



The McKenzies enjoying the most classic form of transportation available: their G18S Twin Beech.

# After 85 Years, Still Queen of the Fleet



## The McKenzies' Model 18 Twin Beech

BY BUDD DAVISSON

**WHILE IT MAY BE** a generational point of view, there is something about the Model 18 Twin Beech that refuses to age the way so many other mechanical contrivances have. Yes, its twin R-985 Pratt & Whitney engines connect it to an earlier era, but the overall design has avoided aging. Yes, it's not super modern, while at the same time, it's not truly old. It just is. And that is the definition of "classic."

Here are some interesting Beechcraft facts: The twin-engine turboprop King Air entered production in 1964. However, the 1937 Beechcraft Model 18, the already-27-year-old iconic Twin Beech, its two P&W 450-hp R-985s rumbling their familiar song, didn't go out of production until 1970. Six years later! Two wildly different varieties of round engines were in production for over half a decade! In fact, Beechcraft's first "modern" cabin class twin, the Twin Bonanza, went into production in 1958. That morphed into the Queen Air, sort of a flat-engined, King Air in 1960, and then it got turbines in 1964. Through it all, the stately old Beech 18 kept plugging away.



Although the panel had been mostly redone, Ken made some major revisions of his own.

Beechcraft had an interesting problem in that the Twin Beech offered comfort, utility, and passenger-carrying capabilities that none of the rest did. Plus, after more than 25 years of serving, it had become the “comfortable old shoe” of militaries, corporate aviation, and small airlines. Everyone knew and trusted the airplane.

A difficulty in talking about Twin Beeches today, 53 years after it went out of production and an amazing 85 years after its birth, is coming up with a definition for Twin Beech, which, by the way, was never an official designation. The variations in type are endless, the theater of operations global, and the stories of its service sometimes astounding. Not many airplanes can lay claim to carrying presidents, billionaires, student pilots, bombs, machine guns, and freight. During its lifetime, the Beechcraft Model 18 has pretty much done it all. And it has lived the ups and downs that characterize so many different parts of an airplane’s life. Since its birth, it has gone from prized warrior, to valued part of corporate culture, to freight dog, to deserted hulk, to sought-after vintage royalty.

As with the DC-3/C-47, the Twin Beech owes much of its current survival rate to a war (250 are estimated by various sources to still be flying). In 1937, when the first Model 18 took to the air, powered by a pair of Wright R-760 Whirlwind engines with very 1930s-looking bumped cowls, sales were slow. The entire country was still trying to climb out of a strangling Depression. Initially envisioned as a form of feeder airliner, a role a number of aircraft manufacturers were also courting, the Twin Beech, with its 11 airline

seats, would have seemed to be the perfect airplane for that purpose, and it was. However, it was ahead of the demand. Even though the Depression was losing its grip, the airlines were still struggling to grow, and the concept of hopping an airplane to go somewhere was still not a universally accepted concept. Plus, the concept of feeder airlines, which would bring passengers from smaller cities to the major hubs where the DC-3 was king, hadn’t taken hold yet. However, war was just around the corner and along with it a windfall for Beechcraft.

Three years after production started, when Zeros, Vals, and Kates poured over Kaneohe to the east and Haleiwa to the north heading for Pearl Harbor, Beechcraft had reportedly sold only 39 Model 18s. Less than four years later, more than 5,000 Twin Beeches — known as Expeditors, Kansans, Navigators, etc. — had been delivered to every arm of the U.S. armed forces and many Allied forces. Without firing a shot, the airplane had proven itself to be one of the most useful aircraft in military inventory because it did so many things so well. It was this ability to be a jack of all trades and master of most that, when the war was behind it, its future was guaranteed.

In the aftermath of World War II, tens of thousands of military aircraft, from B-17s to Stearmans, were sold for pennies on the dollar or simply converted into beer cans. Not so the Twin Beech. Utility and transportation are both capabilities for which there is always a market, whether in or out of the service. Each of the branches of



The interior was stripped to the fuselage skins and brought back to the form the President of Mexico enjoyed.



service rebuilt many of their earlier C-45s (Air Force) and SNBs (Navy) as transportation and freight haulers and kept them in service. Officially, the Army, reportedly the last to keep them in service, retired its C-45s in 1976, but many were seen to still be wearing their uniforms for years after that.

After the war and through the 1970s, the Model 18 lived several different lives; a substantial industry developed, aimed at modifying the basic airplane in a wide variety of ways. These included reshaping the fuselage for more speed, more seats, more headroom, and accessibility (cargo doors) and replacing the nose to mount a nose wheel, making it a tri-gear airplane, a modification that Beechcraft included in the final H models.

