

The Introduction of the Piper Super Cub  
By Clyde Smith, Jr.

Since this is the 60th anniversary of the Piper Super Cub, I've decided this would be a good topic for this month's article.

It would be safe to say that all Super Cub enthusiasts can give thanks to the U.S. Army for creating the PA-18. Back in October of 1948, they approached Piper with a request for a new model; a light aircraft to be used for utility, training, and patrol, similar to the previously built L-4. But it needed to be different in some ways to allow an opening for the L-18 light observation and utility aircraft contract.

Piper was just starting to get back on their feet from the aviation business crash of March 1947, and was very willing and able to devote much attention to this request. So, in January of 1949, they responded with a proposal of a model known as the PA-19. At that time, the PA-18 model had been assigned to a sporty 90 hp Continental powered version of the Vagabond with Clipper wings, which was to be a mate with the 90 hp PA-11 for the 1949 model year.

I have previously written about the PA-19 but, as the story goes, for some reason which we will probably never know, the PA-18 Vagabond program was cancelled, leaving the number 18 open. As the development of the PA-19 continued, (the Army was very interested in the first one, having both the Continental 90 and then a Lycoming 108 hp engine installed), Piper looked at the possibility of making a civilian version of this airplane during the latter half of the 1949 model year, leaving off some of the items that the military had requested. This airplane would then be called the PA-18, and the Type Certificate 1A2 that was already assigned to the PA-19, would be updated to include the PA-18 as well. Hence, the first PA-18 was born November 23, 1949; patterned after the first PA-19 that was built in January of that year. Both of these aircraft were powered with the Continental C90-8 engine.

The new civilian aircraft was the PA-18-90 Super Cub; very much like the 90 hp PA-11, but better. As previously told, there were only 3 PA-19s built. The first one became the test bed for the PA-18-90 and -105 models. The second one became the test bed for the PA-18-125 and -135, and the third one was built and sold to the Department of the Interior and used by the Fish and Game Commission. This one actually still exists and is flying in Alaska.

So, the first full year of production was the 1950 model year and these two models were on the market. For the 1951 model year, the 90 hp version continued with the C90-12 engine, and the PA-18-105 was replaced with the O-290 Lycoming powered PA-18-125, which had wing flaps and the big tail.

In 1952, the 125 hp models gave way to the PA-18-135, and a right wing tank was changed from optional to standard. The PA-18-90 continued, and actually lasted until 1961, when a Piper employee actually bought the last of that model. In 1955, the Lycoming O-320, 150 hp engine became available, and became the standard engine for the PA-18-150. A few PA-18-135s were still built after that, but very few.

The PA-18-150 continued in production right up until the last one was produced as a 1983 model, but was actually built in November of 1982. I had the distinction of ferrying that last Lock Haven Super Cub to Lubbock, Texas, during the New Year holiday vacation of 1982-83.

The military also utilized some special versions of the PA-18. The first one was known as the L-18C, which was a PA-18-90 with the observation greenhouse rear enclosure; the first of this model came out in July of 1950. In 1951, the military began receiving L-21A models, which were a military version of the PA-18-125. In 1952, the L-21B, a military version of the PA-18-135, became available. Also, in 1952 the PA-18-105 Special, or PA-18T, and was built for the Civil Air Patrol and the U.S. Army and Air Force flying clubs as a trainer. These models had the Lycoming O-235-C1 engine, toe brakes, no flaps, and the big tail with an upper and lower elevator bungee spring system, along with some other special options. 243 of these aircraft were built.

In 1955, Piper built a very small number of L-21B "Modified" models which utilized the Lycoming O-320 engine. Another PA-18 model was the PA-18A (or Agricultural model), which began with the 1952 model year. These were equipped for spraying or dusting of dry material from a hopper tank located in the rear seat area. The fuselage frame of these models was beefed up considerably and lacked the familiar "turtle deck" arches, giving it a flat back look.

When fitted with floats, the PA-18 made a fantastic sea plane. So, as it goes, the first PA-18 was built in Lock Haven in November of 1949, and the last one was built in November of 1982. A total of 10,326 units were built during that time. I flew the last one to Texas, and my father flew the first one in some of his flight test work in early 1950.

When Stuart Millar bought Piper from a holding company in 1986, one of his desires was to put the PA-18 back in production as a fully assembled "turn key" aircraft, and also as an owner-assembled, fully-certified kit aircraft. In April 1988, I was hired back by Piper of Vero Beach, FL, to create the Cub Kit Program, and help get the production version off the ground. The first Vero Beach Super Cub was built in July of that year. Unfortunately, in December of 1989 the company filed for bankruptcy, and my program was cancelled before any kits got out of the factory, but the production models continued through the bankruptcy and were built until December of 1994. 113 additional aircraft were built in Vero Beach.

Some significant changes pertaining to the Super Cub's production occurred in the following years. In 1970, the method of welding the fuselage frame was converted to TIG welding from Oxyacetylene. Also, that year saw a change from covering with Grade A cotton to Ceconite 101. The 1977 models went to metal flaps and ailerons, Cleveland wheels and brakes with 6.00 x 6 tires as standard, and an Alcor alternator kit for the electrical system.

The Super Cub has probably been one of the most successful, popular and most produced sport and utility aircraft models of any type in the history of general aviation. Happy 60th Birthday!