

AUTOMOTIVE CLASSIFIED INSIDE AND AT **CARS.COM** THE TRIBUNE'S ONLINE AUTO GUIDE

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Jim Mateja

XC90 doesn't act like an SUV, or even a Volvo

Life was so much simpler a few years ago. If the man wandering the parking lot was wearing a tweed sport coat with elbow patches and had a pipe dangling from his mouth, there was little doubt he was searching for his Volvo.

If, on closer inspection, you noticed his knuckles were swollen twice normal size, evidence of holding the steering column in a death grip while puttering in the center lane at 20 m.p.h. below the limit, you knew for certain.

Sure enough, before long the man would slip into the boxy wagon with clean windows and rusted rocker panels carrying the Volvo logo.

How things have changed. The first signs of the transformation (the automaker calls it the Volvolution) came in 1999, when the S80 sedan arrived, followed by the S60 sedan in 2000. These sedans carried the traditional Volvo safety banner, but have brought styling and performance out of the Dark Ages.

New for '03 is the next member of the Volvolution, the XC90.

Neither Volvo owners nor Volvo vehicles fit the stereotype anymore. The darn things look good, perform well and no longer attract only those who justify the purchase by insisting: "At least it's safe."

The XC90 was just named North American Truck of the Year for '03 by a panel of media judges.

Why truck rather than car of the year? Because the BMW Mini won that honor.

Oh, you mean why is the XC90 considered a truck?

Because though it looks like a tall station wagon, Volvo considers it a sport-utility vehicle, and SUVs are considered trucks.

The XC90, like the S60 and S80 sedans and V70 and XC70 wagons, is the next Volvo iteration of the automaker's P2 platform, which is stretched or shortened to produce a variety of mod-

PLEASE SEE MATEJA, PAGE 10

TEST DRIVE



2003 Volvo XC90 T6 AWD

Wheelbase: 112.6 inches
Length: 188.9 inches
Engine: 2.9-liter, 268-h.p., twin-turbo 6-cylinder
Transmission: 4-speed automatic with Geartronic clutchless manual
Fuel economy: 15 m.p.g. city/20 m.p.g. highway
Base price: \$39,975
Price as tested: \$43,095. Includes \$450 for metallic paint; \$595 for climate package with heated front seats, headlamp washers and rain-sensing wipers; \$1,675 for Versatility package with third-row seats, A/C for third row, third-seat headphone outlets and self-leveling suspension; and \$400 for reverse warning system. Add \$660 for freight.

*For me, missing two hours of work could be a \$10,000-\$15,000 difference.**

— Lance Alm, flying commuter



Lance Alm lands his Piper at Meigs Field to complete his commute from Bardstown, Ky., to Chicago.

Photos for the Tribune by Warren Skidell

The way to really fly

Aero-commuters take to cockpit to make sales calls, monitor far-flung businesses, save time and energy

By Chuck Green
Special to the Tribune

If Lance Alm is going to lose several thousand dollars, it's probably a sure bet he'd rather do it in Las Vegas than by leaving work early to catch a ride home.

"For me, missing two hours of work could be a \$10,000-\$15,000 difference. No way." During the week, Alm, of Chicago, oversees his commodities business at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange. He owns a home and several enterprises in the Bardstown, Ky., area, where his wife and children live. Alm must maintain a steady presence in both places and believes the most practical way to get back and forth is by piloting his own airplane, or aero commuting.

Alm arrives in Chicago each Sunday night or Monday morning. He returns to Kentucky Tuesday and heads back to the Windy City Wednesday. On Friday, it's back to Kentucky. That pace, said Alm, who keeps his aircraft at Meigs Field,



Alm phones home to let his wife know he arrived safely.

would be virtually impossible to maintain any other way, even flying commercially.

"It takes about one hour and 25 minutes, which saves me two hours one way in commuting when I fly myself. I get up at 5:30 in the morning in Kentucky and am off the ground at 5:30. If I flew commercially, I'd have to get up at 3:30 and be out my door by a quarter after 4 and be at the airport by 5 to get through the airline to take off by 6. It's exhausting."

About 100,000 to 150,000 individuals nationwide fly their own planes, at least partly on business, including around 10,000 in Illinois, according to Jim Coyne, president of the National Air

Transportation Association. That organization, based in Alexandria, Va., is the trade group for charter operators, fixed-base operators and flight schools.

