L-17 : Origins

By Bill Lattimer

To paraphrase Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson, we've got "a whole pack of Navions" in the squadron and we'll see a few at nearly every event. Having a good grounding in the history and military heritage of these aircraft helps us all tell a good story about their service and honor those who built, maintained, and flew them. It's an interesting story, but a somewhat convoluted one. This first installment is about the origin of the L-17, and I'll cut to the chase and hit the high points.

North American Aviation (NAA) designed the NAvion to capitalize on what it thought would be a postwar general aviation boom for a four-place personal aircraft. Like all NAA products, it was designed like a military aircraft, built tough and had beautiful lines. Those qualities had three impacts. First, it made the aircraft a tough sell against the competition. For every person who liked its rough field/short field capability, excellent outward view, and good useful load, there were ten who wanted easier passenger entry and more speed, which the Beech Bonanza and others were able to provide. Second, the aircraft was expensive to build and difficult to maintain. This was not an issue for a military aircraft, but significant for a private owner and a new civilian manufacturer. Finally, it made the aircraft interesting to the U.S. Army, which at that time was interested in a four-place light personnel transport aircraft. These all play out in the history of the military version of the NAvion: the L-17.

The Army wanted the NAvion but the Key West Agreement that outlined the responsibilities of each branch of the armed forces prohibited the Army from procuring fixed-wing aircraft. So, in 1947, an order was placed by the Air Force for 83 NAvions which were given the designation L-17, 'L' being the designation for liaison (light transport and reconnaissance) aircraft at the time. These aircraft were little different than "civilian" Navions and, in fact, when the Air Force requested a delivery, a NAvion was pulled from storage parking across the street from North American, painted grey, had military radios and lighting installed, and was flown off. This is why manufacturing serial numbers of the North American L-17 are chaotic and out of order. It's also why we see in-service photos of these aircraft in so many different colors from bare aluminum to zinc chromate to olive drab. When the Army took possession, the last color they wanted was "Air Force Grey," so it came off. Immediately.

The Army was generally satisfied with the L-17, although they were looking for longer range and a more complete panel for instrument flying. Minor changes were made in the field, including upgrading the starter, adding a dimmer for indicator lights, and a few proactive repairs and changes for the airframe. In 1948, the Air Force was working with North American on the XP-86 (later F-86 Sabre Jet) and didn't like seeing resources pulled away for the NAvion. They gave NAA an ultimatum of sorts: which aircraft would they prefer to focus on? NAA knew where the money was, and quickly put together a deal with Ryan Aeronautical to transfer the NAvion—type certificate, aircraft in progress, tooling, and parts. As a sad precursor to today's liability environment, once Ryan confirmed they had what they needed to build, NAA destroyed all other documentation about the aircraft to ensure no liability remained. This is the reason there's very little documentation from the time NAA was building the aircraft. Ryan renamed the Navion, removing the capital 'A' that had identified "North American" in the NAvion name.

Part of the deal for Ryan was an order for 158 new L-17s with enhanced capabilities including a "full gyro" panel, an under-seat auxiliary fuel tank, and several other minor changes. They also provided parts to retrofit a little less than half (33) of existing North American L-17s with these new features, with the installation work being done by Schweitzer Aircraft Company. To keep all these aircraft straight, original NAA aircraft

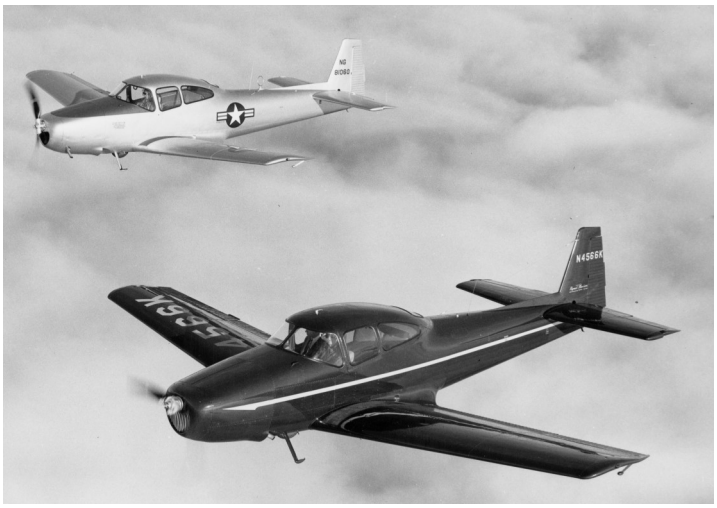


Photo courtesy Bill Lattimer.

were designated L-17A, the new Ryan aircraft were designated L-17B, and the Schweitzer upgraded NAA aircraft were designated L-17C.

Ryan started production, building these 158 aircraft in a single, sequential production run, hoping to generate cash flow for their civilian production as well. At the very last moment, the Air Force added an order for five additional aircraft for the Hellenic (Greek) Air Force and Ryan continued the production run, ultimately producing 163 L-17B aircraft.