It's notable that, while numerous companies were modifying the airplane, Beechcraft was still building them new to include the higher fuselage and increasingly luxurious corporate and passenger seating. It was





The higher cabin of the later Twin Beeches enhances the interior room and brings the fuselage lines into later times.

the rare corporation during that period — the 1950s, '60s, and '70s — that didn't include a Twin Beech or two in their corporate fleet. It was also common for governmental agencies and governments in general to use the comfortable and well-proven old airplane as their VIP transportation. One of those governments was Mexico.

In 1962, Mexico purchased a new G18S Model 18, serial No. BA-616, which served as its presidential transportation for a decade. That was the first step in a long journey that would eventually place it on the flightline at EAA AirVenture Oshkosh with Ken McKenzie, EAA 1181112, of Fort Lauderdale, Florida, at the controls.

In the 1960s, as the Twin Beech was coming to the end of production, Canadian Ken McKenzie was in school in Sioux Lookout, Ontario, Canada. Directly out of high school, he went to flight training for the Royal Canadian Air Force, where he flew the Kiowa helicopter and Twin Otter over 14 years, serving in postings in various Canadian provinces, West Germany, and the High Arctic. In 1995, he began flying DHC-8s for Canadian Regional Airlines, which began a career leading to management positions in a

number of airlines and becoming a member of EAA's board of directors in 2016.

"During my stint flying the Dash 8s," he said, "our family took a two-year leave of absence to do overseas humanitarian flying in Guinea, West Africa, with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, flying King Airs, one of the Twin Beech successors."

Later in his career, as chief operating officer of Airbus Americas, he found himself commuting back and forth from his home in Florida to the Airbus headquarters in northern Virginia.

"Tired of the 'joys' of commercial air travel, we purchased and restored a Lancair IV-P, thus shortening my commute to four hours," he said. "What a joy! Unfortunately, on August 30, 2015, my wife and I experienced a total engine failure on departure from Fort Lauderdale Executive Airport (KFYE). We managed an engine-out landing on the top of a levy and almost pulled it off. After touchdown, the aircraft tracked straight and true for over 750 feet but, due to decreasing rudder effectiveness with deceleration, the



Ken and Sonia McKenzie obviously seem to know what an aerial treasure they have been entrusted with.



aircraft dropped off the side of the levy, spun around 180 degrees, and burst into flames. I sustained third-degree burns to 10 percent of my body and spent three months in recovery. Such an event can certainly sideline one's passion for aviation, for a time."

EAA AirVenture Oshkosh 2016 was Ken's first foray back into the general aviation community.

"Attending with my wife, Sonia, and youngest daughter, Haley, I realized just how much I was missing the spirit and camaraderie of aviation," he said. "As we watched John Mohr work his magic with his stock 220 Stearman, Haley said, 'Dad, you need to get an airplane that is simply just fun to fly.' What John was flying looked like just that right amount of 'fun.' Soon we found ourselves the proud keepers of a 1941 N2S-4 Stearman. Painted in colors of the era, we affectionately named her *Daisy* and quickly came to realize that it is a privilege to be the one who cares for an aviation artifact on behalf of the next generation.

Ken said he and his wife naturally gravitated to vintage aircraft, and part of that attraction was the way it

brings people together. At the time, she was a 60-hour pilot with a '46 Ercoupe, and they were both struck by the kinds of people they met who had the same interest.

"Then we saw a Twin Beech on floats," he said. "That touched a very powerful chord, and in nothing flat, we heard ourselves saying, 'Let's do a Twin Beech.'"

"For whatever reason, we automatically knew that we should do our best to find the best Twin Beech we could, because we knew restoring or rehabilitating one would be beyond our abilities, both mechanical and time-based. We wanted an airplane that we could fly from day one and that would draw in fellow vintage lovers with their own Beech 18 experiences and stories. We looked at a number of them but were attracted to 50WA for a number of obvious reasons. We expected to use the airplane for its original purpose, meaning hauling people, so safety and reliability were key. 50WA was unique in that area because it was, relatively speaking, a nearly new airplane. Kurt Tedham in Phoenix, Arizona, and his son had seen to that.

"Most Twin Beeches have gone through a period of their lives where they were being worked really hard. Often as freighters," Ken said. "They had gone so far down in value that they were often viewed as tired, almost expendable, trucks, and many were left sinking into the weeds on remote airports. Part of that was because they almost all had a sometimes-fatal flaw: The steel tube structure that forms the wing center section and ties the wings, engines, and landing gear together can rust. Making it much worse is that there was a common STC'd modification that entailed bolting external straps to the bottom truss member that caused almost as many problems as it solved. The bolts that held the strengthening strap in place gave access to the inside of the tubing for moisture, so they could rust internally, which many did. The ADs that applied included X-raying the entire assembly with a high probability the entire structure might need replacing, which usually meant the airplane involved was judged to be scrap because they weren't worth the price of repairs. By 1962, when 50WA was built, it was still a relatively new airplane, and being part of the Mexican presidential fleet, it hadn't fallen prey to the demands of low-buck freight haulers. In fact, it had sat in a governmental storage facility for 20 years before it was sold to a U.S. company that specialized in buying Mexican airplanes."

