



YouTUBE's "310 Pilot"

Not since the legendary Sky King's *Songbird* has a Cessna 310 enjoyed such a steadfast following as that of Kevin and Jaime Thornton's 771BC.

By Dale Smith



I'M old enough to admit that the Sky King TV series is one of the big reasons I got into General Aviation. Every week, Sky, Penny, Clipper (I bet you forgot Clipper) and *Songbird* “came out of the clear blue western sky” and flew in to my parent’s living room; taking me, and thousands of kids across the country, on all kinds of thrilling adventures. At the end of every show, somehow or someday, *Songbird* saved the day. Who wouldn’t grow up wanting to be a pilot?

While many think that kind of aviation-inspiring programming has gone the way of the black-and-white TV, the fact is it’s still alive and thriving on YouTube—and not just the old Sky King episodes. I’m talking about new adventures; shot by real pilots. There’s no chasing down desperados, but the exploits of these YouTubers give us the opportunity to ride along on realistic trips in a variety of GA aircraft.

Having about 200 hours in Cessna 310s myself, and being a fan of the airplane, I was thrilled when I came across Kevin and Jaime Thornton’s YouTube channel, “310 Pilot.” From biennial flight reviews to Bahamas vacations, Kevin and Jaime have been kind enough to take me, and nearly 35,000 other subscribers, along on some of their family flights. (*Kevin, Jaime and 771BC’s YouTube channel is listed in Resources.* —Ed.)

Through it all, you can tell by the way they interact with each other and their 310—771 *Bravo Charlie*—the Thornton family loves the freedom and flexibility that General Aviation offers. For me, I think that’s the most important message in many of these YouTubers’ videos: flying your own airplane literally opens the world to you. And it’s all there to enjoy and share.

Beginnings

Like most of us, Kevin got his love of aviation from his family. His grandfather was a pilot, his father flew helicopters in the Army, one uncle flew F-15’s in the Air Force and another was the Chief Pilot for The Coca-Cola Co.

“Back then, my dad owned a Cessna 172 based at Falcon Field (KFCC), just outside of Atlanta,” Kevin said. “After my first lesson, I was hooked. I transferred schools from the University of Georgia to West Georgia so I could fly the Skyhawk as often as my savings allowed.”

“I quickly worked my way through all of my ratings and by 19, I was a CFI and MEI. Shortly after my stint as a flight instructor, I got hired on as an

aerial mapping pilot for a company in Peachtree, Georgia,” he said. “I was their only pilot, flying both a Piper Turbo Lance and a Cessna 401. That’s where I fell in love with the twin Cessnas.”

As he built up hours and ratings, Kevin had his career sights set in the left seat of a major carrier. Unfortunately, the catastrophic events of Sept. 11 put those dreams in limbo, so Kevin performed a midcareer course correction and joined the Air Force, where he became an air traffic controller.

“I initially served stateside at Eglin Air Force Base in Florida. Then I did a six-month tour in Kirkuk, Iraq. Right before I left the service, I was really lucky to ride along during an F-16 training mission that dropped live dumb bombs. That was pretty amazing,” Kevin said. “After my tour of duty with the Air Force, I worked for a short time in a contract control tower at Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Airport (KIWA), but was quickly hired by the FAA as a tower controller at Chicago O’Hare International (KORD).”

Kevin said that one of the highlights of his time at O’Hare was the opportunity to spend three summers working as a controller during EAA AirVenture Oshkosh. After several years at ORD, Kevin decided to switch things up and transferred to Chicago TRACON, where he and his wife Jaime both currently work as controllers.

Four kids and a twin

Kevin said that early on, he and Jaime would rent a Cessna 172, but considering the passenger requirements of their four children, (three boys and a girl), they needed a larger airplane to handle them all.

“We would rent a nice Turbo Saratoga. It had enough seats, but when we actually filled them, we weren’t able to put enough fuel in the tanks to really go anywhere,” he said. “Plus, we need the ability to take longer flights at night, in IMC and over water. And we really wanted the redundancy and speed of a twin.”

“The top two aircraft on our list were the Beechcraft Baron and the Cessna 310. Having about 500 hours of twin Cessna time, I was a lot more familiar with the Cessna systems. I really love the way they handle and look,” Kevin said. “Besides, to get a Baron into our budget, it would have to have been one of the older models with the non-standard power levers, flaps and landing gear positions. I’m not a fan of that setup. Plus, while they both seat six, the 310’s cabin is a bit wider than the Baron’s. When you have a cabin

full of kids, every little bit helps.”

