



## PAUL POBEREZY AT 90: BUILDING A BABY ACE AND TALKING HOMEBUILTS

By David Gustafson

Paul Poberezny was the founding president of the Experimental Aircraft Association from its creation in 1953, until he resigned in 1989. He then became Chairman of the Board, a position he held until 2010. Though he wasn't the first person to build and fly his own airplane, he inspired tens of thousands of others to do what he had done: buy a set of plans, seek out the right kind of aircraft grade materials, build the airplane and then fly it. He made it look easy. Today there are over 30,000 Experimental Amateur-Built aircraft in the FAA Registry.

Paul is now 90 years old, and though he's fully retired from EAA, he still spends 5 to 6 hours a day, working as a volunteer for the organization. His most recent project: to build another copy of the aircraft that put the EAA on the map, the Baby Ace. And sure enough, just like it was in the good old days, he's drawn in a group of friends who have taken an active role in helping him build it. There's no substitute for charisma. We should all be so lucky.

Paul's building career started with a damaged Waco Glider that was given to him by his high school history teacher, Homer Tangney. He spent \$67 on materials to rebuild it and then taught himself to fly it in 1937. That was the beginning of an enchanted career in aviation.

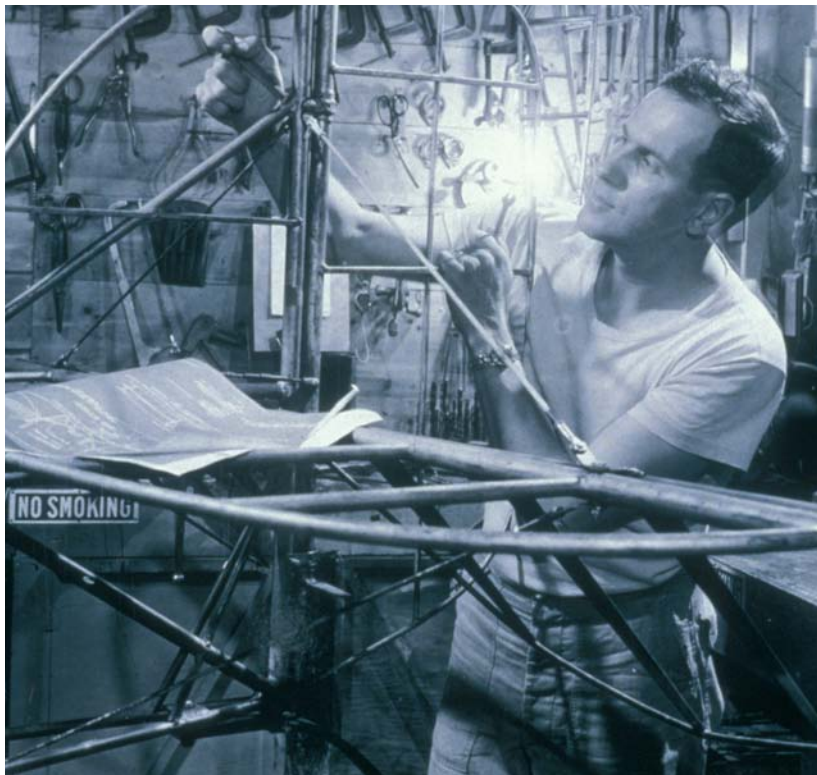
In the January, 2012 issue of Sport Aviation, Paul wrote that he "was aware of some homebuilding in the Milwaukee area prior to the war. The thought occurred to me that maybe I could find a few people who might be interested in building and we could help each other, and others might join in." That thought led to the creation of EAA in 1953. A couple years later, Paul wrote a series of articles for *Mechanix Illustrated*. In the articles he described how an individual could buy a set of plans and build his own airplane. Parts of



the plans were reproduced in the magazine and there were photos of Paul fabricating the Baby Ace. He wrote: "I did not realize the impact it would have on the world of homebuilt aircraft as the magazine had worldwide distribution. Our home's mailbox was flooded." Paul ran EAA from his home basement for many years, working without a salary for the first 17 years. In the summer of 1953, he staged the first EAA Fly-In. That evolved into AirVenture, the world's largest aviation event.