"That's not to say they don't sometimes use a car, airline or train. But we're talking mostly about transportation, and the whole purpose of transportation is to save time."

Coyne, a pilot for about 30 years, formerly commuted every week to Washington, D.C., when he was a congressman from Pennsylvania. "I had an airport about four or five miles from my home and flew into Washington, D.C. It was a 45-minute commute instead of a 2-hour drive."

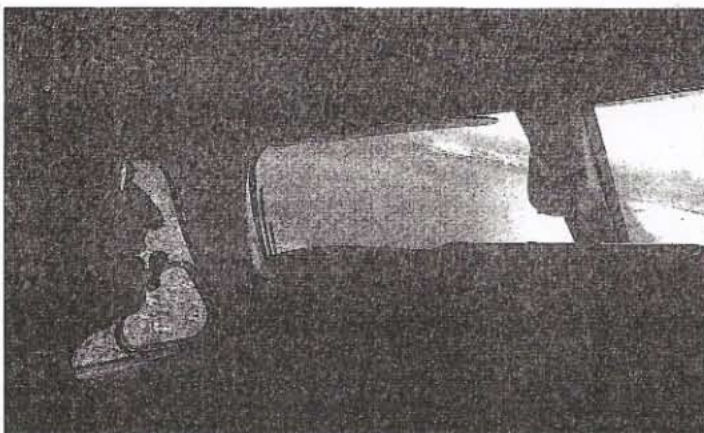
Coyne indicated that "a nice, used," single-engine plane can cost around \$40,000. It typically can be operated for about \$50 an hour, including fuel, insurance and other costs. In general, a single-engine plane can range anywhere from \$10,000 to \$250,000, and a twin-engine can run from \$75,000 to \$600,000.

Aero-commuting dates to right after World War II and was influenced by the glut of pilots and WW II aircraft sold on the civilian market, according to a book, "National Business Aircraft Association's Tribute to Business Aviation," published by the National Business Aviation Association. The aircraft were modified and ac-

PLEASE SEE COMMUTE, PAGE 5



Alm, a Chicago Mercantile Exchange commodities broker, taxis for takeoff back to his home and other businesses in Kentucky.



Air commuter Lance Alm turns his plane toward Meigs Field from a point north of the airport.

COMMUTE: Convenience main reason cited for taking flight

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

quired by corporations.

A midlife crisis fueled Steve Opfer's decision to acquire his pilot's license. Opfer began taking flying lessons six years ago, when he turned 40, and he's been an aero-commuter for four years.

Today, he might fly two or three times a week, then not at all for several weeks. "It's when my customers need me," said Opfer, a salesman for a security software business, who covers Illinois and Wisconsin and keeps his plane at DeKalb Airport.

"Whether it's the car or the airport, time is everything. It's a numbers game. The more people you get to, the more likely you're going to sell enough to make your numbers and keep your job. Driving to Green Bay or to Madison; those are huge dead hour times. With a plane, I can have a meeting in Green Bay in the morning and be down at State Farm [in Bloomington, Ill.] in the afternoon. You can dictate your own schedule.

"I've probably done 20 to 25 percent more than I would have done otherwise. It makes business travel more fun. And the regularity of flying that much helps me become a better pilot. The business aspect is not beneficial enough to learn to fly. You have to love to fly first."

He said he also feels more at ease when he flies himself.

"I live west of Elgin, so driving into O'Hare airport is an hour to an hour and a half, and I never know about traffic. Sales guys have this anal-retentive personality, so we're always paranoid we're going to miss our plane and ultimately miss our meeting. That's gone when I fly myself. The concern in dealing with security and wondering, 'Do I have a nail clipper in my bag?' is gone when I fly myself."

Nonetheless, he said flying commercially is more practical to some destinations:

"Anything beyond Cleveland, going east, south of Memphis or west of Omaha, I'd fly commercial. My rule has always been that if it's cheaper and faster, I fly myself, otherwise I take a commercial flight. If I'm going to the West Coast, it ends up taking longer to go in my own plane than it does to go commercial, even with all the extra headaches associated with driving to airport and security."

Steve Whitney, a board member of Friends of Meigs Field, a group dedicated to preserving the airport, who flies occasionally on business, said piloting your own plane "can be useful for people who have that capability and need to be in more than one geographical location in a short time."