Now came the fun—and often most stressful—part of the purchase process; shopping for the right airplane. Kevin said that early on in his search, he scoured the usual sources, but as luck would have it, he found a likely 310 candidate at Lansing Municipal Airport (KIGQ), in Michigan, which is not far from their home base at Aurora Municipal Airport (KARR), Illinois.

“The 310 would be the first airplane I ever owned. Go big or go home right? I knew I wanted a Q model because it had the larger cabin, but shorter nose so it would fit into the hangar that we were planning to buy,” he said. “I also wanted the Continental IO-470 engines. I had learned that they typically have longer/healthier lives than the IO-520’s, and that would be an added bonus to our budget.”

“Living in the upper Midwest, we also wanted to have full de-icing,” Kevin said. “771 *Bravo Charlie* had everything we wanted, and the engines had right

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around 400 hours on them since they had been overhauled by a reputable shop. The only downside was she hadn’t been flying much over the past several years. Fortunately, the thorough pre-buy came back real clean and not long after, *1BC* was ours.”

Kevin explained that since the 310 had been a “hangar queen” for a while, there was a list of items that needed attention in short order. Among them were overhauling both propellers, rebuilding two of the three landing gear struts, rebuilding two of the four engine exhaust stacks, and doing 500-hour overhauls of two of the four magnetos.

He had made accommodations for these projects and their costs in his final offer, so the work wasn’t as financially painful as you might think. Light twins require you stay well ahead of their needs, even when they’re in the maintenance shop. With that said, the work is never really done.

“During the most recent annual, I had other work done that was on my list: installing shoulder harnesses, replacing the old engine baffling, installing new

LED panel lighting and putting in a new BatteryMINDER in the left wing locker,” Kevin explained. “I also had the lifters in the left engine replaced. I had noticed some spalling on the lifter faces during a borescope inspection. No doubt, this was the result of the airplane’s inactivity for all those years. These things need to fly.”

Speaking of flying, Kevin also knew that to keep flying into 2020, he’d soon have to comply with the FAA’s ADS-B mandate. And, when it comes to avionics upgrades, if you’re going in for a penny, you might as well get in for a pound.

“For reasons both fiscal and nostalgic, I prefer the more normal six-pack panel layout, versus the all-glass options,” he said. “That way, I can approach the upgrade piece-by-piece. I started with a pair of Garmin G5 displays for a number of reasons, including their separate AHRS and four-hour backup batteries. They would have also allowed me to get rid of the old vacuum system, except that I need it for the de-icing boots.”

“Another thing on my required list was to get a digital engine monitor. I chose the Insight G4 because it easily fit in the existing analog instrument cutout. It shows cylinder head temperatures for each cylinder along with rpm, manifold pressure, fuel flow, etc.” Kevin explained. “I download all the data after each flight and upload it to SavvyAviation.com for early trend monitoring.”

He said that next on the avionics list was the replacement of the legacy Cessna 400 autopilot. The unit had worked fine when he bought the 310, but not long after, developed a serious case of pitch oscillation, which rendered it unusable.

“I researched every available autopilot and decided on the new-generation Genesys Aerosystems S-TEC 3100. All things considered, it is the perfect autopilot for *771BC*,” he said. “I have about 25 hours flying with the 3100 in the past two months, and I still can’t stop smiling about it during each flight. Jaime calls it my ‘happy face.’”

“The 3100 is extremely smooth in every phase. It captures altitudes, makes turns, intercepts and tracks courses, and even does a great job with turbulence and crosswinds. It even does a fine job of compensating attitude when I deploy the flaps without ballooning,” Kevin said. “In my opinion, with features like altitude pre-select, envelope protection, GPS steering, auto-trim and straight-and-level recovery, the 3100 digital autopilot is the single best upgrade an owner can make for flying single-pilot, instrument



