lewiston, Maine and made the action-packed, sometimes harrowing, four-day flight back to Birchwood, Alaska with it – but that story is for another day!



**Above from left:** Restoration of Tim's Cessna 185, engine out. • Check out the new Continental IO-550 engine.

**Below Right:** Tim's son Nathan enjoying some time in the hangar with two of their planes.

## Cessna 185: The Second Family Plane

When Nathan was just a few months old, Tim purchased a 1977 Cessna 185, the aircraft his son considers the family vehicle. 1977 was the last year Cessna made the Skywagon with a 12-volt battery. It's a favorite among bush pilots because this "diamond in the rough" is easy to jump start in remote areas but still has the IO-520 fuel-injection engine and the higher dash and air shield.

The Skywagon Tim purchased, N1576H, was one of the airplanes used to test ADS-B in the capstone project. "It was all decked out with the equipment, but it was old." All that ADS-B equipment also made it heavy – which earned it the nickname 76Heavy. Little things were beginning to break and Tim couldn't find replacement parts. Plus, he wanted to lighten the aircraft, so he began saving money to restore and refurbish the airplane.

He put about 150-200 hours on the Skywagon during the summer of 2020, during the COVID shutdowns. There wasn't much to do besides fishing, so he and Nathan did a great deal of fly-in fishing on the Iliamna, at New Halen – Nathan's favorite spot – and along the Kenai near Soldotna (among other top secret fishing spots).



At the annual inspection that fall, the IA gave the engine a thumbs up. At a friend's suggestion, Tim used some of his savings for new avionics. He found a great deal on a Garmin package, so he removed the vacuum system. "I took everything out. There was nothing between the front seat and the firewall." Then he installed a G500, a GTN 650Xi GPS, and an autopilot. Tim wasn't crazy about the autopilot at first but has since grown to appreciate it. Since the autopilot needed a second input source, he also added a 275. The final step in replacing the avionics was designing, cutting and powder coating a custom panel.



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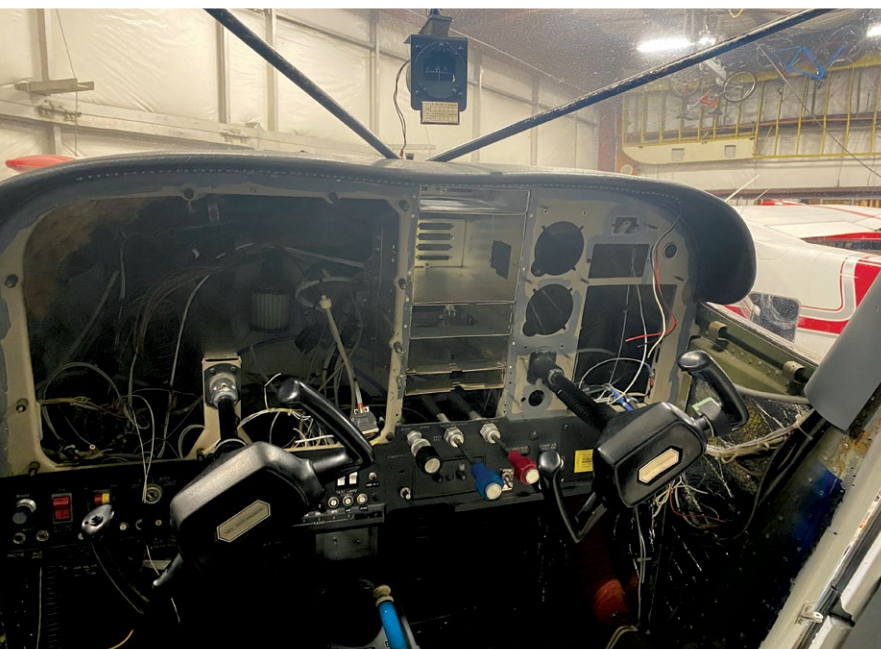
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**Left from top:** The Cessna 185's original panel. • The panel is out and being prepped for the new avionics. • Almost there! The left side of the panel is complete.

Just like home improvement projects often come with surprises, Tim ran into some unexpected work and additional expenses with the new avionics. The existing lights were going to interfere with the new magnetometer, so Tim had to rewire the entire aircraft and replace the existing lights. He installed new Whelen lights with the strobe and navigation lights all in one unit. Replacing the lights meant the wing tips had to be repainted.

Tim did a bit of cosmetic work on the interior, as well. His Cessna 185 now has Atlee Dodge seats installed, full leather in the front and fabric in the back. He also added Selkirk foam to the ceiling and baggage areas to give the interior a more finished look. "It seemed like every time we went to the hangar there was one more hurdle to overcome. In the end, his Skywagon was out of commission for eight months.



**Above:** The panel is complete and includes a Garmin G500, a GTN 650Xi and a GI 275 EIS.

When the engine was tested the following year at the annual inspection, Tim was not surprised to learn the compressions were low. The engine had about 1500 hours on it so he decided it was time to replace it. Donna at Davis Aviation, “was freakin’ phenomenal.” Tim asked her whether she would recommend the IO-520 or the IO-550. “Oh, that’s easy,” Donna replied. “I can’t get 520’s right now.” She went on to offer him a very good deal on the IO-550 and helped him track down some other parts he needed. He bought new baffling from Airforms in Wasilla, Alaska, some brand-new controls, and a Seaplanes West engine mount. He also cut holes and added cooling gills to the cowling.

Fortunately, Tim already had a new propeller. When he was flying with the Iron Dog Air Force in 2012-2013 the prop seal started spitting oil. On a trade-in, Northwest Propellers out of the Seattle area got him a McCauley 401 Black Mack. When he installed it, he intentionally chose a propeller that would fit an IO-550, anticipating he would need to install a new engine down the road.


With all these changes, Tim has noticed some vast improvements. He has been part of the Valdez STOL competitions over the years and the weight reduction and added power have upped his performance.

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## New Projects on the Horizon

Now that the Cessna 185 upgrades are complete, Tim and Nathan can focus on their next two projects. Even though the Cessna 180 has a new engine, it’s looking a little rough. Tim’s plan is to spruce it while keeping it as original as possible.

Their other project is a third airplane they recently crowded into their 45' x 45' hangar. Together they are revamping a Super Cub. While they were at AirVenture this past summer, they won a week of free engine-building classes, which they will use to get their experimental aircraft up and running.

Why have three airplanes? Tim explained, “In my opinion, airplanes are like golf clubs in the lower 48. Each one has a certain purpose. That’s why I will have an experimental Super Cub and a pretty fast 185. Do they overlap a bit? Yeah, kinda. But at the end of the day, they actually have two somewhat different missions.” It’s true, they’re both bush planes. But the Super Cub, which is capable of getting in and out of tighter places, has a smaller payload. The Skywagon needs more airstrip but is faster and has a much bigger payload. And the Cessna 180? The family would feel incomplete without it. 

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