

Livin' and flyin' with old time radios

BY DALE SMITH

NEWSPHOTO—Oshkosh, Wis., July 2004, tens of thousands of pilots discover that they don't need a \$15,000 full-color multifunction COMM/NAV/GPS to safely fly from Point A to Point B...Well, OK, so it's not really a news flash. But when you flip through all the popular aviation magazines you'll probably get the idea that if it doesn't have a "Direct To" button, it has got to go.

Sure you'd love the latest unit that does everything short of make coffee, but how many of us "hundred dollar hamburger" hunters can justify buying a box that costs around half of what our airplane is worth? Not many.

So, short of mortgaging the old homestead, what are your options for the day your trusty panel-mount radios decide to head west? Thankfully the list is pretty short. You can fix 'em, replace 'em or bite the bullet and upgrade the whole system. But, since we're staying budget conscious, we'll stick to the fixing and replacing options for this story.

Old avionics never die...

They just become harder to fix. "If an owner is still flying with older Narco avionics—anything built within the past 25 or so



years, chances are we can fix it," explained Marty Lockner, manager of engineering for Narco Avionics. "Our philosophy is, if we have the part or can get the parts we will continue to repair the units."

Lockner said, in fact the real determining factor as to whether or not a box can be fixed is the availability of parts. "Some of our suppliers have stopped making some components. There just isn't enough demand," he added.

Dan Barks, director of marketing for Honeywell General Aviation (or Bendix/King, as most of us know them), agreed with Lockner's assessment and said, "If you're talking about our first generation Gold Crown units, we try to support them as best we can, but when you start talking boxes that are 30-plus-years-old, it's very hard to get parts.

Our suppliers just don't see the demand to continue to make the components."

"It's a problem we're seeing more and more with the old Collins' Microline and some of the Bendix RDR-series radar units," explained Keith Lewis, avionics service manager for Stevens Aviation. "Very recently, some of the avionics we had been able to repair we cannot find replacement parts for.

"We have to approach each situation on a case-by-case basis," he added. "We really don't know from day-to-day when this will occur and what we can do about it. The customer just has to bring it in and we'll see what we can do."

Dr. Frankenstein, I presume...

But just because the parts aren't available doesn't mean it's

the end of the line. "A lot of times our guys get pretty creative in finding parts for the older stuff," he continued. "We get equipment traded in on new stuff and if it's in good shape, the shop will keep it around to use when they need to repair a similar box. It's pretty inconsistent, but it can help keep an older box in play if the owner doesn't want to buy a newer unit."

"The idea of searching for parts for out-of-production units may just work out sometimes," explained Brad Miller, service manager, Gulf Coast Avionics. "But, realistically, I'd say it's an emergency step. There's really no way of knowing the real condition of the cannibalized parts—you may be putting a poor part in to fix a bad part.

"If it's a matter of money, the customer has to consider the time it may take the shop guy to search out the part and that cost will be added to the overall repair cost," he continued. "In my experience, since you have no idea how long the repair may last, it's not worth the cost and effort in the long run."

Lewis also added that another cost the owner has to consider is the aircraft's downtime. "It's just sitting there while we search for



suitable replacement parts," he said. "Can the owner really afford to keep it out of service for an unknown amount of time? Or is it better to put that money toward newer boxes?"

Miller explained that with some conscientious shopping, aircraft owners can pick themselves up a very good, reconditioned box for little more than the final cost of having a technician hunt down a used component and using it to fix their current radio. "If it were my airplane, I wouldn't spend money getting an old radio fixed," he said. "Part of that comes from the fact that I do this for a living and I know the history and actual cost of keeping this old equipment running. The other point is that if I'm flying the airplane I want the best avionics I can afford..."

Everything old is new again...

One option available to pilots flying with recent-generation Narco Avionics is the company's upgrade program. "We currently offer upgrades to owners who have a Mark 12D, COMM 810, or 811," Lockner said. "What we do is bring these units up to the capabilities of our "plus" models."

As Lockner explained it, the upgrade nets the owner more memory channels, and digital bearing on the VOR side. "Basically it's a situation where we replace the main board, microprocessor, display circuitry, power supply, display, trim panel and provide a new product warranty," he said. "When we're done about one-third of the radio is new. Total cost is probably just a couple of hundred more than

they would spend on repairing the current radio."

Even if you're not flying Narco, buying refurbished radios is a very cost-effective way to move your avionics suite a few floors closer to the penthouse. But all the experts agree that you have to be careful what you buy or you could end up with a three thousand dollar paperweight. "Whether we take it in trade or buy boxes from a salvage company, we take the time to open every unit and go through it carefully," Gulf Coast's Miller said. "Just because a radio has a yellow-tag doesn't mean it's in good condition, it just means that it worked when they took it out."

While there may be some very appealing deals on eBay, you have to be very careful. Of those shoppers interviewed, many said it is much better to deal with a reputable avionics shop. "It may cost a little more, but in the long run you won't be throwing good money after bad," one technician said. "Just because something is cheap doesn't mean it's a good deal."

Even if the boxes are in relatively good shape, take a minute to think about the long-term effect of buying older avionics. If you are really planning on keeping your airplane for a long time, it may just be a better idea to spend some more money now and get truly step-up capabilities. "I certainly wouldn't want a customer to buy something that is on the verge of being obsolete itself," Stevens' Lewis cautioned. "That's a situation we

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run into now and then. Say the replacement unit lasts two more years, then you're back in the same situation having to spend money for a repair or another unit."

Dealing for dollars...

So just what are some tips for budget-conscious avionics buyers? Narco's Lockner suggested you start by talking to other owners at your airport. "Say an owner buys a factory new [avionics] stack, he may be replacing a perfectly good used radio that he'd be willing to sell you at an attractive price. I'd also suggest that you have it checked out by an experienced avionics shop before you install it, but if it were working well in the other guy's airplane there's no reason it won't work in your airplane."

Another option is to check with the larger avionics dealers in your area. They are very often the source of some great deals on 'experienced' avionics. Especially when the manufacturers are having some kind of promotional offer.

"When we introduced our color-display units, we had an upgrade program for the earlier KLN-89B IFR GPS units and took a lot of them in trade," Barks said. "Those are perfectly good, functional IFR units that are available not because they are worn out but because their owners wanted to upgrade to the newest technology.

"That's a great opportunity for a lot of owners to make a big upgrade in performance and capability at a much lower cost than they imagined possible," he continued. "We took them in trade, refurbished them when

needed and have put them right back out on the used market at a tremendous price point."

Ground control to Major Tom...

One last thing to consider before you start spending money on having your radios repaired or replaced is the condition of the antennas and wiring. "We often trace 'radio' problems to these areas and if an owner or shop starts there they may save a lot of time and money," Gulf Coast's Miller suggested. "You can put the best new radio with a 30-year old antenna and still have problems. It may only be part of the problem, but it is still part of the problem."

Whatever you're livin' and flyin' with be it used, reconditioned, remanufactured or just gracefully aged, your decision to upgrade, repair or replace should start with your avionics expert. ■