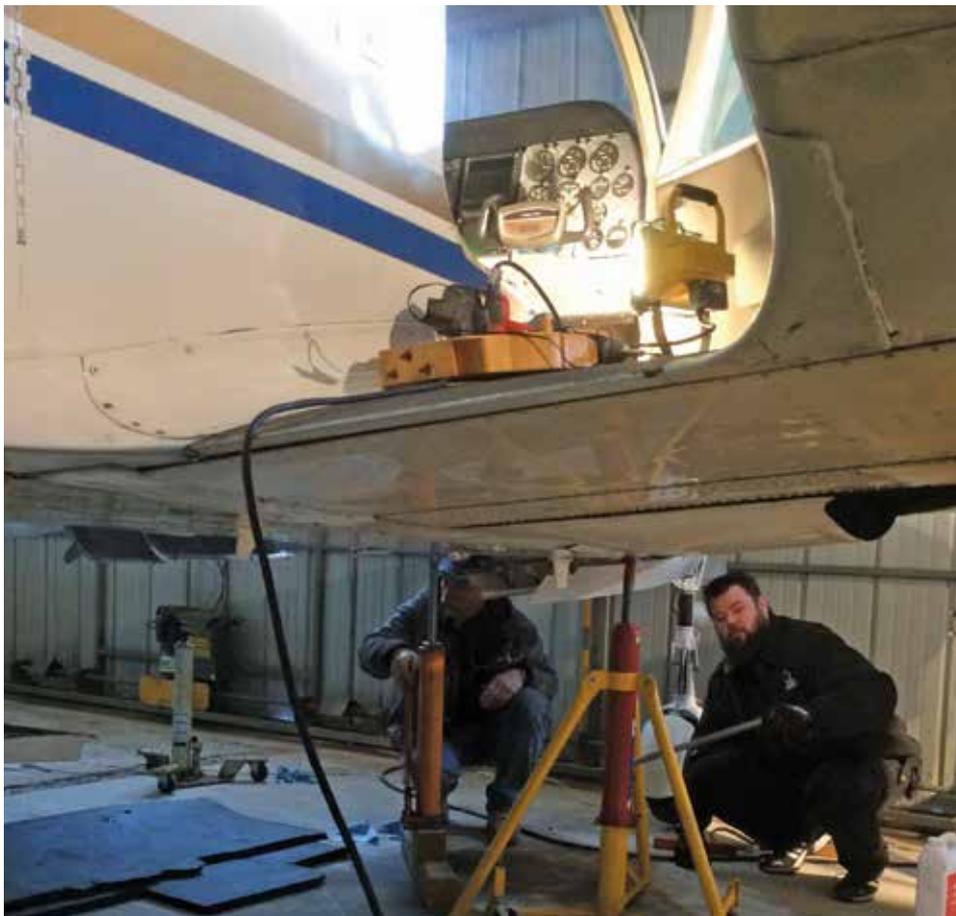
Kevin Thornton (right) letting his 16-year-old son Carson (left) fly the 310.



Jaime and Kevin Thornton with their sons Eli and Toccoa on their way back from a family fun trip to the farm.



Left to right: Kevin and Jaime Thornton in front of the ATC tower at St. Louis Regional (KALN) with friends Jenna and Robb Kidd, air traffic controllers at St. Louis Approach Control.



Erich Rempert of Burlington Air Center (our favorite maintenance/upgrade shop located in Burlington, Wisconsin), conducting the pre-purchase inspection while the plane was at East Troy, Wisconsin.



Kevin Thornton with his 4-year-old son Toccoa landing at Lake in the Hills Airport (3CK) near Chicago, Illinois.

conditions. I highly recommend it.”

While Jaime and Kevin were at Sun ‘n Fun 2019, they pulled the trigger on the last piece of 771BC’s avionics upgrade puzzle. “It was time to upgrade our 20-year-old Garmin 530W/430 stack. So, while we were at Sun ‘n Fun, we took the time to look at all of our options. “

“I quickly fell in love with the new Avidyne products. Their FMS GPS’s have 3D synthetic vision and can operate both through the touch screen and bezel knobs,” he said. “They also have pilot-friendly, intuitive features that blew us away—and that was just from using the demos in their booth.”

Kevin explained that 771BC’s full Avidyne upgrade includes an AMX240 audio panel, IFD550 and IFD540 series touch-screen GPS navigators, an APX322 ADS-B Out remote transponder, and the SkyTrax 605A ADS-B capable Traffic Advisory System.

“The couple of flights I’ve had with the IFD550 paired to the S-TEC 3100 and Garmin G5s have been a pilot’s dream come true,” he said. “Once we get it all finalized, the last piece is to have a new metal panel cut. That will clean everything up quite nicely.”

The adventures continue

Today, after about two and a half years of ownership and 200-plus hours in 771BC’s left seat, Kevin says that the airplane has lived up to his (and his family’s) every expectation.

“It handles like a dream. The controls are nice and heavy, making it

Kevin also knew that to keep flying into 2020, he’d soon have to comply with the FAA’s ADS-B mandate.

feel very stable. She also handles turbulence and crosswinds very well,” he said. “During my last BFR, I shut down and feathered the critical engine and she handled very nicely.”

