

PANTHER

By The Tail

GIVING THE PIPER NAVAJO A "LOCK-AND-KEY" MAKEOVER

Text And Photography By James Lawrence





Mike Jones knew he had a Panther by the tail when a potential customer stopped by his display at the 2005 AOPA show. The man had just ordered a factory-fresh Piper Seneca twin to replace his new Seminole—which had replaced his used Saratoga. Then he saw Jones' pride and joy: a completely remanufactured, "lock-and-key" Piper Navajo Panther twin.

"Most new airplane owners aren't interested in used airplanes," says Jones, who ought to know. Not only is he a commuter airline pilot, but he has also owned and operated Mike Jones Aircraft Sales for 25 years. In that time, he's earned a reputation as an expert purveyor of pristine used aircraft.

So when the customer saw Jones' virtually brand-new Panther, he couldn't believe it was a used airplane. It had that new-bird look, feel and smell. He called his Piper dealer, cancelled the Seneca order and bought the Panther on the spot.

The Navajo, a longtime bread-and-butter staple for Piper Aircraft, long ago fell victim to general aviation's economic woes. But Mike Jones had a vision.

"I've always believed in the strength and potential of a market for the Navajo—if it could be produced in like-new condition," says Jones. "I liken it to a station wagon. It's not a Cadillac, not a Mercedes. It's not pressurized. But it's a comfortable, cabin-class airplane with a toilet and unbelievable baggage-carrying capacity, for about half the price of a new airplane with similar features.

"No one badmouths the Navajo; it has proven itself over the years. There are no engine or wing problems, and it has that wonderful utility. Once I 'Pantherize' it and do my 'lock-and-key' process, it's a virtually





Mike Jones' "lock-and-key" Navajo Panther conversion is meant to compete with the new airframe manufacturers. From top to bottom, the big Pipers are remanufactured to provide a "new airplane" look and feel.



The Panther comes with a new Garmin nav package, a King Digital EFIS, an Avidyne MFD, TCAS and Stormscope. Every detail, inside and out, is transformed into cabin-class elegance.



brand-new airplane.”

When the last spray of paint settles to the booth’s floor, Jones has put \$500,000 to \$600,000 into each plane. The standard price is \$975,000. Jones beams, “For that, the customer gets a nosecone-to-tailcone piece of art.”

A key element of the Navajo’s long-time appeal is its capacious baggage space: two huge wing lockers, roomy enough for four sets of golf clubs. Each locker carries approximately 150 pounds; another 400 pounds rides in the nose

and rear compartments. “Total baggage volume is about 65 cubic feet,” Jones notes. “Normally, you’ll gross out in weight before you bulk out in volume!”

The C/R and Chieftain models are the only Navajos that Jones will work on. So the first step in his “lock-and-key” makeover is to find the right used airplane.

Jones explains, “It must have a good pedigree: complete logbooks written in English with no missing entries. Minor things like hangar-rash

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repairs are all right, but there can be absolutely no accident history.”

The next criteria is a low-time airframe. Navajos are workhorses: some have racked more than 20,000 hours. The average for the fleet is 6,700 hours. “I look for airframes with less than 6,000 hours,” says Jones.

Once purchased, the airplane makes its way to Colemill Enterprises (www.colemill.com) of Nashville, Tenn., for the Panther conversion.

Colemill replaces the stock engines with factory Lycoming TIO-540-J2B turbocharged mills rated at 350 hp. The engines come with dual-drive magnetos and Hartzell four-blade “Q-tip”

propellers, spinners, unfeathering accumulators (for less-drag in-flight restarts) and Shadin digital fuel-management computers.

The engines are mounted with all-new vacuum pumps, lord mounts and fuel and oil hoses. The result is a dramatically quieter, smoother, more powerful airplane that rides like a turboprop.

The Panther conversion includes redesigned cowlings for better cooling, and winglets with tip lights. Jones notes, “The winglets alone give you a 6% better climb performance.”

