

The Skymaster first appeared in 1964 as the fixed-gear Model 336. With its front-rear engine layout, high strut-braced wing, and down-and-welded gear, the 336 was a radical departure indeed from the light twins of the day. But Cessna sold almost 200 336's that first year, and revamped it into the retractable-gear 337 Super Skymaster in 1965. The design evolved only a little over years, progressing from the A model in 1966 through the 1978-80 H model, with minor refinements. The engines remained the same throughout the Skymaster's career: the 210-hp six-cylinder Continental IO-360.

A turbocharged version, the T-337B, appeared in 1967, but was dropped in 1972 with the addition to the Skymaster line of the pressurized P-337 version, with uprated 225-hp engines. The turbo was revived in 1978, but Skymaster sales had begun slipping by then, despite the great general aviation sales boom of the late 1970's, Cessna saw sales drop to only 61 in the boom year of 1979 and less than 50 in 1980. Cessna pulled the plug following the 1980 model year, after a total Skymaster production run of 2,058, plus 332 pressurized versions.

Major model changes were few. Gross weight crept up over the years, starting at 4,200 lbs. with the 337 and 337A and increasing to 4,300 lbs. (B model), 4,400 lbs. (C model) and 4,440 lbs. (E model). With the 1971 F model Cessna increased takeoff weight to 4,630 lbs., but max landing weight remained 4,400. The P-337 with its 30 extra hp, had a takeoff weight of 4,700 lbs., and a max landing weight of 4,465 lbs.

The 1971, F model, has the highest useful load even though the empty weight of the fleet continued to rise as each model was introduced. In 1972 the electrical system, sometimes the most troublesome area of most early models, was improved. The 1973 model saw the biggest changes to the center-line-thrust aircraft. The engine driven hydraulic gear system was changed to a electro-hydraulic "power pack" system. Prop synchrophasers were improved; the standard swing open door was replaced by a clam-shell two piece door. The 1975 model had more fuel capacity in the long-range tank option, 148 gallons. The H model saw the highly sought after sliding rear seat, that incorporated the seat rails on the side of the fuselage and allowed the bench seat to move fore and aft unrestricted in the rear cabin.

Performance is not as racy as the B55 Baron or not as efficient as the Twin Comanche but the Skymaster doesn't look bad next to the generation of light-twins that followed it. The turbocharged models can put up some pretty nice cruise numbers if you take them high enough. Real world cruise speeds start at about 155 knots for the normal aspirated models at 65% power. The pressurized models will push 190 knots at 20,000 feet, their maximum certified altitude. The straight turbo models, (B,C,D,E and F) will fetch numbers close to 200 knots at altitude. The original service ceiling certified the models to flight level 330. Obviously before RVSM was introduced. The turbo E model had a book cruise speed of 223 knots. These aircraft are solid platforms to fly IFR and will penetrate rough air with a heavier than expected ride.

Rate of climb ranges from a modest 1,300 fpm in the original 336 to a less than desired 940 fpm in the last non-turbo 337H models. The heavy, over built H models were victims of stuff-all-you-can-into-it syndrome. The pressurized H models with turbocharged breath could at least pass the 1,000 fpm mark. It's nice to have all the extras until one needs max performance. Looking at all models together the average rate of climb points to about 1,100 fpm.

Runway performance is much better to look at. The Skymaster uses the good ole Cessna formula – long, tapered wing and bug flaps – to achieve stall speeds well below those of most twins. Stall speeds with flaps range from 63-70 mph, depending on the gross weight of the particular model – 10 to 20 mph below conventional twins like the 310 and Baron.

As a result, the Skymaster will get off the ground in less than 1,000 feet at gross weight – a feat very few other twins can manage. Landing ground rolls are around 700 feet, also among the best of the twins.

Single engine performance is very similar to most light twins. Most models will climb better on the rear engine vs the front. In the change to the pressurized G model the front propeller was increased 2 inches in diameter over the rear to help balance the single engine difference of the two power plants. Until then the front and rear props were the same 76 inches. Typically the rear engine provided 320 fpm alone and the front struggled to reach 300 fpm in most cases at gross weight. This unusual phenomenon was created when the rear prop was stopped and the air coming over the fuselage created more drag.