

SAVVY MAINTENANCE / OPINION

Booted out of annual

Unfortunate owner, untenable position, unreasonable maintenance manager

BY MIKE BUSCH



meet,” he told Oliver. (Uh oh.) When Oliver arrived at the shop, Maurice told him that the exhaust riser for the number one cylinder had an ear broken off its flange, resulting in exhaust leakage at the number one exhaust port. Oliver approved removing the broken exhaust riser and sending it off for repair. Maurice had worse news: Isaac had removed the number six cylinder and discovered pitting on the cam lobe and lifter. Maurice told Oliver that the engine would need to be sent out for overhaul. Oliver was shocked.

Oliver walked out on the hangar floor to find Isaac, and asked him if he agreed with Maurice’s verdict that that the engine needed to be overhauled. Isaac indicated that he didn’t think the cam pitting was serious, and said Continental’s guidance (SID05-1B) recommended installing a new lifter and then reinspecting it after 100 hours or one year, whichever came first. Oliver uttered a sigh of relief.

Oliver took some high-resolution photos of the cam lobe and lifter face and emailed them to the local engine overhaul shop (a very good one). After reviewing the photos, the engine shop agreed that the cam distress was minor. The engine shop’s advice was “polish the cam lobes as much as possible, replace the lifters with new ones, and then pull the lifters for inspection after 50 hours.” Oliver passed this on to Isaac, who fully agreed. Oliver gave Isaac approval to order the serviceable cylinder and a pair of new lifters.

The following Monday, Oliver received another call from Maurice. “Now we have a problem with cylinder number one.” Maurice explained that the exhaust port had been eroded by the exhaust leak caused by the broken exhaust riser flange and would need to be sent out for resurfacing.

SOMETIMES TRUTH IS stranger than fiction.

I’m going to change the names—I’ll call the aircraft owner “Oliver” and the A&P/IA “Isaac” and the shop manager “Maurice”—and avoid geographical references. But I swear this really happened. The story started some months ago when Oliver put his recently acquired 1960 Beechcraft Debonair in the shop on his home airport for its 2022 annual inspection. This is his first airplane and was the first annual on his watch. He delivered the airplane to the shop on a Friday.

On Monday morning, the shop’s A&P/IA, Isaac, ran up the engine to heat up the oil and cylinders, then started draining the oil to perform a hot compression check. All compressions tested OK except for cylinder number six which measured 40/80. Cylinder number six was borescoped, and

the images did not reveal any obvious issues.

Isaac cut open the oil filter and inspected it. A small amount of metal was found in the pleats, so Isaac placed the filter media in a plastic bag and overnighted it to Aviation Laboratories along with an oil sample. Meantime, the maintenance manager Maurice—who is not an A&P—told Oliver that he’d located a serviceable replacement cylinder.

On Tuesday, Oliver suggested that Isaac continue with the annual inspection while they were waiting for the lab results. Isaac removed the right wing tip and repaired a balky fuel quantity sending unit whose float had developed a leak.

Two new problems

On Friday, Oliver received a phone call from Maurice, who said that “two new problems” had been discovered. “Let’s

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“This engine really needs to be removed and sent out for overhaul,” Maurice told Oliver. “We cannot sign it off as airworthy.” When Oliver protested that he couldn’t see how a cylinder problem could justify tearing down the engine, Maurice said, “Bring the FAA in if you want.” He then suggested that if Oliver was unwilling to authorize the shop to do what was necessary to make the airplane safe, he might have no choice but to move the airplane out of the shop in its disassembled state.

Volcanic eruption

Once again, Oliver sought out Isaac to get his take on all this. Isaac showed Oliver the issue with the eroded number one exhaust flange and said he didn’t believe an overhaul was necessary unless something serious was uncovered when the number one cylinder was removed. At that point, Maurice walked into the hangar, spotted Oliver and Isaac conversing, and got visibly upset.

“Damn it, all I’m trying to do is save your a**!” Maurice bellowed at Oliver. Maurice then turned to Isaac. “Get this [expletives deleted] airplane out of my hangar and off my airport!” he screamed.

Six cartons of parts were boxed up and placed inside the Debonair, whereupon it was removed from the maintenance shop and towed to a community storage hangar.

Later that day, Oliver received the oil and filter analysis results from Aviation Laboratories. The oil analysis was completely normal. The filter analysis found trace amounts of steel and aluminum, with a recommendation that another filter analysis be done at the next scheduled oil change. Oliver emailed these reports to Isaac and Maurice.

Over the weekend, Oliver went to the community storage hangar to view his disassembled Debonair with the six cartons of parts inside. He satisfied himself that the airplane was secure and undamaged. On Monday, Oliver called Maurice and asked whether he had reviewed the oil and filter lab reports. “No, and it doesn’t matter,” replied Maurice. “There was metal in the filter so the engine needs to be overhauled.”

Better call Saul

It was at this point that I received a phone call from Oliver and disbelievingly listened

to his extraordinary tale. “Can you help me?” he asked. My company generally doesn’t like to take on new clients in the middle of an annual inspection, particularly a contentious one. “We’re a lot better at preventing eggs from breaking than at unbreaking them once they’ve broken,” I said. Yet, I just didn’t have the heart to leave Oliver in the lurch.

