

# From Aeronca to Zenair: The Basics of Buying a Bird

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A red banner with the words "FOR SALE" in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters is draped across the wing of a small, light-colored aircraft. The banner has a scalloped bottom edge. The aircraft's wing and fuselage are visible in the background against a clear blue sky.

Photo by Tom Hoffmann

**T**he time has come! You have enjoyed the benefits of a private pilot certificate for several years and, after diligently saving funds, you want to take that next big step. You are ready to purchase your very own plane.

But how on earth do you get started? Is there a *Planes-R-Us* or *JetSmart*? And once you have acquired your new pride and joy, what does it take to keep it airworthy? A little WD-40 and some speed tape? These are all excellent questions, so I decided to take some time out to chat with a few FAA folks and get some answers on buying an aircraft, keeping it “street” legal, and most importantly, keeping it safe for flight.

## Alphabet Soup

To help crack the code on acquiring a new aircraft, I sought the insight of the FAA Flight Standards Service’s Aircraft Maintenance Division and the Aircraft Registration Branch under the Civil Aviation Registry. To make it easier I will refer to these two agencies as AFS-300 and AFS-750, respectively.

Like most divisions under Flight Standards, these two are staffed by a mix of regulators, program

analysts, legal instruments examiners, and safety inspectors, in addition to airframe and powerplant certificated technicians. In brief, AFS-300 is headquartered in Washington, D.C., and is responsible for the regulations and national policies governing the certification, inspection, and maintenance aspects of aviation, to include maintenance airmen. AFS-750 is located at the Mike Monroney Aeronautical Center in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, and is responsible for national aircraft registrations, the recording of conveyances and security interests against U.S. civil aircraft, and the identification system used for registered aircraft.

## Bargain Beechcraft

Now back to that airplane purchase. It is a huge investment — tantamount in cost to the purchase of a new home, or the birth of triplets — and that is just for pre-owned! Presuming you are going to go the “used” route and you’ve made a decision about the make and model of the aircraft you would like, the next step is picking a place from which to purchase.

While “Bob’s Bargain Basement Beechcraft” might sound like a great place to get a good deal,

you should probably ask around your local FBO, check out aviation trade magazines, and read over bluebook values first, so you know what to expect when purchasing. Some initial things to consider that affect the value of the aircraft are engine time and specifics, equipped gadgets, completed airworthiness directives (ADs), damage history, and, of course, the aesthetics of the aircraft. That last part is two-fold: not only do you want the aircraft to look good, you will also want to make sure that a new paint job doesn't hide an underlying corrosion issue. For a "carfax" style report, AFS-750 can produce aircraft records with the click of a link. Go to <http://aircraft.faa.gov/e.gov/ND/>, and fill in the aircraft N-number and serial number and for a small fee, you can receive all sorts of pertinent data in either CD or paper format.

Once you have your heart set on a bird, the next step is to establish its airworthiness. That means both its legal status and its ability to stay aloft (safe for flight). To start, the seller of the aircraft should be able to present the maintenance logs, the flight manual, and either an airworthiness certificate FAA Form 8100-2 (standard), or a Form 8130-7 (special). It is in your best interest that the aircraft already has its certificates and data plates when you are ready to purchase. Reproducing these credentials can be a lengthy and costly endeavor. To learn more about the ins and outs of airworthiness certificates check out <http://go.usa.gov/DnbJ>.

In addition to these documents, it would be prudent to conduct your own title check on the aircraft to determine the status of any existing liens. The last thing you want is to be ready to close the deal and find out that there is a hold up with a financing agency. Ultimately, you are also legally responsible for knowing what is on file with the FAA, even if you don't. Several aviation advocacy groups such as the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association (AOPA) and the Experimental Aircraft Association (EAA) have departments that specialize in aircraft purchasing and fact checking, and can be a big help to you.

### **Kick the Tires and Check the Wires**

Once you have the paperwork, the next step is to get your future investment inspected by a FAA certified mechanic — preferably one familiar with the aircraft — in a pre-purchase inspection. This step can save you a whole lot of grief and money later, as it should help to weed out some of the bigger discrepancies that could exist on the aircraft. In addition, 14 CFR part 91 places primary responsibility upon the



owner (or future owner) for maintaining the aircraft in an airworthy condition. So you will want to make sure you don't have your heart set on a lemon.

Different mechanics have different approaches as to how they like to conduct pre-purchase inspections — everything from a brief look to a full tear-down of the engine — so it is a good idea to sit down beforehand and ensure you both are on the same page. Together, you should check out the maintenance logs, placards, equipment lists, and active ADs and safety bulletins to help determine the condition of the craft.

