

GULFHAWK TEXAN



WE GO FOR A FLIGHT WITH CLAY LACY'S UNIQUE TEXAN

BY MICHAEL O'LEARY

Built as an AT-6D, the Texan was immediately delivered to the Navy as an SNJ-5.

If this old girl could talk, she would have a lot of tales to tell," said Clay Lacy as he ran his hand down the smooth flank of his North American Texan. The aircraft had returned from an early evening flight and was now back in its hangar at Van Nuys Airport — the hangar being equally as historic as the Texan. The two large wooden hangars on the east side of the field once belonged to Lockheed Aircraft Company and a variety of planes moved through them when the main facility at nearby Burbank got too busy.

Over the decades, the cavernous hangars have held Lockheed PV-2s that were getting new wings once it was learned that the original design was prone to easy failure; then there came endless rows of P-80 and T-33 Shooting Stars; for several years, a sinister collection of all-black U-2s occupied the hangars while wearing interchangeable civilian registration numbers; Then there was the Lockheed AH-56 rigid rotor Cheyenne combat helicopter program. A big, mean weapon of war, it seemed that the Cheyenne had a great future but the fact that the Vietnam War was ending, squabbling by the USAF regarding the Army taking over some of its combat missions, and the dour political climate led to the cancellation of what seemed to be a most impressive machine.

So, the point of this is that a lot of historic aircraft have passed through the two old wooden hangars. Today, they house several businesses and Clay keeps some of his collection of aircraft in the hangars. These hangars really need to be placed on the National Register of Historic Places since the bureaucrats at Van Nuys want to — guess what? — tear them down. Citing everything from "health hazards" to "we need more room for Gulfstreams," I would not want to bet on the survival of these great hangars.

Clay had finished his post-flight check of the aircraft and continued on: "I got the plane back in the very early 1960s. I don't even want to tell you what I paid for the old bird but it was four figures — a very

low four figures! I think I got it right before I bought my Mustang. I have always liked the Texan — they are a bit of a challenge and therefore fun to fly, they are relatively economical, and they are great for just cruising around on these late-afternoon flights."

Clay's Texan is somewhat unusual. "The plane started out as an AT-6D for the USAAF as 42-85496 but immediately upon completion it was handed over to the US Navy as SNJ-5 BuNo 85056. When I got it, it was not that long since it had come out of surplus at NAF Litchfield Park. It was in good condition and we did not really have to do much to the plane.

"When we got the SNJ, we used it for fun flying and then it was one of the early Texans that helped establish the Condor Squadron

— an all Texan outfit that is still based at Van Nuys. When I made the first flight of Jack Conroy's Pregnant Guppy, I gave the aircraft to a friend and he took off with a photographer and filmed the Guppy as we lumbered out of Van Nuys and headed to Mojave. The FAA told us we had to avoid populated areas so it was sort of a circuitous route as we worked our way to the desert. By the time we were nearing Mojave, the Guppy had picked up about six 'chase' planes including a couple other

Texans — the guys were just trying to get photographs. Imagine that happening today!"

Another strange role awaited the Texan. "One of the radio stations got the idea that it would be great to use a T-6 as a traffic/weather reporter each morning so we made some sort of deal and away the T-6 would go to offer reports over KGIL. The commuters, as they moved along at 10-mph, must have really gotten used to that buzz saw noise made by the prop as it went supersonic.

"Over the years, the Texan has been in a couple different paint schemes," recalled Clay. "Some years back, I decided to strip the plane and



Randy Sherman displaying the classic *Gulfhawk* scheme carried by all of Al Williams' aircraft.