I set up a call with my technical director Jeff Iskierka and my quality assurance manager Eric Svelmoe, both A&P/IAs, to fill them in on Oliver’s predicament. “Guys, can we help him?” Jeff and Eric instantly agreed that we had to try.

Jeff normally assigns each new SavvyMx client to one of our 30 veteran A&P/IA account managers. “I’m going to handle this one myself,” Jeff said. He assigned A&P/IA Mark Reed as the backup manager so he could take over once things were under control. Getting this mess straightened out was going to take some serious diplomacy.

Jeff reached out to both Maurice and Isaac by telephone. Isaac struck Jeff as an excellent young IA who was really trying to do the right thing for Oliver. Maurice was nice enough to Jeff on the phone, but was clearly stuck in the “overhaul or else” position and not interested in helping Oliver.

“Maurice, we would never ask you to sign off an airplane as airworthy that you weren’t comfortable with,” Jeff said. “All we’re asking is that you agree to reassemble the airplane so that we can obtain a ferry permit and move it to another shop.” Maurice was unwilling to do that.

Jeff subtly felt out Isaac to see if he might be willing to help get the Debonair reassembled to ferry on a moonlighting basis. Isaac sounded sympathetic, but he wasn’t willing to cross Maurice and put his day job at risk. There were no other shops or mechanics on the airport.

Sabotage?

Jeff searched Savvy’s extensive database looking for shops within easy driving distance that might be willing to help. It didn’t take him long to find several. Jeff set up an appointment for one mechanic to meet Oliver at the community hangar. But the appointment came and went, and the mechanic didn’t show up. Jeff contacted



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two more mechanics within driving distance. Both offered to help, then no-showed. Finally, it dawned on Jeff what was probably going on. Each of these mechanics had contacted the local shop, and Maurice had most likely persuaded them the Debonair was a death trap that they shouldn't touch with a 10-foot pole.

Jeff suspected Maurice was actively sabotaging his attempts to find a solution for Oliver. He shared his suspicions with Oliver, who told Jeff he was going to file a complaint against Maurice's shop with the flight standards district office.

Jeff suggested that might not be a good idea. His suspicions that Maurice was sabotaging his efforts were only that—suspicions. He also expressed concerns that filing a complaint with the FSDO might easily backfire. The FAA aviation safety inspector (ASI) would certainly contact Maurice about Oliver's complaint. If Maurice was able to persuade the ASI that the Debonair's engine was dangerously unairworthy, that might torpedo any chance for Oliver to obtain a ferry permit and move the airplane to another shop.

Oliver was not to be deterred. He called the FSDO and told them he wanted to file a formal complaint against Maurice's shop for maintenance malfeasance.

A compassionate fed

Oliver's complaint was assigned to an ASI—I'll call him "Abe"—who is an A&P, a former IA, and who ran a GA maintenance shop for two decades before moving to the FAA. Oliver told Abe that he was serious about pursuing his complaint about Maurice's shop, but more interested in getting his airplane reassembled and ferried to another shop where the annual inspection could be done. Abe recommended the complaint be put on hold until the Debonair could be reassembled and moved.

Oliver decided to roll the dice and made a request of Abe that few aircraft owners would ever make of an FAA employee. Two hours later, Abe arrived at the community hangar armed with a flashlight, mirror, and iPhone camera. Oliver was there with his aircraft records. After Abe inspected the aircraft for about an hour and spent another 30 minutes going over the logbooks, Oliver's gamble paid off.

Abe told Oliver that he could find no major issues with the Debonair or its engine. He said that an overhauled cylinder, some new lifters, and a repaired exhaust riser was exactly what he believed necessary to ferry the airplane. Abe offered to contact a mechanic who could help put the airplane back together. The two agreed that the airplane would be ferried to the shop that had performed the prior year's annual inspection.

Abe then told Oliver that once the airplane was safely in good hands, he would be glad to reopen Oliver's complaint against Maurice's shop. He confessed that he was disturbed that Maurice (not a mechanic) was overriding the airworthiness determinations of Isaac (an A&P/IA). He was also not happy about the shop refusing to give Oliver signed logbook entries for the work done on the Debonair prior to forcibly ejecting it from the shop.

As Abe left the community hangar, his parting words to Oliver were, "If you have any issues with the mechanic getting in here to repair the airplane, please call me and I'll take care of it."

Epilogue

The rest of Oliver's story was anticlimactic. The Debonair got reassembled with an overhauled cylinder, a couple of new lifters, and a repaired exhaust riser. The mechanic signed a safe-to-ferry entry in the logbook. Abe emailed Oliver a ferry permit that was valid for 10 days. Oliver flew the airplane to the shop for its second attempt at an annual inspection.

Over the years, I've been involved in some ugly maintenance dramas, but Oliver's is certainly one of the ugliest. Thankfully, it looks like it's headed for a happy ending. Abe had a lot to do with that. Isaac needs to find a new boss. ■

mike.busch@savvyaviation.com

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