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By Mike Jones

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I am always tickled when Rick Giles walks into my hangar. Giles is a lean and handsome captain with a legacy airline. He's got 50-something years on his personal Hobbes but blasts through his days with the optimistic world-view of an exuberant teenager. Our planes park tail-to-tail in a row of tee hangars, and every time I meet him a smile joins the conversation. Giles is a born-and-bred taildragger pilot, and his passion is flinging the handsome Cessna he calls "Mike-Whiskey" through the blue Carolina skies.

We walked around the corner to examine his Concours-quality showpiece. Despite her seventy years, Mike-Whiskey's paint glistens in the hard December sunlight. The windscreen is bug-free. The tires are neatly tucked in bespoke wheel pants. The soft leather interior features impeccably stitched Cessna logos. From the nose, Mike-Whiskey is broad-shouldered and imposing, far taller than a Cessna 182. From the side, she is lean and elegant, and brings to mind a proud lion paused on its haunches, lissome and muscular, casually deciding which antelope will be next on the menu. Welcome, dear reader, to the pinnacle of taildraggers: the Cessna 180.

A Classic Design

Giles' plane is a "naked" C-180 and does not carry a suffix such as the C-180A, -B, and so on. The Cessna 180 is a four-seat, high-wing, all-metal, fixed-gear taildragger produced between 1953 and 1956; Mike-Whiskey is a 1956

model. Cessna 180s typically feature a carbureted, 6-cylinder, 230-horsepower Continental engine driving a constant-speed propeller, a square-topped upright rudder (not streamlined like later models), the famous flat-steel landing gear, and a maximum gross weight of 2,550 pounds.



Cessna N180MW is an elegant bird, beautifully maintained by Capt. Giles. Here she sits outside her hangar at the Pinehurst, NC airport.

Cessna quickly discovered they had a winner and cranked up the money machine. A total of 2,664 “naked” C-180s were followed by 3,535 copies in ten different variations. The C-180 also is the direct ancestor of the Cessna 182 and the little cousin to the burly Cessna 185. It was no accident that Geraldine Mock, the first woman to circumnavigate the world by plane, chose the C-180 for her 1964 adventure. Many would argue the Cessna 180 family comprises the ultimate flying machines: moderately priced, sufficiently speedy, ruggedly built, endlessly reliable, and forgiving to fly.

Sitting on the ramp in the shrill winter glare, few examples surpass the quality and elegance of Giles' blue-and-white baby which has been his family's personal flyer for four decades.

Family Fun

Over the December 2025 holidays I sat with Giles and his extended family for some juicy airplane gossip. We started with Gile's mother, Rose.

"I will never forget my first solo," she recalled modestly. "My instructor said do three touch-and-goes and stop, and I did them just fine. Suddenly he opened the door. I said, 'Wait a minute, don't you leave me!' He said, 'You can do this.' And I did!"

Giles' uncle (Rose's brother) Ken Cox joined us at the table. In the Vietnam era, Cox was an Air Force KC-135 pilot who transitioned to Piedmont Airlines before retiring and flying corporate. Cox has 29,700 hours scribbled in his logbook.

Another Piedmont captain (is there a pattern here?), the slender and thoughtful Milt Ward, joined us. Ward first flew giant C-141 cargo lifters and EC-47s in Vietnam, before contentedly chugging around the world in the left-seat of a C-5 Galaxy. With 24,000 hours as PIC, Ward is aeronautically and spiritually, if not genealogically, part of the Giles family.

There's another Piedmont captain in this story: Giles' dad, Jimmy. Giles explained that his late dad "...flew Hueys in Vietnam, Chinooks in Alaska, the U-21 [a military version of the Beechcraft King Air], and anything else with wings." All four of my guests agreed that Jimmy traded planes like baseball cards.

"Because of the Army, we lived all over the country, and Dad always had an airplane of some type," Giles recalled. "He hauled airplanes back and forth in the 48 States. One time he flew a J-5 on straight floats all the way up to Alaska.

In Alaska, we had a Stinson on skis and would go caribou hunting, landing on the frozen lakes. In San Francisco he had a Mooney. He always had a lot of things going.”

Rose laughed at that comment. “Do you remember? After he passed away, I still had three airplanes to sell!”

“Jimmy sold everything and anything,” Cox agreed. “I’m surprised he didn’t sell Rose and the kids. If he could have made a buck he would have.”

But one airplane that stuck around was Mike-Whiskey. Jimmy Giles bought it in 1986 from a mechanic at Piedmont named Mike Steele. It had flown missionary trips to South America and pipeline inspections in New Orleans. He kept it for five years. In 1991, Cox bought the airplane from Jimmy, and five years later Ward adopted it for 25 years, reluctantly transferring the plane to Rick Giles in 2021.



