

A high-angle, low-altitude photograph of a bright yellow Consolidated Vultee L-13 biplane. The aircraft is viewed from the front and slightly above, showing its two sets of wings, the fuselage, and the landing gear. The pilot is visible in the cockpit, wearing sunglasses and a light-colored cap. The background consists of a lush green landscape with rolling hills and trees, seen from an elevated perspective. The lighting is bright, suggesting a clear day.

# A Family Burger Bomber

The Colvins' Consolidated Vultee L-13

BY BUDD DAVISSON

JIM KOEPNICK

## Actually, they could be considered bigger than we need, since they were originally set up for six seats or two litters. But whoever has too much room in an airplane?

“Meet me by that big, yellow, round-nosed thing. You can’t miss it, because it towers over all the other ‘planes.’”

“Did you see the inside? You could roller-skate in it!”

“What happened to the tail? It looks as if someone stood up too fast in the tent under it and broke it.”

“It has a nurse painted on the nose. Maybe it’s an ambulance of some sort.”

And so it went for the entire week of EAA AirVenture Oshkosh: The Colvin clan’s colossus towered above the Vintage aircraft area, prompting all manner of comments and guesses. Some about its identity. Some about its mission in life. Some about how short it could land. There were no guesses about its speed—that was obviously measured in various degrees of “slow.”

What few could know was that the airplane was the direct result of 2-year-old Baron Colvin’s birth. His father, Clu (who’s part Cherokee, and Clu means “Little Bird.” Fitting, eh?), explains, “We were doing pretty good with our ‘54 Bonanza. But we already had two kids, so Baron definitely put us over the limit. We needed more seats.”

Incidentally, the degree of the Colvin family’s dedication to aviation can be seen in their kids’ names: The eldest daughter (8 years old) is Piper; number one son is Lear (6); and Baron brings up the rear.

The need for space was just one of several factors behind Clu’s decision to find an L-13. “When we knew Baron was on the way and we were going to rapidly outgrow our Bonanza,” says Clu, “I initially

thought I’d be buying something like an old C-310. But then I started looking at how we used airplanes. The majority of the time we were just going out to lunch and didn’t need 180 knots. What we needed was a solid 90 knots and lots of room. Besides, I knew the L-13 fairly well because my dad had a couple projects and one flying at one time.”

Actually, his father had practically everything at one time or the other.

“I’m third-generation aviation,” Clu says. “Granddad was a general-aviation pilot, and my dad went to Spartan School of Aeronautics right out of high school. He was an IA [a mechanic with inspection authorization], but buying, selling, and exporting aircraft was a big part of his business. At the same time, however, he also rebuilt or restored a huge variety of aircraft, including Cubs, Stearmans, BT-13, T-6, B-25, and just about everything in between.”

To say that Clu was into aviation almost as soon as he was out of diapers is no exaggeration. “Mom really got on Dad’s case one time, when she came out in the shop and found he had me down in the tail cone of a Mooney, bucking rivets without ear protection. I was 5 years old at the time.”

Further ensuring that Clu had few, if any, barriers between himself and aviation was that he was raised on his father’s farm in northeastern Oklahoma.

“It actually was a working farm,” Clu says, “so we farmed during the summer and built airplanes during the winter. Dad had a runway on it, and later when I got married, we bought 75 acres, built a house, and



started farming on the other end of the runway.”

The farm gave Clu a childhood that was very av-centric because of its semi-isolated location 7 miles from a small town of less than 300. “We don’t have a stop light, which means, as a kid, my world was very much centered on the farm, and that meant airplanes. I rebuilt a Cub mostly on my own as an after-school project when I was 12 years old and built up my first Luscombe when I was 14. And of course I had the obligatory and highly illegal ‘farm solo’ when I was 14.

“One day an FAA inspector was out at Dad’s place inspecting an airplane he was going to export. He had been out lots of times and saw me always working on airplanes. I wasn’t 18, so I didn’t have an A&P [airframe and powerplant mechanic] ticket yet. The inspector cornered me and said, ‘I want you in my office on your 18th birthday to take the A&P exam,’ which I did.”

