

Comanche *Flyer*

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Cover Story: Comanche Spirit

The Flying Architect

by *Bruce Camino*

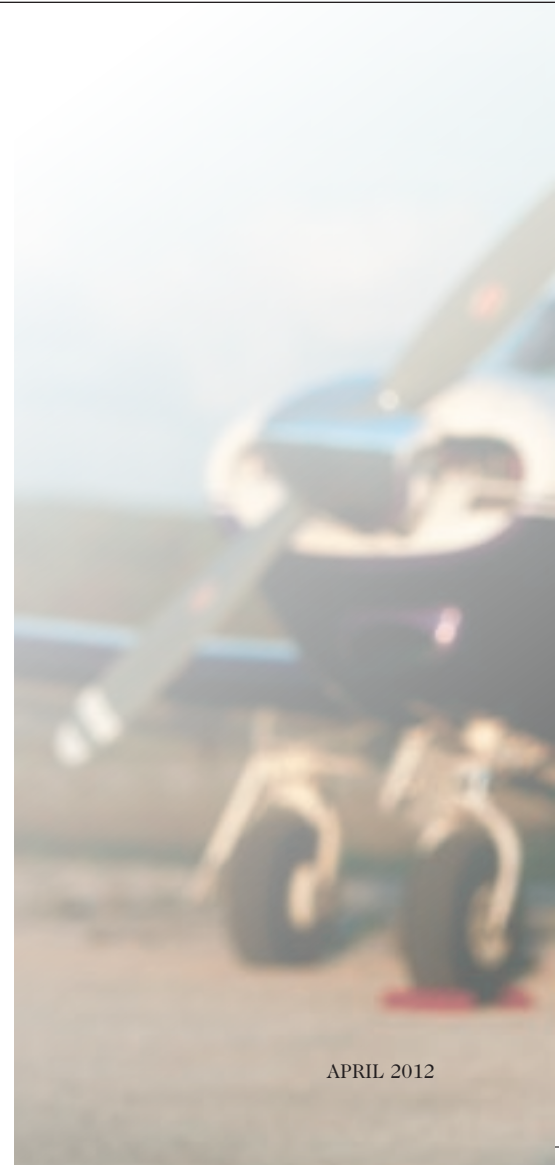
I recently realized that people have been calling me “The Flying Architect” for quite some time now. This shouldn’t come as a surprise, as I have been flying my Piper Comanche, N8871P, to remote project sites for nearly 15 years.

Like many other pilots, ever since I was a little boy, I was fascinated with the concept of aviation. My ultimate dream was to work for NASA and become an astronaut. This dream was so vivid that I could feel the controls in my hands as I imagined myself in the cockpit of a Gemini capsule, just like the one piloted by Edward White and James McDivitt for their 1965 space walk mission. My passion for flight was

intense from a very early age, but I never imagined that my dream of working for NASA would ever come true.

Although my career path as an architect was far from my goal of becoming an astronaut, I have to pinch myself when I realize that, in a remarkable way, my ultimate dream has indeed come true. They say that *God works in mysterious ways*, and that he is able to choreograph the achievement of a goal differently than originally planned. I wholeheartedly believe these statements, as I have achieved my goal of working for NASA – not as an astronaut, but instead as an architect who also possesses the unique expertise of a pilot.

N8871P flying in the Bahamas and opposite page (far right).



Spirit



I started flying in 1990, and purchased a 1966 Piper Comanche PA24-260B in 1997. The purchase was regarded as a “project,” and I had no idea how long I would keep N8871P. Over the years, I have naturally considered trading it for something new; however, each time I think about replacing the airplane I am reminded of its reliability, fuel efficiency, optimum payload capacity, great speed, and good looks.

I was reminded six years ago of the value of this particular plane when I received a telephone call from NASA, who requested to pay a visit to my office.

During the visit, one of the NASA staff surprisingly asked, “Tell us more about that airplane of yours.” Just like most Comanche owners, I thought to myself, “Don’t get me started!” I went on to speak at length about the many outstanding attributes of the plane, and how my practice of architecture had evolved into a niche that focused on providing design services to clients in remote areas. They were so impressed that they offered to grant me a contract if I agreed to use my aircraft to do work at their location. I graciously agreed and have been the prime architect at the NASA Dryden Flight Research Center for the past six years.

My use of the Comanche stretches far beyond my work at NASA. I have provided services for other clients as far north as Washington, as far south as the border with Mexico, and east to Nevada and Arizona. Additionally, I’ve logged hundreds of hours flying the airplane for philanthropic purposes, for organizations such as the Flying Samaritans and the Flying Doctors of Mercy. A year and a half ago, I aided a Catholic priest in his mission to deliver mass to remote sites in Alaska. I flew N8871P to villages throughout the great state of Alaska, and even ventured north of the Arctic Circle. The Comanche flew flawlessly, its GAMI injectors making for phenomenal fuel efficiency.

After 22 years of flying and countless adventures with the Comanche, no trip has been quite as special as the most recent flight I took with my wife of 23 years. Lisa has never shared my passion for flight, but when I explained the plans I had in mind for my next journey, I was pleasantly surprised by her enthusiastic interest in accompanying me this time around. On January 14, we joined the Baja Bush Pilots on a voyage that led us from Orange County, Calif. to Miami, Fla., and then on to the Bahamas, the Cayman Islands, Honduras, El Salvador, Mexico, Texas, and back to Orange County.

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The trip was truly an adventure to remember. While we were in the Bahamas, we had the pleasure of meeting Craig Fuller, president of the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association (AOPA). Craig admired the Comanche and proceeded to accompany us on a once-in-a-lifetime aerial photo shoot of the airplane. This recent journey is worthy of a separate article in itself, but I would like to mention that at the conclusion of this trip, my wife wrote a touching journal entry wherein she admitted, "After all these years, I get it!" It is very fulfilling to know that she now understands my passion for flying and for the Comanche, and she wants to be a part of what she has missed out on over the past 22 years.

The Comanche has provided me with countless hours of service and enjoyment, and has played a major role in defining the purpose of my career as "The Flying Architect." I presume I will again, at some point, wonder if I would be better off with a different plane, but I am confident that I will always find more than enough reasons to remain loyal to the Comanche.

It is incredible how things have come full circle since my childhood dream of becoming an astronaut and working for

NASA. Today, as an architect, I am also a pilot, I have my own Comanche, and I work for the NASA Dryden Flight Research Center. I even use the same runway the Space Shuttle used to land on. The only thing left to do to complete this chapter is to fly into outer space; perhaps not in the Space Shuttle, but with a private space travel venture in the near future.

With the help of some inspirational words from Lane Wallace, I'd like to wrap up this article with the following:

"As I look back and cherish what has been, and try my best to be present in the moment I'm living right now... I also know that the secret to a vibrant life is to keep seeking out new learning, new horizons, and new moments of laughter and joy. It's been an amazing, wonderful, and unforgettable ride, but the best part of the party is always the part that isn't over yet."

I agree with Lane. The time with my Comanche has been unforgettable. Of all my flights I have ever taken, from the philanthropic flights with the Flying Doctors of Mercy, to the epic flights to the Arctic Circle and the Caribbean, my answer as to which one is my favorite is simply, the next one. 🛩️