Cruise performance gets a big bump as well: The Pantherized C/R cruises below 12,000 feet and 65% power at 190 knots; 75% brings 200 knots. The Chieftain, two feet longer and 500 pounds heavier, trues out at 180 knots and 190 knots, respectively.

At altitudes of up to 25,000 feet, airspeeds approach 235 knots, and climb performance is a solid 1,300 fpm in the C/R and 1,000 fpm in the Chieftain.

Ins and outs are friendly too: the nimble bird operates out of a 2,500-foot strip “any day of the week,” as

Jones puts it, with a standard takeoff roll under 1,800 feet.

Once Colemill is done Pantherizing, Jones rolls up his sleeves for the “lock-and-key” upgrade. In essence, the entire airplane is processed. “Every moving part is inspected and brought as up to date as possible,” says Jones.

Jones installs new tires, brakes, rotors and brake liners, fuel lines and new fuel tanks with floats. Fuel gauges are overhauled and calibrated. The cabin heater is upgraded to a more efficient Jentrol unit.

The landing gear gets all-new hardware, bearings and bushings. Actuators, hydraulic pumps and power packs are overhauled. “We spend \$20,000 on just the gear,” Jones claims. “Our typical airframe work runs \$100,000.”

On to the inside, French-seamed leather is used for the seats and even the plastic panels. All of the interior windows get new seals. All of the cabinetry is redone. Even the control wheels are covered in leather.

The instrument panel is painted with Alumagrip, clear coated, then



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gets silk-screen lettering. The avionics package is completely redone. Jones promises, "We give a year's warranty on the entire panel, from light bulbs to airspeed, altimeter, HSI, manifold, tach—everything is overhauled and recalibrated."

Instruments include a full Garmin package and King Digital EFIS on the left side, Avidyne MFD with full-blown TCAS, CMax IFR Jeppesen pictorial chart and heads-up XM weather, a WX500 Stormscope and PMA 8000-SR audio panel with Cirrus radio.

"We also move the King slave HSI to the copilot's side, and add an autopilot switch so you can fly autopilot entirely from the right seat," continues Jones.

It doesn't end there. There's an in-cabin DVD player with controllers at four seats. Jones points out, "And we add an emergency radio backup system. You'll have the Garmin 530 with audio panel and transponder for 30 minutes to shoot an approach and get the airplane on the ground." A complete Chelton system is also an option.

Autopilot servos, fuel selector valves, cross-feed valves, shut-off valves, flap motor, cowl flap motors, emergency pump and inboard boost pump are all overhauled. Says Jones, "No one else in the country does Navajos like this."

Jones guarantees everything on the airplane: "All you have to do is unlock the door and fly it home, like a new airplane or car." The engines come with one-year firewall-forward guarantees. Everything not already covered by manufacturers receives blanket 90-day coverage from Jones.

To minimize the chance that the warranties will be needed, the aircraft is flown for a 4- to 5-hour check-out ride. "After the flight test, we take it to a 'guru,'" mentions Jones. "He tears the airplane down and goes through everything again. Then Carpenter Avionics checks out the entire avionics system."

Then on to the exterior for brand-new side windows and paint. Jones continues, "We paint all of the panels separately, install stainless-steel screws and camlocks throughout, even paint the inside of the engine cowlings with Alumagrip so fluids bead up rather than soak in.

"If my Navajo was in production today, it would easily cost \$2 million. My philosophy is simple: why pay seven figures for a new aircraft when you can buy my 'like-new' Navajo for so much less? My goal is for customers to have the best ownership experience they've ever had."

The makeover process takes five months. Jones has several airplanes in the pipeline at all times though, so one is ready for sale every 45 to 60 days. And customers desiring a par-

ticular color and interior scheme have eight combinations to choose from.

Jones explains, "In the last two or three years, I saw a niche in the market. I couldn't believe people were paying Baron or Seneca prices for what they were getting. I wanted to give a whole lot more for less money."

Mike Jones remembers the buyer at the AOPA show with a smile: "I know that guy would have walked away if anything on that airplane had looked less than brand-new." PJ

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