He moved to Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, to work for an airline as a mechanic, quickly becoming its top dog for C checks on MD-80s. He was still flying his brains out and, at one point, met the airline’s chief pilot, which resulted in an offer to fly as a flight engineer.

“I flew as an engineer for a couple of years, moved into the right seat, then was furloughed. I wound up with another carrier that was ab-



**Stowing the horizontal tail requires nothing more than the removal of a couple of pins and the relocating of the brace strut to two different mounts on the tail and fuselage.**

DEKEVIN THORNTON

sorbed by yet another carrier until, in 2001, I landed at my present job where I'm based out of Denver."

When he's not playing airline pilot, Clu, like his father before him, is rebuilding airplanes—lots of airplanes. Especially Luscombes.

"I've had at least 20 to 25 Luscombes," he says. "Most of the time, I'll take a real basket case and build it up to where it's a pretty easy project for someone and then sell it. I have fuselage and wing jigs, and I'll go through them and replace everything that needs replacing, which is usually because of corrosion. This is especially true of the wings. I've gotten to where I don't trust the spars. I had 13 sets of wings at one point, and every single one of them had at least one spar with bad intergranular. So, since Univair has the extrusions for the spars, I just replace them. That lets me sleep better at night knowing everything I sell has good spars."

Even though a lot of Luscombes come and go, he's working on one for himself. "I have three T8F Luscombes and will finish one up and keep it," says Clu.

But Luscombes wouldn't even come close to solving his family transportation problem. "When we decided to go big, low, and slow, I automatically thought about the L-13," he says. "When I was

a kid, Dad had four or five projects around, so I knew them really well. And they were exactly what we needed. Actually, they could be considered bigger than we need, since they were originally set up for six seats or two litters. But whoever has too much room in an airplane?

"I hadn't seen one for sale for some time, so I came up with a way of ferreting projects out. I ran a bogus ad on eBay in which I just said, 'Airplane for sale.' Since it was eBay, I knew I was going to get tons of responses, which I did, including one from eBay itself, because what I was doing, running an ad to sell something when I really didn't have anything to sell, was against their rules. I knew that, which is why I put the ad up on Friday, knowing it would take them until Monday to take it down.

"All I wanted to do was talk to a lot of people who were looking to buy airplanes and get the word out about the L-13. Practically no one knows anything about the airplane, and this way I could spread the word until someone sees one. And that's exactly the way it worked.

"The first one that came up was in Scottsdale. It had no firewall-forward, which is pretty standard for these projects because the six-cylinder, 240-hp, flat Franklin they originally had turned out to

be very difficult to keep running. So, a lot of the airplanes became lawn ornaments because of no available engines.

"Originally designed and prototyped by Stinson before it was absorbed into Consolidated Vultee, the military actually bought 300 of the aircraft in 1946 and '47. It was supposed to be the ultimate ambulance/liason/utility airplane, so it has a lot of unique features. For one thing, for battlefield mobility, it's designed specifically to be able to be towed through a hole no wider than a Jeep. So, not only do the wings and tail fold, but the main gear wheels can be pivoted back inside the landing gear legs, giving it a really narrow profile. I don't have the right brake line fittings on my gear legs, so I can't rotate the wheels, not that I have any reason to.

"The flaps are massive, as are the wings, so it can really come down steep and land at practically zero airspeed. Most of its role was taken over by the helicopter, so shortly after the Korean War they were all surplused. Unfortunately, the lack of a suitable engine meant a lot of them wound up rotting behind hangars. Not all of them, though.

"Two companies went through the STC [supplemental type certificate] process to certify the airplane



DEKEVIN THORNTON PHOTOS

With Clu's son Lear up in the cockpit, Clu Colvin (far right) had two of his flying buddies, Matt Mitchell (left) and Brandon Jewett (center), with him during our EAA AirVenture photo shoot.

for a 300-hp, R-680 Lycoming radial. One was known as the Centaur 101. They also did a couple as Centaur 102s with 300-hp Jacobs. Besides being more horsepower, the Lycoming was a well-proven engine, and at the time there were lots of them available surplus. Another company did a Lycoming type certificate and named their aircraft the Husky. It carried eight passengers with two bench seats in the back. They used the airplanes as air taxis bouncing around the Caribbean islands.

