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BEECHCRAFT OF THE MONTH

Bonanza Bound— A Young Aviator

1993 F33A N186RL (CE-1748)

by Mercer Clark



James (Mercer's brother),
Jim (Mercer's dad), and
Mercer in Charlotte,
North Carolina.

Like many aviators, my road to aircraft ownership started with humble beginnings. It began with training and flying different airplanes to new airports. I learned from instructors, mechanics, mentors, and fellow pilots who have seen and flown way more than I had. There was so much to learn. As a young aviator, I was impressed by the community of older pilots with passion towards the younger generation of pilots. This is my story of student pilot to commercial pilot and becoming a Beechcraft Bonanza F33A owner.

My story begins in 2018. I was 22 years old, in college at Auburn University. Before graduation and entering a career in construction, I wanted to become a pilot – a certificate that none of my family had held since my great-grandfather. My great-grandfather, George Adams, flew for the Civil Air Patrol in the 1940s. He flew in the early days of general aviation, and I was excited to usher aviation back into my family.

As a student pilot I flew a 1974 Piper PA-28 Warrior out of KCSG: Columbus, Georgia, my hometown. Learning to fly was fun and exciting. My first solo flight was on September 30, 2018, and I obtained my Private Pilot certificate on November 12, 2018. I then flew multiple models of Piper aircraft – Warriors, Cherokees, and Arrows. My Private Pilot checkride



Mercer's great-grandfather (in the Civil Air Patrol, 1940s, right)



James, Mercer, and their dad flying to Greenville, South Carolina.

was with FAA DPE [Designated Pilot Examiner] Catherine Cavagnaro. Catherine, an AOPA writer, ACE Aerobatic School owner, and a Bonanza owner herself, influenced my passion for the Bonanza.

As a new private pilot I was eager to continue my flying in search of an aircraft to own. My first Bonanza flight was February 2, 2019, with Catherine in her beautiful aerobatic 1968 Beechcraft Bonanza E33C, N1KY. The space, comfort, and craftsmanship seemed unmatched. I was Bonanza Bound.

In March 2019, after passing on airplanes in Alabama and Texas, I found "the one": a 1993 Beechcraft Bonanza F33A, S/N CE-1748, registration N186RL, in Alton, Illinois. It was a low-time airplane, just 1800 hours on the airframe, 250 hours on a new engine and propeller, and recently re-painted. Before these upgrades, N186RL had a unique history. It was a world traveler. After rolling off the factory line in Wichita, Kansas, N186RL flew across the Pacific Ocean and was based in Bankstown, Australia, for a few years under Australian registration



Mercer and his F33A at Raleigh, North Carolina (KRDU).



In the hangar at Columbus, Georgia.



Sunset in Cedar Key, Florida



N186RL's panel



Mercer passing his commercial checkride in N186RL.



Mercer (right) and his dad on a turkey hunting trip in Great Bend, Kansas.



July 4th Family Beach Trip - Katharine (Mercer's sister) on left, Mercer's Mom (also Katharine), and Mercer's dad, Jim Clark

VH-DGZ. In 1999 it flew back to the U.S. and re-registered as N186RL. N186RL flew its ocean crossings with a 100-gallon ferry tank installed in place of the rear seats – an impressive achievement for a piston airplane! N186RL then flew to Illinois, where it was based until 2019.

Now, in 2019 I was a very young pilot – just under 70 hours total time. To many, moving from a Piper Warrior to a Beechcraft Bonanza would be seen as a big transition with such speed, complexity, high-performance, and advanced systems. This was a big jump, but I had to go for it. I knew this could be a long-term bird for me. Luckily, N186RL's previous owner-operator was the perfect instructor for this transition: Donald Torrini, a 13,000-hour pilot, career Army aviator, Vietnam War helicopter pilot, A&P, and Bonanza enthusiast. He flew King Airs, Lear Jets, Citations, and all the pistons you can think of.

My dad traveled with me to Illinois on March 22, 2019, where we saw and flew N186RL for the first time. Don introduced all N186RL's features, even flying a coupled ILS approach with the King KFC 150 autopilot. This was all very new stuff to me, so it was extremely fascinating.

After a successful purchase, I traveled back to Illinois in April 2019, and Don taught me how to fly the Bonanza. My training began with some homework: the *Pilot's Operating Handbook* (POH). Looking back, I think this is where I realized how much quality and craftsmanship went into building these airplanes. Beechcraft's POH was superior to others I was familiar with. Everything



Mercer (right) and his mom flying to South Carolina.



Mercer's graduation day at Auburn University (his mom on left)

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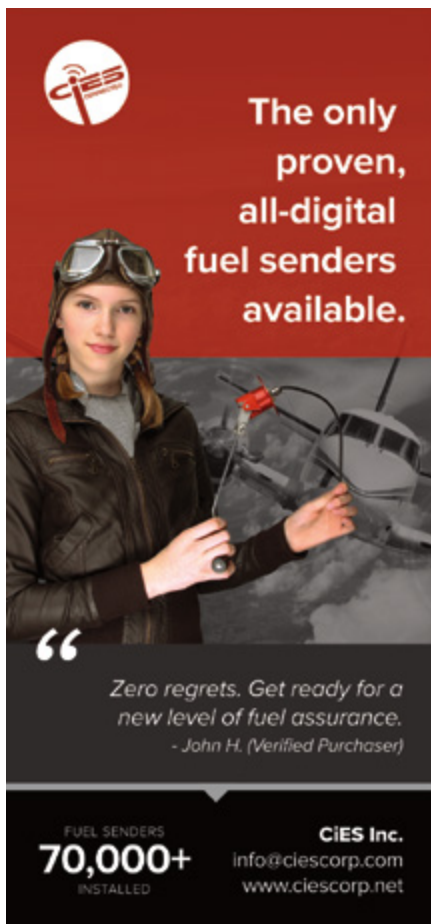
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from normal operating procedures to weight and balance, and performance charts was done with accuracy and quality publication. I read every single page of the POH.

An A&P mechanic, Don's investment in me went beyond normal ground school. We spent a week together studying and flying. He taught me how the Bonanza is built and how it is maintained. We studied maintenance manuals, logbooks, and prior maintenance. I learned about its landing gear design, wing design (NACA 23000-series airfoil), how to change the engine oil, engine EGTs and CHTs, and various other model-specific details. I soaked it in. This was very inspiring. My 15-hour flight training consisted of multiple flights around Illinois - daytime and nighttime. I learned to fly N186RL "By the Numbers." Following training, Don and I flew N186RL south to its new home of KCSG: Columbus, Georgia.

I then built time in N186RL with new trips to new airports. I achieved my Instrument rating in 2020 and Commercial certificate in 2021 in N186RL. Catherine was my DPE

for each of these checkrides. Today, with almost 700 hours, I'll always continue to learn new skills. My dad, Jim Clark, also recently became a certified instrument pilot in our Bonanza! He's quite a pilot and an enthusiast himself! It's our favorite hobby. We've also enjoyed adding a few upgrades to the plane: new Air Mod Headliner by Dennis Wolter, GAMI fuel injectors, Garmin G5s, a GTN 650 GPS and GFC 500 autopilot, just to name a few.

As a Beechcraft owner and American Bonanza Society member, having a community of pilots and enthusiasts dedicated to sharing safety and education is special. The Bonanza being such an iconic, capable, reliable, and high-performing airplane, it's no surprise it attracts pilots with superior loyalty and community. Owning and operating my own airplane is fun, hard work, exciting, and rewarding. I enjoy being part of the younger generation of aviation, and hope my story inspires many others to fly.