When Whitney flies, it's often a week at a time, and he has found the time productive and relaxing. "The time I'm saving is productive time. There was a week I was flying down to Wisconsin every day, and if I'd been driving, I would have spent probably an hour and a half each way. And it probably took me 45 minutes flying. So I cut more than two hours out of the commute schedule. That becomes productive time at the office, not just wasted in route."

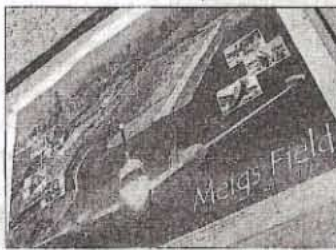
For shorter distances, he feels driving makes more sense. "If you're talking about going less than 20 miles, then it's hard to justify flying except for the fun of it. The only time I think it really makes sense to fly a short distance is if your trip starts and ends close to an airport."



Alm squeezes through the cabin of his Piper Meridian.



One air commuter says that with the amount of information a pilot must know to fly a plane, one must love flying before considering to commute by air.



A poster advertising Meigs Field hangs in the airport at Lansing, Ill. Meigs' location makes it easier for Alm to commute to his commodities business.

Ask Dana Holladay of Island Lake, a far northwest suburb. He keeps his plane near his home, in Wilmet, Wis., just over the Illinois border, and flies to work at Palwaukee Airport in Wheeling, where he is an administrator for American Flyers, a flight school. "I can make a beeline for the airport and fly within 50 feet of my office.

"There are no traffic lights in the sky. Instead of driving for about an hour to reach the office, I fly there in 15 minutes. It's as much a release from all the stress from the hubbub and the chaos on the ground as anything. It's just nice to not sit in traffic," said Holladay, who said he does it two to three times a week.

The cost of fuel also adds to the extra expense of flying. "It probably costs me, to commute, round trip, \$25-\$30 in gas, whereas driving it's probably about \$5. But it's worth the expense."

He believes piloting his own plane is safer since the terrorist attack of Sept. 11. "There's probably a much smaller chance of any type of problems flying small aircraft versus flying on airlines."

Holladay doesn't feel flying is any riskier than anything else. "It's a matter of risk man-



Alm does a pre-flight walkaround of his plane before taking off from Meigs Field.

"If I flew commercially, I'd have to get up at 3:30 [a.m.] and be out my door a quarter after 4 and be at the airport by 5 to get through the airline to take off by 6. It's exhausting."

Lance Alm, aero.com

agement. It's just like driving a car or anything else. When I'm in charge and managing the risk, I feel safer in my airplane than I do in my car because I can't manage the risk of someone else hitting me so there's larger potential for that to happen in a car than an airplane."

Jack Webb, a United Airlines pilot for more than 30 years before retiring in January 2002, used to fly to O'Hare from his home in Paudding, Ohio, about 25 miles east of Ft. Wayne, Ind., where he kept his plane.

"[Flying my own plane] is a big time saving. If I went about 10 miles over the speed limit and risked a ticket, it would take four hours and a half. I flew there, with head winds, in an hour and a half. The costs are greater, but the convenience of it more than pays for it."

"It's more convenient when the airplane arrives on your schedule. If you want to stop and visit with a friend before going home, you can."

Of course, even people who don't know how to fly can reap the benefits of flying to work on a private aircraft.

For instance, Townsend Engineering shuttles employees back and forth from its plant in Des Moines to Europe, including a town just outside

of Rotterdam, Netherlands.

"We trade personnel on a weekly basis [at the plant in Holland]. That way, it's one fact we couldn't do it on the airlines, because only would it be expensive, they don't go to area of Holland. You'd have to go to Amsterdam or London and drive, and that's not good," Bill Wagner, the company's chief pilot. "We transport the tools and equipment they without going through all the hassle of the line terminals and having certain things red because they're sharp."

"Yes, it's expensive. How much do you pay for your time? Do you want your CE wait at an O'Hare terminal for three hours the next flight? Not when he can be back here Des Moines, calling shots for the company."

According to Cassandra Bosco of the NEA, it's not only high-ranking executives who use private planes for business. "One misnomer of business aviation is it's mostly executives. About 14 percent of owners of business aircraft are top executives. The other 86 percent are salesmen, engineers, customers. Companies use it smartly. The terminus who has to be where."