MY MANAGUA MISADVENTURE

WE HEAD BACK INTO THE TURBULENT DECADE OF THE SEVENTIES AS AIRCRAFT COLLECTOR DAVID TALLICHET AND HIS HARDY CREW HEAD SOUTH TO RECOVER A CACHE OF WARBIRDS LOCATED IN NICARAGUA

BY GENE SMITH

The mountains were like dragon's teeth.

Mottled green and brown, they formed cones and ridges with a 60-degree slope, and they were slowly closing in on the grossed-out Cessna Skyhawk struggling up the pass. Below was triple canopy jungle, broken only by a stream cascading down from the heights. I found no comfort in the fact that the water was swift — and flowing toward us.

It was a hell of a time to commit Cardinal Sin No. 37 in the Airman's Bible, but I had just done so. The valley floor was rising, the mountains were shouldering closer, and the overcast had us pressed in the narrowing gap. To the left, the peaks were within 200-yards. To the right, the same. Worst of all, dead ahead the valley terminated in a ridge rising steeply to more than 7000-feet directly across our flight path, slamming the door.

The chart showed a six- or eight-mile-wide break in the mountain mass, with foothills flanking lowlands of less than 1000-feet. It was this we had sought — but in poor visibility and unable to climb above 1500-feet because of the cloud decks we had drifted to the right. We had compounded the error by picking the biggest notch —also to the right — and now the chart showed the hennaed mass of the Sierra Madre del Sur stretching for 180-degrees in front of us. Directly ahead somewhere was the area marked with the big "10°," while off to the right the shaded numerals read "13°."

Welcome to Mexico, I thought, not for the first time in the last couple of days. If we live through this, I'm gonna stop calling it "Mission to Managua" and label it "Managua Misadventure," instead.

There was one bolt-hole left. Ahead, the high

The way things were in Managua back in 1977. North American T-28A N99395 is ready to go in the foreground while A-26B FAN-601 languishes in the background minus some parts. (Carl Davaz)

FLASHBACK