“Since installing the digital engine monitor, I have been able to run the Continentals lean of peak (LOP) at about 9.5 to 10 gph and keep the engines smooth. Normally though, I prefer to operate rich of peak,” Kevin explained. “I’m not a fan

of the speed loss running LOP with the normally-aspirated engines, so I generally plan for 12.5 gph at around 60 percent power. That gives me between 175 and 182 knots true airspeed.”

“With 163 gallons usable, she will stay in the air a lot longer than we prefer. On long trips, we typically stop at 1,000 miles or five and a half hours, whichever comes first,” he said. “As for the seating, it’s very rare that with two 16-year-olds in the family that we get them all in the airplane at the same time, so room is not a problem.”

As for any future upgrade plans, Kevin said that 771BC’s interior is still in very nice condition, but that the paint is starting to show its age. That condition has already initiated talks of a full-on strip and paint job happening during an upcoming winter.

With regards to an airplane upgrade, Kevin steadfastly states that the 310 is truly the ideal airplane for the family’s needs. But, just for the sake of dreaming, his foreseeably-affordable twin Cessna upgrade would be a pressurized 340. And his ultimate turboprop choice would be a TBM. “Who wouldn’t want one?” he said.



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The making of a YouTube star

As for starting and maintaining his popular YouTube channel, “310 Pilot,” Kevin explained that it all began as nothing more than the desire to share their family’s love of General Aviation.

“It started when Jaime gave me a gift card for a Rosen Sunvisor. But, at the time, there was no STC for our airplane, so I bought a GoPro camera instead and just started filming our flights. Since then, we’ve added more cameras to give viewers added perspectives,” he said. “The flight planning and flying parts are easy, but since I’m not a technical person, the editing has been a constant work in progress.”

While Jaime is not a licensed pilot, her years of experience as a controller, makes her the ideal, radio-handling copilot. Her voice and *771 Bravo Charlie* are instantly recognizable by an increasing number of fellow controllers and pilots.

“Jaime and I are still getting used to being recognized in flight—a Bahamian pilot recognized our N-number during our trip to the islands—and at aviation events,” Kevin said. “We really enjoy it, truly appreciate all of the support from our viewers and truly value all of the connections we have made through the videos.”



Kevin and Jaime Thornton on the ramp at Mackinac Island Airport (KMCD), Mackinac Island, Michigan.



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*Left to Right, Top to Bottom:
Jaime Thornton showing off 1BC before departure
out of Aurora Municipal (KARR) in Aurora, Illinois,
for Sun 'n Fun 2019.*

Toccoa's first lesson... never too early to start!

*Tied down for the breakfast fly-in at Poplar Grove
Airport (C77) in Poplar Grove, Illinois.*



“As long as people keep enjoying the channel, we will continue making the videos,” he said. “The close-knit General Aviation community is an amazing group of people and we are very happy to be able to share our part of it.” **CF**

Dale Smith has been an aviation journalist for 30 years. When he's not writing aviation articles, Smith does commission aircraft illustrations specializing in seaplanes and flying boats. Smith has been a certificated pilot since 1974 and has flown 35 different types of General Aviation, business and World War II vintage aircraft. Send questions or comments to editor@cessnaflyer.org.

Resources

“310 PILOT”

YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCcBTQfcjYcSkYvO4kXM5-Bg>

CESSNA 310 UPGRADES
– CFA SUPPORTERS

Garmin Ltd.

(G5 flight instruments)
<https://buy.garmin.com/en-US/US/p/570665>

Genesys Aerosystems (S-TEC 3100 digital flight control system)

<https://genesys-aerosystems.com/products/s-tec-3100-digital-flight-control-system>

Insight Instrument Corp.

(Insight G4 GEM)
insightavionics.com/bestg4.htm

ADDITIONAL CESSNA 310 UPGRADES

Avidyne Corp.

(IFD550, IFD540, AMX240, APX322, SkyTrax 605A)
avidyne.com

GoPro Inc. (Cameras)

gopro.com

Rosen Sunvisor Systems

rosenvisor.com

Savvy Aviation Inc.

(Engine monitor data analysis)
savvyaviation.com

VDC Electronics (BatteryMINDER)

batteryminders.com


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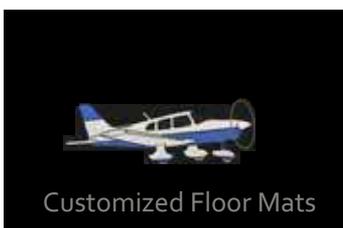
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