"Because one of the companies had done a Lycoming 680 design investigation for the USAF, they could easily market the conversion, and that's what saved many of the few L-13s that have survived. With that engine, it began working in Alaska and anywhere a high-lift airplane was needed, such as for towing gliders. They also came up with a conversion for a 450-hp P&W [Pratt & Whitney], and at least one of those has survived and is being restored. Now that one ought to be a real *hoss*."

Once Clu had committed to



The cockpit is very utilitarian, with steeply sloping sides on the instrument panel to allow for maximum visibility. The beefy control yoke columns are unusual, being a triangular cross-section.



How many airplanes that you've flown come with a trap door? Befitting one of its military roles as a liaison aircraft, the L-13 has this cargo pickup door in the aft section of the cabin.

purchase the first L-13 project, he found himself on a roll as a second one popped up on his radar almost immediately. This one was in Van Nuys, California.

"That airplane was a complete airplane, although modified somewhat with metal over the skylights and other changes. One odd thing about this airplane was that I have a picture of me standing in front of it as a little kid. [Even though] this one was a complete airplane as compared to the project I had just trailered home, I wasn't sure I wanted it. I had just won a salvage bid on a C-195 that had an engine my friend Nick Howell wanted for his Staggerwing, so I was already committed. Still, the 195 was more or less in the same direction as the L-13, so I threw a number at the L-13 owner, deciding ahead of

time that if he took it, we'd just take two trailers and bring them back together. I wasn't about to fly it home. Complete or not, it hadn't flown for 25 years, and I learned long ago that it's much easier to take an airplane apart on the ramp than in a pasture. That assumes you find the right pasture at the right time.

"He took the offer, so we took off with two trucks and trailers thinking we were picking up two airplanes. However, when we started loading the L-13, we found I hadn't bought one L-13 but closer to two-and-a-half, because there was another project fuselage and wings as part of the deal. He hadn't mentioned that. So, at that point I owned three-and-a-half L-13s."

Because he commuted to Denver for his airline job, Clu had a han-



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The wings are folded after accessing the forward spar mount and releasing the wing root fairing.



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gar at Front Range Airport, which is only minutes from where he's based. He has always had an airplane project in that hangar, including the oldest Taylorcraft flying, so he dropped the L-13 off there where he could work on it during the dead times while staying in Denver.

"When we started taking the airplane apart, and bear in mind that it appeared nearly flyable, it became obvious that this was an airplane I would have flown only if someone was shooting at me. For one thing, the yoke was rusted tight, and it took some banging to break it loose. The landing gear wasn't L-13 gear. I don't know what it was, but it definitely was not L-13. The L-13 gear is a little odd to begin with because the legs don't line up right and left: They are a little offset fore and aft, so the upper ends of the legs can miss each other and push against oleos that pivot from the opposite gear leg attach point.

"The tail wheel was...well... I don't know what it was. It was

a cobbled-together something or other. It looked as if someone had stolen the original and stuck this thing under it so no one would notice. I'm certain the owner didn't even know it had been changed."

The L-13 is much bigger than it looks in photos unless someone is standing next to it to give it scale. It's actually a little taller than a Beaver and a fair amount wider. Or at least it looks wider, because the cockpit is so open and airy. That's one of its most attractive attributes; the entire flight deck is just that, a deck, and only the pilot's seat appears to be more or less permanently attached in place. Everything else is quickly removable to allow a wide variety of seating/cargo arrangements. The structure is also easy to access which makes bringing a dead one back to life a little less difficult.

"We crawled all over this thing," says Clu, "and were amazed at what a small amount of corrosion we found. There was a little rust here

and there on the tubing, but the aluminum needed nothing but a good cleaning. Considering how disreputable the airplane looked, we were pleasantly surprised. We wound up doing a refurbishing job, not a restoration. In fact, that had been our goal all along because we wanted a working airplane that we could enjoy, not a showpiece that we'd worry about scratching. So we didn't go nuts with the thing in any area.