Floating above Pinehurst’s famous golf courses, N180MW demonstrates her comfortable flying characteristics. While N180MW can be flown as a rough-and-tumble backwoods flivver, Capt. Giles uses it as a long-haul IFR platform for trips up and down the east coast. Here Giles and his bird transit over the historic Carolina Hotel in central North Carolina.

Giles offers a memory about that day: “Yeah, one of us was really happy. And the other one was Milt.”

Both Cox and Ward kept the plane on their own grass strips in North Carolina.

“I commuted over to Charlotte with it, when I was flying for the airline,” Ward explained. “But then I retired and the airplane became for keeping up with the kids. Like, going to Florida to see my son who worked at the University of Florida. But mostly the flying was local, going to grass strips and hanging out.”

Both Cox and Ward owned hangars and ensured the plane never suffered from the shrill North Carolina sun. “It was never worked hard or put up wet,” Ward said. “It’s my favorite airplane of all time.”

But the years eventually added up. By the turn of the millennium, the airframe had about 4,000 hours on it and the engine was tired.

Ward discovered an STC developed by Steven Knopps which offered promising performance. Knopps was an Air Force mechanic from Camino Island, Washington who adapted aircraft engines for floatplanes and bush flying. The famous “P.Ponk” (“Knopp” spelled backwards) STCs have long enhanced the performance of Cessna taildraggers.

“The engine starts as a O-470, but they put 520-inch cylinders on it, producing about 285 horsepower,” Ward said.

The STC also included a three-bladed prop and strengthened landing gear. The custom wheel pants were a fiberglass innovation by Mike Steele. In 2013, fresh upholstery and a new blue and white paint job finished the renovations. Today the plane has a scant 500 hours on the “new” engine.

From the Cockpit

Taildraggers have a reputation of being easy to fly but tricky to land. All four pilots had their opinions about the flying manners of Mike-Whiskey.

“It’s amazingly stable, fantastic to fly, but you just can’t ever get behind it,” Giles explained. “You can’t get complacent, or get out of practice. It’s just hard to put into words just how much it rewards good airmanship.”

**“It’s my favorite
airplane of all
time!”**

— Milt Ward

Ward concurred that the bigger engine turns the plane into a bit of a beast, and it requires a PIC to be at the top of their game. “It’s got about a five second take-off roll. You push the throttle in, lift your tail,

then pull back. Five seconds. That’s a lot of performance.”

Cox agreed the plane was über-capable. “The lowest approach I ever shot was over at Charlotte. The ceiling was indefinite, it probably was zero, and visibility three sixteenths of a mile. Two airliners in front of me went around,” he said. “But Mike-Whiskey and I came in and landed. All old round dials, just following the needles. A piece of cake.”

Ward reported it is the best flying airplane he’s ever flown. The plane cruises on thirteen gallons an hour and seems happiest at 7,500 feet. Giles noted that Mike-Whiskey trues out at about 150 knots. With the big engine, “It will give you whatever you want,” Giles smiles.

Mike-Whiskey has proven itself to be a reliable traveling partner. Over four years it helped Ward visit his extended family, and helped Giles attend all but a handful of his son’s college baseball games.

“When my son was a freshman, he had a game in Tampa on Sunday, and they finished at 5pm,” Giles explained, counting off the events on his fingers. “The plane was Tampa Executive. At 5:30pm we were in the air. We made a fuel stop in Savannah, and I was back at home in bed at 10:00pm. You couldn’t do that commercial. You couldn’t do it on the highways. And yet it’s still economical.”



One of the few photos featuring the threesome of Rick Giles, N180MW, and Jimmy Giles, Rick's late father. This photo was taken by Rose Giles, from the back seat of Mike-Whiskey, and is one of Rick's most treasured memories.

Into the Sky

Our demo flight with Giles at the helm was exhilarating. On a cool winter day with two adults and half-fuel, the plane was off the ground in about 700 feet. Even without beating the ponies, our climb-out was 1,600 feet per minute. The plane is relatively quiet and the engine smooth. Giles demonstrated an

effortless ballet of turns, slips, climbs, and descents, proving the controls are nicely balanced.

The panel is 90% original with all the other gauges and controls where Cessna installed them seventy years ago, which is to say, higgledy-piggledy. Without a standard “six pack” I found it difficult to eyeball the gauges, but Giles said flyers quickly become accustomed to the idiosyncratic layout. He’s added an Aspen HSI and a Garmin GPS, but doesn’t plan any further upgrades, to preserve the historical integrity of the plane.



Owning an antique like N180MW poses a challenging dilemma. The panel is mostly 1956 original equipment, highly un-ergonomic, less reliable than modern avionics, and never designed to fly IFR. An upgrade might be a good idea. But installing a modern panel would destroy the historical connection this plane carries back to the early years of aviation. It's a tough call.

Note: Since this article was published, Capt. Giles has had the entire panel renewed with solid-state Garmin avionics. Sic transit gloria.

