

Butch Walsh:

The Stinson

BUDD DAVISSON



Butch and Carol Walsh have been around Stinsons for a long time. A very long time. In fact, Butch says he can trace his interest in Stinsons clear back to his childhood.

“My second airplane ride was in a 108-2 (N389C) and, at the time, it just seemed as if it was the perfect airplane and the more I was around it, the more I liked it,” he says.


Apparently nothing has changed in the intervening years because by his own estimates he has owned at least 15 Stinson 108s of various models and rebuilt at

least 10. In fact, Butch spends so much of his time working on Stinsons and communicating with others who either need his advice or want to purchase his services, that many in the field have elevated him to the exalted status of “guru.” He is the Papa Smurf of 108 Stinsons and the go-to guy for all things having to do with restoring and flying the breed.

The attachment many people feel for specific types of airplanes is sometimes difficult to explain although it always seems per-

fectly clear to them. In the case of the postwar, 4-place 108, certainly part of the attraction has to be a combination of a number of factors. For one thing, the price on the airplanes has lagged behind some of the more popular airplanes, but the ability of the 108 to carry four people in luxury and style is unquestioned. Plus, the Stinsons are legendary in the smooth feeling of their controls, a benefit of ball or needle bearings being used everywhere that might generate friction.

Guru



The Grand
Champion Classic
of EAA AirVenture
Oshkosh 2004,
Butch Walsh's
Stinson 108-2.



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Butch at the controls of his favorite airplane.

Butch says, "I bought my first Stinson, a 108-2, in the early 1970s and we still have it today. My daughter Terri learned to fly and got her certificate in it and her two daughters, Mikayla and Ann-Clair, ages 7 and 5, are logging time in a booster seat on the right side and Papa works the pedals. So, we already have three generations flying the same airplane. It is an absolute part of the family."

Butch showed up at Sun 'n Fun

2004 with a 108-2 that was new to many of his Stinson friends.

"This airplane is the result of one of those chance encounters that happen to all of us," he explains. "We were at Oshkosh about four years ago with a -3 and were staying in the dorms. I was involved in a conversation about Stinsons when one of the fellows looked me in the face and said, 'Do you want to buy a Stinson?' I was a little surprised but followed up on it.

"The airplane was a project located in Florida. I went down and looked at it and it really wasn't a very good project. It was totally disassembled and had been apart long enough and moved around enough times that it had accumulated a fair amount of moving damage. It's very hard to move an airplane without inflicting some kind of damage on it and the more you move it, the more damage it will accumulate."

Butch decided to buy the airplane and trucked it up to his base in Arrington, Virginia.

"Every project has its good and

bad points and one of the good points of this airplane was that it was fairly stock. One of the bad points was the engine, which was mostly junk. I trashed the case and crank and basically came out with a cam and a carburetor.

"The panel wasn't too bad and, amazingly enough, the glove compartment area hadn't been butchered to put radios in it. The original glove compartment doors are really hard to find. There is a really good reproduction door available, but, well, it's just not original so I don't like to use them.

"When I rebuilt the panel, I put the top part back as close to original as I could including matching original instruments, where possible. I did the rest of the interior in original fabric, which is available from a company that has some of the original material and keeps it in an environmentally controlled storage area so it doesn't change color or deteriorate."

As is usually the case with an airplane that has spent a lot of time on trailers,



LARRY HAWKINS PHOTOS

“The surfaces are also trouble because no one has stepped forward and successfully manufactured accurate skins for the control surfaces. They were probably formed in a male/female die that stretch-formed the concave stiffeners without distorting the skin. This is a real problem, if you want to do a perfect restoration, because so many of the control surface skins have been beat up through the years. This is especially true on elevators and rudders.

“This last [location], the rudder trim tab area on a 108-3, is really a toughie because it’s nearly impossible to repair cracks in that area and hide the repair. The trailing edge always requires a little doubler and you can spend a lot of time making that area look right. This is especially true now because most Stinsons have already been repaired right there and you’re working hard to repair the repair.”

Butch's expertise with sheet metal is second to none, as this beautifully rebuilt wheelpant and carefully straightened out elevator and trim tab will testify.



everything made of sheet metal was beat up and good only for patterns or needed extensive rebuilding.