Ken described what made 50WA a unique airplane.

"When it came to the States, it had a little over 4,000 hours' total time, which for a Twin Beech means it was barely broken in. Plus, virtually every one of those hours was providing VIP transport. It hadn't been flown in and out of remote, usually gravel, mining strips, hauling equipment or anything that could be stuffed into it. It had essentially been a limo for the president and his staff, and although it had been in storage for some years, it had been protected the entire time. Vandals had no access to it, so

although it was weathered, it didn't have the dings and scars that utility aircraft always accumulate. Everything about the plane remained amazingly fresh, including the engines, and there was apparently zero corrosion throughout."

And, according to Ken, the absolutely best thing to happen to the airplane was being bought by Kurt Tedham and his son in 1989.

"The airplane had one previous owner who had the spars X-rayed, the API spar strap installed, and registered it with the FAA," Ken said. "Shortly after that, it was ferried down to the Tedhams, and it is difficult to describe the remanufacturing — not the restoration, but the remanufacturing process — they put the airplane through. Beechcraft could not have done a more thorough job. They went well past the normal standards a project like this entails. For instance, every single part used in the rebuild, right down to the flat washers, has a traceability document for it. If a part wasn't riveted to the airframe, it was removed. No two components were left bolted together. They were separated, rebuilt or replaced, and epoxy primed before reassembly. Every single fitting of any kind, be it the wing fittings, landing gear components, etc., everything was rebushed, bolts replaced, and epoxy primed or anodized, depending on the application. All of the original fabric-covered control surfaces were refreshed and then metalized.

"The engines are amazing," he said. "Virtually every part on them is either new or first run. Finding first-run R-985 parts is like going on a treasure hunt, but the Tedhams kept after it until they had what amounted to new engines on both sides. Amazingly enough, one of the props is actually a factory-new item. As elsewhere on the airplane, if anything on the engines wasn't new, it was brought up to like-new standards, and they run like new engines.

"The interior was stripped down to the fuselage skins and spun-slag installation installed, which has four times the sound-deadening effect of Fiberglas," Ken said. "You wouldn't believe how quiet it is in there. All upholstery was replaced with maroon leather with a gray wool headliner installed. The interior was a very corporate arrangement, with seats facing one another with desks and cabinets. All of the woodwork was sent out to be revenered and refinished. The Tedhams didn't miss a single trick. None. However, when they sold the airplane, the fuel system and instrument/avionic panel had yet to be completed."


The Tedhams sold 50WA to Barry Hancock, and he contracted Taigh Ramey of Vintage Aircraft to complete the aircraft, which included adding avionics and the remaining fuel system.

"Barry flew it less than 300 hours, and I purchased the aircraft in October of 2021," Ken said. "My big

addition to the aircraft was to redesign the instrument panel, adding a Garmin GI 275 attitude indicator and Garmin GI 375 multifunction display to each pilot position. The instruments tie in nicely to the onboard GTN 750 and GTN 650 navigation systems.”

Ken described how the airplane flies.

“It’s so smooth and responsive, it’s an aerial Mercedes or Cadillac,” he said. “I’ve used it for carrying personnel for some of my charter school projects, and while it may be slower than a jet, it is many times more comfortable and enjoyable. Everyone we’ve ever carried loves the experience. It’s more than transportation. It is a window into a time when traveling meant more than simply getting there. The trip itself was reason enough to be airborne. And every time those two throttles move forward against the stops and I let the tail come up in the air, I am very, very conscious of the responsibility I bear, not only to my passengers but to the airplane itself. The instant I crank just one engine and it coughs into life, it is reminding me that I’m being trusted with an invaluable piece of history. And don’t kid yourself, that can be a very weighty responsibility. However, I love it! When Sonia and I are watching the sun set from the flight deck of 50WA, I can’t think of anywhere else on earth I’d rather be.”

In many ways, the Twin Beech is forever. There is absolutely no doubt that, even as you’re reading this, somewhere in an obscure corner of the world, there is a ratty old Model 18 turning final to a short stretch of broken asphalt or gravel, earning its keep. While many 18s, like 50WA, are spit and polished and on display at fly-ins, there are still those out there working for a living. And there probably always will be. 



Starting with the iconic Pratt and Whitney R-985 and flowing back to the classic twin tails, every inch of a Twin Beech is a work of art.