The operational story begins with these 246 aircraft representing about 10% of overall Navion production. As an origin story, it doesn't read like a blockbuster movie script. But the L-17 would go on to serve with distinction in a broad variety of roles, some traditional and some very surprising. That's the subject of the second half of this article: Myths and Legends. ✪

L-17: Myths and Legends

By Bill Lattimer

Mark Twain wrote, "Truth is stranger than fiction, but it is because Fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities; Truth isn't." The modern version of this becomes, "You can't make this stuff up," which describes the myths and legends of the L-17 surprisingly well. A bit player on the world stage for a relatively short period of time, the L-17 still pops up in some surprising ways during the Korean War.

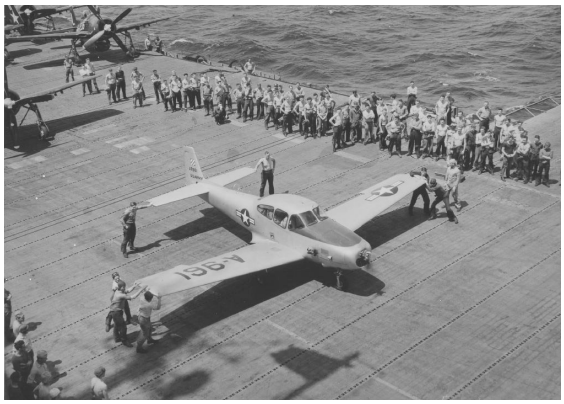
The first myth is that of the armed L-17. Over the years, many reports of armed L-17s have surfaced, from bazookas wired under the wings to rockets and bombs mounted on hard points. There's no shortage of Navions today flying with gun port decals and, in some cases, fake rockets and bombs mounted under the wings, but the hard truth is that *it didn't happen*. The creativity of L-bird pilots and ground crew are legendary, and we have aircraft like "Bazooka Charlie" Carpenter's Piper L-4H to show that truth can be stranger than fiction.

But having run all these reports to ground, talked extensively to Korean War L-17 ground crew and pilots, and done archive research, I can say confidently that no evidence exists to support armed L-17s and there is hard evidence to the contrary. The USAF went so far as to ask Ryan in 1950 if there was any means to mount a standard T-6-type hard point on the L-17, and Ryan responded that an entirely new wing would be needed. The USAF declined and that chapter was well and finally closed.

Another myth is L-17s flying off aircraft carriers, but this turns out to be true! Navions have outstanding short- and rough-field capabilities, and after the initial crated deliveries of L-17s to Korea, it was determined they could easily fly off the decks of the escort carriers (CVE) *Sicily* and *Badoeng Strait* for delivery. Operation OPEX was initiated in early 1950 to determine if loaded L-17s could both fly off and land and, while it was determined that they could, the margin of error was too low for regular operations, leaving only ranking personnel flights for operations.

During active duty, L-17s served with the US Air Force and Army, the Hellenic (Greek) Air Force and the Republic of Korea Air Force. There's no evidence of any active duty L-17 serving with any other branch, although we see them (and Navions) today with all service and all country markings on them as an homage to the owner's service or their interests. A single aircraft, the Ryan Model 72, was built for testing against the Temco Plebe and the aircraft that would become the T-34 Mentor in a trainer competition. But it was never accepted by the military, having lost the competition, and it soldiered on as a Ryan testbed for several years.

General Ridgway's L-17 in Japan. Photo: Fred LePage



L-17 48-961 on board USS *Leyte*, 1950. Photo: San Diego Air and Space Museum Archive

The final myth is using JATO packs for takeoff and, again, this was tested! The Navion has a very beefy center attach point for the wings, and this was deemed enough for a JATO mount. Aside from what appears to be three test flights, it was never used operationally.

The L-17 earned its place in history with a single event: calling down the very first airborne Forward Air Control (FAC) strike on 9 July 1950. Standing in for two L-5G Sentinels with failed radios, two 24th Division L-17s called down about ten flights of F-80s very effectively, supporting "the best day in Fifth Air Force history." The L-17 was quickly withdrawn from this duty, replaced by the more capable T-6 Texan, but it was there and it did the job.

The L-17 then settled down into standard L-bird work, transporting light cargo and personnel. General MacArthur had a personal L-17, as did Major General Matthew Ridgway (1948 Ryan L-17B 48-1042)—his carrying nose art of a Conestoga wagon wheel and the words "The Big Wheel". Marilyn Monroe flew around for her USO tour in Ryan L-17B 48-944, piloted by Lt. Jack Plumly; aircraft and pilot were reunited at KOSH in 2000. 26 aircraft have been verified with Korean War service and six were lost to enemy air action. They also served in Japan and Germany as general unit "hacks" or light transports.

After the Korean War, L-17s went to military flying clubs and many were transferred to the Civil Air Patrol. CAP service was a mixed bag; there were plenty of spare parts but, as in their military service, they were considered difficult to service and soon were released. The last L-17s left military service in the late 60s.

Of the 246 L-17s built, about 75 survive today and about 30 of those are flying, often in civilian markings. And many civilian Navions fly in military colors to honor veterans. While a small footnote in any history of military aviation, the L-17 played its part and still soldiers on today. ✪