“The boot cowl and cowling were areas where I had most of the parts but couldn’t use any of them. They were just too bent up. The nose bowl was too far gone too. The nose bowls were made from soft aluminum and it doesn’t take much careless handling to make a mess of them. Fortunately, Univair has new nose bowls available. I made the top hood pieces myself, to be certain of getting a perfect fit. Stinson spot-welded a lot of their aluminum components, so I bought a spot welder. Now, it’s hard to see a repair once I’ve done it with the spot welder.”

Butch has seen so many Stinsons in his day that he knows almost exactly what to look for and what to advise other people to inspect when buying an airplane. The airplane he had at Sun ‘n Fun is a case study in things to be considered when preparing to buy or restore a 108 Stinson.

“I was lucky on this airplane because it’s never had any gear damage, which generally comes from a hard ground loop. That usually makes a

Butch scoured aviation flea markets for these old-style inspection hole covers. Each one was cleaned up and smoothed out so they’d look like this when done.



mess out of the left gear, the gear attach points, left wing, and aileron.

“The airplane has the same corrosion and/or rust problems all old tail-draggers have in that the longerons at the rear of the fuselage have to be looked at carefully. This airplane was really pretty good in that area, but I checked it carefully anyway.

“The control surfaces are one of the Stinson’s real problem areas. First, there’s no way you can get in and inspect them. So you have to take them apart to inspect them and that requires drilling out a bunch of spot welds and replacing them with flush rivets. Keeping them straight while you’re doing that is a constant worry.

As with all machines that are approaching 60 years of age, there are certain parts, often minor ones once deemed unimportant, that loom large in the mind of anyone seeking to do a 100 percent restoration of a Stinson 108.

“Right around the inside edges of the doorjambes the original interior had a little stainless steel strip about 3/8-inches wide that covered the edge of the upholstery. These days you’ll find longtime Stinson owners who have never even seen one of those strips because they were so fragile and easy to lose over the years. It’s an impossible piece to make by hand, so I just make new doorjambes and run



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Those who notice such things would have noticed that Butch and Carol haven't been seen much at fly-ins for about 3 years and there's a reason for that, which both of them seem very willing to talk about.

"I was diagnosed with lymphoma 3 years ago right after I'd put the fabric on this airplane. That pretty much occupied all of our thoughts while we tried to figure out how to handle it. Thank goodness we found our way to the M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston. They were exactly what we needed and at my last check up, I was found to be cancer-free.

"I got back into the Stinsons about a year ago and it turned out to be the best thing I could have done for myself. It gets your mind into things that you can actually do something about and keeps your spirits up," Butch says.

Carol says, "I was worried about him because he was putting in 14-hour days working on Stinsons and helping other people. His doctor had an interest in airplanes and I asked him if Butch was working too hard and the doctor said, 'Absolutely not. It's the best thing for him.' We consider the Stinsons to be part of the reason Butch has recovered so well."

When you're speaking with the Walshes about Stinsons in general, and their Stinsons in particular, you get an immediate sense that they aren't speaking about machines or inanimate objects. They speak about the airplanes in the same tone of voice they would in describing a family member, and the reason for that is obvious: To Butch and Carol, the old airplanes are family. They have raised their family in and around the airplanes. They had joyful times and sad times, but the airplanes have always been there, and this means the Walsh family and their descendants will always have a Stinson or two around. In fact, one of his next projects is rebuilding his original 108-2, N389C, one more time before he turns it over to his grandchildren.



LARRY HAWKINS

The panel of Butch's latest restoration features as many original instruments as possible.

the jamb over the edge of the upholstery. It looks good, but it drives me nuts because I know it's not original.

"I've already mentioned the glove box doors. An original is like looking for hen dentures. Another item that only Stinson used are the inspection covers. They are very identifiable by their four locating-ridges and, although you could use normal inspection covers, it wouldn't be right. These covers are flea market items and don't usually cost much because no one knows what they are. I picked up 10 of them at Sun 'n Fun for 2 bucks a piece."

The Franklin engine is always a subject of some discussion for those thinking about a Stinson and Butch has more than his share

of experience there.

"First of all, the Franklin is as smooth an engine as you'll ever ride behind. Its only real problems include age and disappearing parts. The 108 and 108-1 used the earlier 150-hp light case engine, which is more prone to problems than the later 165-hp version used in the 108-2 and -3. Still, parts are so hard to come by that A.I. Service in Jewett, Texas, (www.franklinparts.com) has started having some of the parts made. They already have PMA'd pistons rings, cylinder liners, and bearings and are working on new crankshafts and cases. There are enough of the old engines still running around out there to make it worth it for them."