What's your favorite?

Trusting the TriStar



BY BARRY SCHIFF / AOPA Foundation Legacy Society chairman

I RECENTLY APPEARED as a guest on Mike Busch's podcast, Aviation Masters. One of Mike's questions was, "What is your favorite airplane?" Given that I have flown 364 different types, that question is more difficult to answer than you might imagine. (Captain Eric "Winkle" Brown, who was a British Royal Naval officer and test pilot, flew 487 types, more than anyone else in history. I'm still trying for that record but obviously will never come close.)

The easy answer to Mike's question was to say as many others do that my favorite is the one I own or the one I'm currently flying. But since I do not now own an airplane and am not currently flying a particular type, I have to dig deeper. And I do have an answer, several in fact.

My favorite airplane usually depends on the mission at hand. When I was in college and wanted to impress my date, there was nothing better than a flight at sunset on a warm summer evening in a Stearman. Other open-cockpit biplanes would do the trick, but the ex-military Stearman was my favorite.

Years later, when I took my family on flying vacations to various national parks, nothing was better for the six of us than a Cessna 414A Chancellor. It was a comfortable, exceptionally stable cabin twin that hauled a load and was turbocharged and pressurized. It was our mini airliner.

But when I want to go alone or take a passenger, my favorite is the SIAI-Marchetti SF.260. The Italian single, designed by Stelio Frati as a military trainer, is the nicest-handling piston-powered airplane I've ever flown. It's a beautiful, speedy, and fully aerobatic airplane, an airborne Ferrari. (In 1969, I used an SF.260 to break a world speed record for lightplanes previously held by France.)

If you're in the mood for pure excitement, there is nothing better than a North American P–51 Mustang, although it is not that much fun to fly. Control forces can become heavy, and the airplane needs to be retrimmed with the slightest change of speed and power. Personally, I'd rather fly a Curtiss P–40 Warhawk. It is more pleasant than a Mustang and, at low altitude, has as much performance.

I've yet to mention my all-time favorite airplane, but we're getting there. My second-favorite airplane is the one in which I learned to fly, the Aeronca 7AC Champion. Pilots often develop a special relationship with the airplane in which they receive their aerial baptism. Such experiences, especially the first solo flight, are similar in some ways to a first kiss or a first slow dance, memories of which linger forever.

Cross-country flying in a Champ is slow but possible. You can keep up with freeway traffic but only if the traffic is slow. Champ pilots become topographical experts. The terrain beneath their wings moves so slowly that there is time to enjoy and study what others in speedier craft see only as a blur. I not only soloed in a Champ but also earned my private, commercial, and CFI certificates in one. No other airplane taught me as much about flying, and no other airplane ever will.

My all-time favorite airplane might surprise you. Number one is the majestic Lockheed L–1011 TriStar, a distant descendant of the legendary Constellation.

The TriStar had incredible handling qualities. When you put your hand on the control wheel, it was as though the airplane knew what you wanted to do and where you wanted to go. It maneuvered beautifully, like a much smaller aircraft. It never felt heavy or ponderous. This was due in part to its quadruple-redundant hydraulic systems, which also contributed to its exceptional safety record.

On final approach, direct lift control (a function of the spoilers) enabled you to make precise glide-path corrections while maintaining a nearly constant pitch attitude (manually or on autopilot). This typically was followed by a smooth landing, sometimes so smooth you couldn't feel the touchdown. I loved that. It made my passengers think I was better than I was.

The TriStar had an incredible autoland system. We could trust it to bring us down and land comfortably with ceiling zero and visibility of only 300 feet (Category IIIb). We would not see the runway emerging from the fog until after the mains were rolling on the runway and the nosewheel was about to touch down. It did this smoothly and consistently, better than any other airplane I've ever flown. The TriStar earned our trust, and we knew that it would always take care of us.

The tough part about landing it in fog, though, was trying to find the gate without bumping into something on the way. ■

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