

Jim & Cathy Minant

Resurrecting a 1946 Navion, the Couple is Poised to Conquer the Country

Opening the hangar door, it was a truly pitiful sight: The forlorn fuselage lying limp on a sawhorse, its front nose gear gunked in old mud. "It was," says Jim Minant, "covered with years of dust, with mice nests and various, you know..."

"Bird droppings," laughs his wife, Cathy.

But when the Minants came upon the remains of the once-wrecked 1946 Navion that would prove to be their darling of a five-year resurrection project, the Monticello, Illinois couple hardly were daunted. Instead, they could barely contain their excitement. Here was a grand opportunity, and they jumped: they embarked on an aviation junkyard-to-glory odyssey that today finds aviator Jim, a family physician, and Cathy, his work- and life-partner in love and fun and flying, thrilled and proud owners of an aircraft masterwork: the plane that swept the 2005 "outstanding classic" crown at both Oshkosh and Sun-n-Fun.

"It was quite an endeavor," says Jim, who earned his wings in 1994. "But I am always a sucker for a project. I love restorations, and this plane..." Well, this plane would well-challenge the skills of the talented "sucker" who had successfully rehabbed three '60s-era Camaro autos and now was eager to graduate from the "box kite on a hot summer day" he was flying, the more lightweight Cessna 172. "I wanted a really solid cross-country plane, something to go a substantial distance, comfortably," he says. Then again, maybe the challenge was a little too much. Jim says: "For two years I did nothing but clean and sort parts. I stripped the fuselage myself, cleaned the interior myself." It took a long

time! The Navion was in such bad shape. Finally, I realized: I needed major help with this plane!"

Enter Chris Gardner and Wes Sanda of Sierra Hotel Aero, Inc., the Minneapolis, MN outfit that owns Navion Aircraft Int'l.



"We just clicked from the start," says Jim, who with Cathy packed their plane's disassembled bits and pieces into a U-Haul and drove it to the team who would help the Minants realize their dream of an aircraft that would take them to major places – places like Biloxi, MS, where they flew within two weeks of hurricane Katrina to collect their (unharmed) son Matthew, 29, a technology specialist who lives there. Daughter Jeannine, 26, is a successful restaurateur in Pittsburgh, PA.

"Chris and Wes put the plane back in the actual original jig," says Cathy, who was amazed at how much restoration progress was made after the jig completely righted every fuselage misalignment. "If I had tried to put it together myself it would never have been right," says Jim.

Eventually, the Minants' circa-1946 baby, the 74th Navion built out of what they couple estimates is a total of 2,000 made, was spiffed by all manner of thrilling things: An entirely new panel. A converted Continental I0470H engine out of a 1962 Bonanza that is 285 horses' worth of cruising happiness. "I like to fly at a comfortable 140-150 knots, says Jim. "I am not a risk taker so that is my alley." And a shiny new paint job and attractive interior redo by Wipaire, Inc. of South St. Paul, MN. Now the Navion "A" was ready for the Minants' christening.

"It's like flying a brand new plane," says Jim. The high school sweethearts who in 1973 married at age 21 and honeymooned by driving to romantic Mackinaw Island, MI, would like to return, this time sporting their newest family member. The trip is only one of the many about which the couple fantasize now that their flying has entered the longer-range realm. There is Dyersville, Iowa's Field of Dreams for its legendary cornfield-turn-baseball diamond. And Jackson, TN for its Chicago Cubs Farm Team. There is also their friend's place at the Blue Mountain Air Park in Trion, GA, for a wonderful Appalachian getaway. "I would even love to get East, to Hilton Head, SC," says Jim, who has 26 hours in his newly restored – and much admired – fly. "But that's for when I get my feet wet a little more."

Jim is the first to admit to a bit of reticence in the cockpit, likely a holdover from his surprising (to him) entry into aviation in the first place. Though he attended Flight Surgeon School in Texas in the 1990s and would "hang out around the airport

because, "I loved to be around anything that was fired up and running," it never dawned on him, Jim says, to learn to fly himself. That is, not until a friend coerced him up in a Piper Cherokee for five total hours of apparent queasy hell. "I was paranoid!" laughs Jim. "I didn't know how to land! It wasn't until I figured that out that I felt I could stick with it." Jim's cautious, conservative bent (in addition to his practice with Monticello's Kirby Hospital group, he is the physician who serves as town coroner) is fine by Cathy, who appreciates her husband's ultra-safety consciousness.



"My favorite thing on the Navion is the TCAS Jim bought me," she laughs. "Now I always really feel safe in the air with him."

The Minants' ability now to trip the distance fantastic already is bringing thrills. After the couple's long, long (to them) flight to Florida for spring's Sun-in-Fun, the 1946 stunner they painstakingly restored created a sensation with its now-official "outstanding classic" status. Their self-styled "Mission Biloxi," a fiercely determined effort to get into a Katrina-ravaged area to fetch Matthew, proved the Navion rehab was absolutely the right project to undertake. "It was really impressive to see some of the things that happened down there," says Jim, who after medical school served four years in the Air Force as an aviators' physician and today, in addition to being a Reservist,



conducts GA pilot medicals. "Simply massive damage: trees snapped in the middle; houses gone, everywhere. Amazing." Yet the world now opening to the couple in their expanding travels is also one of anticipated pleasures. "We're really looking forward to flying to Pittsburgh to visit Jeannine," says Cathy, who in addition to her work managing Jim's practice devotes a great deal of time to her community's children's holiday toy and gift program. "So much of what we do is on a wing and a prayer," she says, "but somehow 'a wing and prayer' always works!"

So now with their 1946 Navion taking their wings-and-prayers farther afield, are the Minants ready to conquer the country?

"You bet!" they say, enthusiastically; it is a "you bet!" they say in unison. ✕



From wreck to winner: The Minants' labor of love saw their "outstanding classic" painstakingly remade in a process that wasn't always pretty. (Above): The 1946 Navion undergoing its makeover; the proud couple with their classic, restored.