

A man and his Vagabond — 52 years on golden wings

## Marcia “Sparky” Barnes

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When we taxied along the flight line to find a place to tie down at the annual Thomasville, Ga., Fly-in, my eyes were quickly drawn to a small, perky yellow vintage airplane tied down in the grass between a red Stinson and a white Luscombe. I was a wingless pilot at the time, drawn by longing toward that 1948 Piper Vagabond, for I was in the process of rebuilding one of my own.

Little did I know the interesting story that would unfold as I strolled over to meet Winn Baker, N4666H's devoted caretaker, who had the Vagabond's engine cowling propped open and was wiping off the dipstick to check the oil level. Tall and lean, with a serious yet pleasant demeanor, Mr. Baker told me that he has been in aviation all of his life.

"It's a good thing I fly airplanes because I don't know how to do anything else," he says, laughing.

A retired Delta Airlines captain, he flies today as a demonstration pilot for Pilatus Business Aircraft and travels all over the southeast, as well as into Canada, New Mexico and the Caribbean.

My curiosity was piqued as to why this experienced pilot would choose an old, no-frills Vagabond, powered by only 65 horses, as his personal pleasure aircraft. Mr. Baker answered my query with a quiet, proud smile and the words, "I soloed it in 1952 — it's just part of me."

It turns out that his father was a Piper dealer years ago and sold the airplane new in 1948 to a man in Brunswick, Ga., whose son learned to fly in it. They kept the short-wing PA-17 at a small airstrip behind their house and, two years later, sold the little Piper back to Baker's father for only \$500.

Mr. Baker fondly recalls the trips that he and his father used to make in the Vagabond.

"We used to jump in and fly down to Miami or Key West," he reminisces. "I was just a kid, and that was before they had Kennedy Space Center. We'd fly down the beach the whole way, and fly right around the Cape. We'd land on the beach and go fishing."

As a teenager, Mr. Baker learned to fly several different aircraft, although he didn't bother to log all of his flight time in the beginning. He received his required pre-solo spin training in a J-3 Cub (his first logbook entry) and soloed the Vagabond (his second logbook entry) on his 16th birthday. But he didn't stop flying that day when he climbed out of N4666H — he soloed his family's Super Cruiser and Stinson, as well.

Exactly a year later, on his 17th birthday, the trusty Vagabond took Mr. Baker aloft to earn his private certificate. By then, Mr. Baker must have known that he would make aviation his career — he went on to earn his commercial rating, once again in the unpretentious Piper, at age 19.

Think about it: would you be able to earn a private or commercial ticket today in an aircraft that has only a tachometer, airspeed indicator, wet compass, altimeter, and a combined oil temperature/pressure gauge for instrumentation? But the Vagabond had taken Mr. Baker as far as it could for the time; he flew the Stinson for his instrument training and rating.

Several years passed, and Mr. Baker went away to school and then joined the military. When he came home, he says his family still owned the Vagabond, but they "had a pretty good fixed base operation going in Brunswick. We had Bonanzas and Apaches, and I was flying an Aero Commander for another company."

So he and his father talked about selling the airplane, but at that time, it would only bring about \$1,500 — only enough to buy a radio for one of the other airplanes. Today, Mr. Baker is mighty thankful that his father decided just to keep the PA-17.

Aircraft sometimes bring sweethearts together in life, and Mr. Baker's Vagabond did just that — in fact, not only did it bring him and his future wife together; it also brought another Vagabond into the family. Before they were married, Mr. Baker used to take his girlfriend, Carolyn, flying with him every few weeks.

"Unknown to me, she started going out to a little airport and taking flying lessons in a Cessna 150," smiles Mr. Baker, adding, "then she started perusing Trade-A-Plane, and she found a Vagabond out in Shreveport, La."

Mr. Baker journeyed with her to look at it, and they finally arrived in Shreveport one evening after surviving several days of bad weather and a bad case of the flu for Carolyn.

"The next morning it was beautiful. We looked at the PA-17 and she bought it," he says. "Then we flew it back to Atlanta the same day."

Yet another long-term relationship was formed — Carolyn owned and flew N4682H for 30 years, and she and her husband experienced the unique joy of flying their respective Vagabonds in formation with each other over the years.

Mr. Baker's father had several mechanics working for their FBO, and through the years, N4666H received piecemeal restoration work as needed — the wings might be restored one year, and the fuselage a year or so later. And, if you recall the coastal excursions the plane made, you might suspect, correctly, that the airplane required some welding repair, from salt water-induced rust on the longerons.

But it was well loved and cared for, by several generations of the Baker family. Standing proudly beside the tube and fabric, vintage aircraft, Mr. Baker explained by saying "my dad flew it until he was nearly 80 years old, and my son soloed this airplane on his 16th birthday. I also had a two-place Pitts then, and he soloed that after he soloed the Vagabond that day. But unfortunately, we lost him in an automobile accident in 1986 — that was tough to take, but time helps heal. He had chosen a career in aviation and was flying 727s for a young upcoming airline in Atlanta then."

In 1986, Mr. Baker sadly dismantled his loyal Piper Vagabond — made even dearer to him now because of the precious memories it held — because the fabric covering was unairworthy, and the time had finally come to ground it. He stored it away in his basement until late 1997 when he took the parts and pieces over to a local business for restoration.

Mr. Baker wanted N4666H to appear much as it did the day in 1948 when it was delivered from Piper Aircraft in Lock Haven, Penn. He chose to have it covered with Poly-Fiber fabric instead of Grade A cotton for longer lasting durability, but that was the primary modification to the aircraft. In keeping with aircraft finishes of the 40s, he wanted a satin luster finish as opposed to the modern shiny "wet" look and decided to do without a fancy trim scheme. After all, Piper Aircraft never manufactured a Vagabond with an accent trim due to its extreme cost cutting strategies in 1948.

Mr. Baker says he wasn't going after trophies with the Vagabond's restoration.

"I just wanted a good airplane that'll last me from now on. And on August 10th, 2002, it'll be 50 years to the day that I first soloed it. I plan to let them cut my shirttail again," he says, laughing and blue eyes shining with anticipation.

My curiosity piqued once more, after listening to his story of Vagabonding for half a century, and I asked Mr. Baker if he sometimes suddenly feels 16 years old again while flying the little yellow Piper.

"Oh yeah!" he exclaims, and then, with the accumulated wisdom of life's experiences, quickly adds, "but I resist some of the urges I had then."