"We haven't done the panel yet because we want to find a radio compass and take everything back to pretty much original, but usable. The panel hasn't been cut, so the radios are mounted in such a way that they can be removed leaving no marks.

"The engine supposedly only had a hundred hours on it since overhaul, but that was back in '77. So when an accessory gasket let go while we were running it up, we dropped the engine off. As soon as I got it apart, it was obvious the parts were in good shape, so rather than doing a complete overhaul, I just did an IRAN—inspect and replace as necessary—which was mostly hoses and gaskets."

When it came time to fly the airplane for the first time, Clu went out of his way to avoid one of the usual pressure points of first flights.

"We did it late in the evening with no one but helpers around. No spectators. You don't need a peanut gallery on a test flight.

"The airport is at 5,400 feet MSL [mean sea level], and I chose the long runway just in case. While taxiing out, I messed with the tail-wheel lock and found it different



than most tailwheel locks in that it locks it steerable, not centered; when unlocked, it becomes full swivel, which is usually the case.

“As the power went in, the airplane had barely started moving before the tail wanted to come up, and a few seconds later it was off the ground. This at 5,400 feet MSL! However, as it started accelerating, the trim began trying to push the nose up and the forces got quite high. I found later that the trim cable was wrapped the wrong way around the trim drum and I hadn’t noticed it. I did my Schwarzenegger thing, keeping the nose down and the power back until I came around and landed it. On that first one, I wheeled it on so I could take off again if I needed to. Even on that first approach the flaps were something to be reckoned with: There’s a *big* pitch change, which helped with the out-of-trim condition, but until you’ve seen it, you can’t comprehend the view out the windshield with the flaps all out. You’re looking at nothing but pavement, because the nose is so far down. And that’s on every landing. We flew it again the next day with absolutely zero problems.”

At this stage of the airplane’s development, it was still in bare aluminum. But painting something that big is a pretty daunting task, and Clu gave some thoughts to having a professional paint it.

“I changed my mind and decided to paint it myself when I got the first quote,” he says. “I know that \$8,000 isn’t that unusual for a paint job, but I just couldn’t see


paying that much. So I took advantage of a good friend, Brandon Jewett, who wanted to fly the airplane so badly he could taste it. In exchange for some flights in the airplane, we took it up to his private runway and painted it out in a pasture with the help of Tom Alexander, Don Smallwood, and Matt Mitchell. Nothing complicated. Like I said, I didn’t want a show airplane, but I don’t think it turned out too badly.”

Yellow isn’t a color often associated with ex-USAF aircraft, but it was actually fairly common during the mid-’50s.

“I went for yellow because, among other things, when you have something this ugly, you don’t want to hide it. You want it to stand out. Besides, I remembered that some of Dad’s L-13 parts were yellow. The nose art is inspired by my wife Jenifer, and it’s set up as an air ambulance, ‘Intensive Care Unit.’ We’re thinking about painting our T8F Luscombe the same way and naming it ‘First Aid Kit.’

“When I brought the airplane home, I buzzed the runway so my dad would come out. The first thing he said when I got out of the cockpit was, ‘I wouldn’t pay \$8,000 for that paint job,’ and I replied, ‘I didn’t. I paid \$457.’”

So now the Colvin family has a five-place, \$100-hamburger airplane. Clu laughs, “At 17 gallons an hour and 105 to 110 mph, that hamburger had better be pretty close, or it’ll be more than a hundred bucks.”

We, however, think he has to look at his airplane from a different angle. Its normal useful load is 1,900 pounds (wartime useful load was 4,200 pounds!), so with all 110 gallons on board, he can carry his entire family and some baggage for six-and-a-half hours. That’s a lot of flying! Or he can carry four-and-a-half hours of fuel and carry eight people with room to spare. That being the case, Clu says the airplane can be his hamburger bird until child number six shows up. We wonder if he’s really considered that. 

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