In addition to saving you from potential financial heartache, or worse, a safety incident, a good once-over can also help identify the smaller, more manageable issues with the aircraft that you can then get addressed. In fact, when it is all said and done, and you do decide to buy the aircraft, it would serve you well to end the whole process with a newly accomplished annual so you can start fresh and know where you stand mechanically.

### **Signed, Sealed, Delivered – It's Yours!**

Once you have determined the aircraft is safe for flight and you have negotiated a bill of sale, the next step is to file a whole lot of paperwork. This part can seem a bit tedious but you have to realize that filing ownership and lien documents essentially announces to the world that this aircraft is *yours*.

When you think of it that way it makes the process a bit more palatable, right?

First up is that bill of sale or Form AC 8050-2.

This document should be recorded with AFS-750 to protect your interests as the new owner. The next step is to register the aircraft in your name on Form AC 8050-1. Links to all of these forms and more can be found at <http://go.usa.gov/DC7R>. In addition to the national registry, most states will require you to register your aircraft through them, so you want to ensure that you have met those requirements as well.

Next is that airworthiness certificate. Hopefully you already have it but if for some reason you don't, your local flight standards district office (FSDO) can process an application for a replacement certificate. Only an authorized representative of the FAA can issue an airworthiness certificate and in order for the agency to do so, you must first provide proof of registration. Last should be a copy of the lien (if there is one) against the aircraft. While the FAA does not require filing lien or security interests, it is a good idea to provide as much verifiable proof as possible that the aircraft belongs to you.

### The "Others"

Now please don't think I have left out the brand new, fresh-off-the-assembly-line airplane seekers. There is a big thrill in knowing that you are the first ever (save for the production test-pilot) to fly an aircraft and for you, the process doesn't change much. The biggest exceptions are that you can very likely forgo the pre-purchase inspection and the title will be a first-issue. It is also highly unlikely there will be missing paperwork problems since these will also be newly issued.

Purchasing a light-sport, amateur-built, or former military aircraft has its quirks as well. For light-sport, you will need to ensure your aircraft has been certificated as a special or an experimental light-sport craft under 14 CFR section 21.190 and section 21.191, respectively. In addition to the usual paperwork requirements, you must also provide a Light-Sport Aircraft Manufacturer's Affidavit, Form AC 8050-88A (<http://go.usa.gov/DgEQ>).


Amateur-built aircraft require a more robust pre-purchase inspection as the mechanic must take into account workmanship, structural integrity, and parts verification in addition to the usual procedures. Amateur-built aircraft also require a condition inspection to be accomplished within 12 months prior to flight. To learn more about amateur-built policies and regulations, check out <http://go.usa.gov/DgdY>.

Former military aircraft require quite a bit of extra attention, and purchasing one is not for the impatient. Just one of the many additional steps to purchasing an old warbird includes returning the aircraft to its originally approved civil configuration, if previously modified. Your best bet for grasping all of the nuances of this particular class of aircraft would be to read up at <http://go.usa.gov/DgvV>.

### Zen, and the Art of Flying

Now that monies have exchanged hands and papers have been filed, you should be good to go. Some other things to consider as a new aircraft owner is that there are a host of annual, time-compliance, and emergency-action inspections that will be required over the lifespan of your bird. This is definitely the time to get in tight with your mechanic as he or she can help you track these requirements as they come up.

Your last prudent measure is insuring your investment (compulsory in several states and often by lenders). Airplane insurance has many different options for purchase to include: passenger liability, third party liability, ground risk hull (in motion and stationary), and in-flight. A word to the wise — shop for your insurance company with just as much scrutiny as you would shop for your aircraft. Not all policies are alike and the differences can be significant should the worse occur and your baby sustains damage.

Finally, after all of this hard work, you are ready to rack up the hours in the pursuit of flying Zen — safe and secure in the knowledge that you have purchased a sound, dependable, and street legal bird. As the longtime historian for Britain's Royal Air Force, Sir Walter Alexander Raleigh (1861-1922) once said, "the engine is the heart of an aeroplane, but the pilot is its soul." Happy flying. 

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#### Learn More

For an excellent handbook on purchasing a new aircraft, check out *Plane Sense* at <http://go.usa.gov/Dg7e>.

It includes sample checklists, regulation references, and contact information for AFS-300, AFS-750, Light-Sport Registry, and more!