While the plane is beautiful it has its quirks. The cabin is narrow, and in later models Cessna widened the cabin six inches. The flaps are controlled by an over-sized Johnson bar between the seats. Oddly for a backwoods flyer, the plane has a relatively low flap extension speed of 87 knots (in comparison, the first notch of flaps in my Cessna 210 can be deployed up to 165 knots). This changes the way Giles manages energy during his approaches. On our first landing he came in a little fast and couldn't deploy any flaps until we were over the runway and ready to flare. Mike-Whiskey also bleeds energy below 100 knots. Giles suspects this is the effect of the three-bladed prop, so he always

lands with a “skosh” of power. But not too much, or “she’ll get into ground effect and float and bounce.”

I asked him about the enduring popularity of the design. “While it doesn’t do anything outstandingly, it does everything very well,” he suggested. Even more pointedly, “It doesn’t do anything poorly.” If you balance the relatively benign flight characteristics with a large useful load, decent speed, and reasonable operating costs, it’s clear why the C-180 and its brethren are still the favorites of bush pilots everywhere.

But big taildraggers aren’t for everybody, and this particular bird can bite the unwary. That enormous square rudder is an essential, if the pilot knows



This family portrait which encapsulates forty years of the aviation history. From left to right: Rick Giles, current owner and airline captain; Milt Ward, an airline captain who owned the plane for 25 years; Rose Giles, pilot and Rick’s mother; and Ken Cox, airline captain and Rose’s brother.

how to use it. “Once you start to lose the tail you’re not getting it back,” Giles cautioned. “But I’ve landed in a 35-knot direct crosswind, without a problem.”

While Giles demonstrated a wheel-landing on our demo flight, he doesn’t recommend them. “If the weather is really blowing and gusty, I always make a three-pointer [landing] because once the plane is on the ground it’s not going to fly. With a wheel landing you still have some speed and some lift” and things can go south quickly. Sounds like good advice.

Memories

Mike-Whiskey has had its share of adventures. Ward remembers one flight from Charlotte to his grass strip. Like Giles, Ward usually kept a little power on during descent because of the three-bladed prop, noting “it takes a long time to get down with power on.”

“But this time, when I pulled the power back, the throttle stuck. I couldn’t get it below fifteen inches,” he recalled. Obviously, that was far more power than was needed to land. “About 800 feet in the air I just pulled the mixture out. I did a self-induced engine-out landing on a short strip with a ditch at one end and trees at the other. I just slipped her a little, and it felt right.”

Captain Cox scoffed at that “easy” landing. He suggested trying it at night, over the Everglades, with four people onboard.

“Coming back into Palm Beach, at about 1,000 feet on final, a bird hit the right wing. It was like being hit with a sledgehammer. It just really yawed the airplane. I don’t know how big the bird was, but it made a football-sized dent. Smashed the wing up pretty good.” Cox looked across the table to confirm he had my attention. He waited until I finally begged, What happened then?

“Oh, the landing wasn’t eventful,” he smiled at me slyly. I began to breathe again.

Cox taught Giles to fly, but he was not Cox's favorite student.

"Rick used to get so mad at me when he was learning to fly, because I would pull the power," Cox reminisced. "One day he said, 'Dammit, Uncle Ken, why do you keep doing that?' And I said, 'I hope you never find out why.' "

"You just can't ever get behind it. It's hard to put into words just how much it rewards good airmanship."

— Rick Giles

At this point, Giles put his face in his hands at the memory.

"Rick has just won his license. Maybe he had been flying about three weeks. And there was a lady

involved," Cox continued, to Giles' embarrassment. "He was just taking her for a ride. But the mixture cable came loose and vibrated to engine shut-off. Here he is, a brand-new pilot, with a passenger, and loses the engine. In the end, they landed on a grass strip. I guess I trained him pretty good."

Giles decries any credit for handling the incident and instead attributes his success to the Cessna. "It's just a great airplane."

And it's great that it's stayed in the same family for forty years.

Cessna 180 Family Production

(Source: Cessna, Wikipedia, and FAA Aircraft Registry)

Model	Years Produced	Total # Built	# Still Registered	% of Tot. Production	% Still Surviving
C-180	1953-1956	2,664	1,177	45.3%	44.2%
C-180A	1957-1958	694	206	7.9%	29.7%
C-180B	1959	306	94	3.6%	30.7%
C-180C	1960	251	55	2.1%	21.9%
C-180D	1961	152	51	2.0%	33.6%
C-180E	1962	112	33	1.3%	29.5%
C-180F	1963	129	40	1.5%	31.0%
C-180G	1964	133	40	1.5%	30.1%
C-180H	1965-1972	839	364	14.0%	43.4%
C-180J	1973-1976	486	265	10.2%	54.5%
C-180K	1977-1981	433	272	10.5%	62.8%
Grand Total		6,199	2,597	100.0%	41.9%

About the Author



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