

PACEMAKER: BELLANCA'S 1929 HEAVY HAULER

An old workhorse goes back to work BY BUDD DAVISSON PHOTOS BY DAVID LEININGER

“We only have roads into town three months of the year, while all the lakes and rivers are frozen. Otherwise the only way into Norman Wells and many of the other communities around us is by airplane. Usually float planes. That’s why I had the Bellanca CH-300 restored. In the 1930s it was one of our favorite links with the outside world and is a historical connection from then to the modern aircraft we fly today.”

The speaker is Warren Wright, who has operated North-Wright Airways for decades. His fleet of 21 aircraft—many on floats, some on wheels, and some on tundra tires—provide an aerial lifeline for the many small villages and camps that dot the wilderness of Canada’s Northwest Territories. For reference, Norman Wells is located just 90 miles south of the Arctic Circle and right in the middle of nowhere. This is where airplanes are an indispensable survival tool.

Wright’s latest bird is the 1929 Bellanca CH-300 Pacemaker, which is representative of the breed of airplane that opened up much of the northern territories of Canada and Alaska. The aircraft were big, heavy haulers that were essentially aerial tractor-trailers, which carried anyone and anything that could be jammed through the doors. The Bellanca Pacemaker, although revered in the North Woods, where it wore coveralls and had dirt under its fingernails, was something of a glory hound elsewhere in the world. In those realms, it was seen as the vehicle of long-distance adventurers and airline pioneers.

Giuseppe Bellanca was well known for his long series of distinctive-looking heavy haulers. The CH-300 Pacemaker was one of his best known and not only did cargo duty in the North Country but also formed the basis of Hawaiian Airlines.



In 1931, for instance, the Pacemaker was the first aircraft to break the 5,000-mile, nonstop, non-refueled distance record. Russell Boardman (later killed flying a Gee Bee "R" racer) and Johnnie Polando left Long Island and, more than 49 hours later (yes, 49 hours!), nonstop, landed in Istanbul, Turkey.

In a less successful attempt in 1932, Lithuanian pilots Steponas Darius and Stasys Girėnas successfully crossed the Atlantic only to die after getting caught in weather a few hundred miles short of their destination in Lithuania. Their N-number, N2668E, is proudly displayed on Warren Wright's restored Pacemaker. He said two Lithuanian pilots at Oshkosh immediately recognized it at the EAA convention in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, in 2016.

A CH-300 was also Hawaiian Airlines first airplane and pioneered passenger flying in the islands.

Wright's CH-300 had been a dead airplane since it last flew in 1950. Its carcass—or what was left of it—was carted from warehouse to hangar to barn for nearly 60 years before Wright tracked it down, bought it, and had it delivered to John Pike at Big Sky Stearman in Oregon City, Oregon. There, Pike and his craftsmen rehabilitated the airplane, which included constructing new wings and re-creating the myriad of formers, stringers, and small parts that flesh out a steel-tubing frame and make it into an airplane. It had exactly two hours of flying time on it when Pike flew it to the EAA convention at Oshkosh in 2016, where, for the first time, Warren Wright was able to fly the airplane of his dreams. His comment after the flight was, "It surpassed anything I had on my bucket list. I couldn't be happier."

So, a North Country beast of burden is once again in the traces. But this time, it is to be treated as royalty, a right it has earned. †

Viewed as an aerial truck, the Pacemaker made streamlining secondary to function.

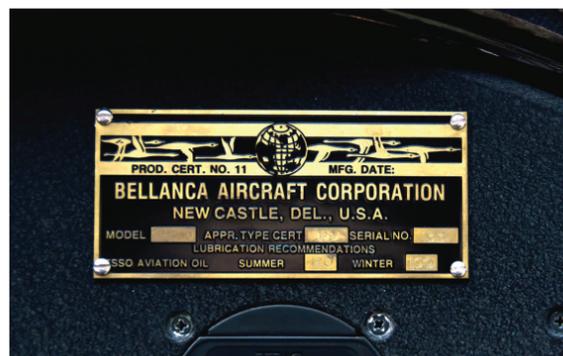


Above: The landing gear on the early Pacemakers utilizes 25 feet of bungee cord, which, according to John Pike, the restorer, gives the airplane a distinctive "waddle" on the ground.

Right: All of Bellanca's early designs strived to convert every bit of structure into airfoiled lifting surfaces. This included the struts and the fuselage itself.

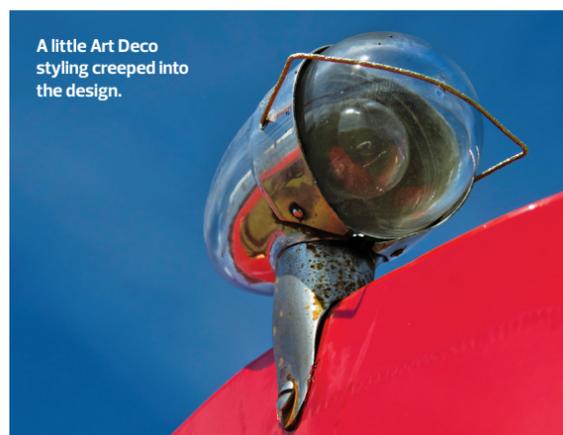


Simple in the extreme, the flight deck on a CH-300 Pacemaker is pure utilitarian. Inasmuch as the owner intends on merging it into the North-Wright Airways stable, the barely noticeable avionics are a necessity.



Above: Back in the day, the majority of Pacemakers were mounted on floats. Owner Warren Wright will soon have this one on floats.

Left: It is doubtful that Wright's Pacemaker ever looked this good while in service.



A little Art Deco styling crept into the design.