Over the years, Paul developed plans for modifying or for complete "clean sheet" designs for 15 aircraft. These included names famous to homebuilders like Little Audrey, Acro Sport, Pober Sport, Pober Super Ace and a highly modified TaylorCraft. Plans for most of those designs are still available. He also built copies of the Junior Ace, a Pitts Special for his son, Tom, another for his daughter, Bonnie. He participated in the construction of two replicas of the Spirit of St. Louis and he was involved in a long list of restorations of antique civilian and military aircraft. Along the way, he flew hundreds of different types of aircraft, civilian and military, logging around 28,000 hours in the space that always made him happiest: "The vast ocean of air above us".

Paul is quick to point out that he has learned far more about people than airplanes in his lifetime. And most of what he's learned about aviation, he's learned through other people. He credits his success in homebuilding and EAA to his love of people. "If you don't love people and respect them, they won't follow you." He made this statement when I got him to take a little time away from his Baby Ace project to talk about



and reflect on his life as the Chief Motivator of homebuilding in the world.

It seems almost silly to ask a man like Paul Poberezny what he considers his three greatest achievements in life, knowing that it's been a life filled with all manner of accomplishments. However, Paul narrowed it down to three solid choices. First was forming the organization. He did that in 1953 with a group of his dedicated buddies and they must

have chosen well since their original charter has sustained the organization for nearly 60 years. Paul is also convinced that he did it right when he aimed to make the EAA a “family organization” from the start, involving not just the wives, but the kids as well. That meant setting a high moral tone for the activities, like the annual Fly-In, and the success is evident to all who have made the pilgrimage to Timmerman, Rockford and since 1970, Oshkosh. The third, and arguably one of the most important policy decisions made in the early years, had to do with cementing relations between EAA’s coveted Experimental Amateur-Built category and the guardian of those rules, the FAA. In doing so, Paul made homebuilts a respected part of General Aviation. It became a two-way street, with EAA becoming a center for innovation that has in many ways influenced designs in the General and Commercial aviation industries. The freedom that the homebuilt designers have enjoyed has created an industry that companies like Cirrus and Kestral and even Boeing in their use of composites today owe much of their progress to.

There have been some other significant milestones. The EAA Chapter Network, boasting over a thousand chapters worldwide, was the brainchild of Ray Stits, whom Paul acknowledges has been a driving force in the evolution of EAA. The creation of a world class aviation museum, that’s right up there with the Smithsonian, has been another accomplishment that Tom Poberezny made possible through his fund-raising efforts. It, and the 900 acres of land around it, are all paid for...all through private funding. And the development of the EAA Divisions, Vintage Aircraft, the International Aerobatic Club, Warbirds, and Ultralights have all added to the landscape and texture of the extended family.

When asked to identify a few of the people who have made significant contributions to EAA, Paul’s eyes initially glaze over. He has met thousands of people in his life who have contributed to the growth of EAA. Tens of thousands of volunteers have given up millions of hours of their vacation time to help with EAA Fly-Ins all over the world. Hundreds of designers have presented the results of their successful labors at EAA’s annual Fly-In. Men like Steve Wittman, Ray Stits, John Thorp, John Dyke, Bud Evans, Carl Unger, Lou Stolp, Ed Marquart, Cal Parker, Lance Neibauer, Tom Hamilton, Tom Cassutt, Ken Rand, Randy Schlitter, Ed Fisher, John Chotia, Mike Loehle, John Monnett, Dick VanGrunsvan, and the homebuilder’s icon, Burt Rutan, have all brought examples of their design talents to AirVenture. The flightline has grown and diversified and moved forward in technology as a result of these and other prolific designers. Then there are the builders, men who spent anywhere from six months to ten years (or more), laboring in garages, basements, or whatever space they could commandeer, for their projects. Those who were lucky enough to win the honor and trophy for Grand Champion Homebuilt truly earned the title of Master Craftsman. Every component in their aircraft was worthy of a hallowed spot on anyone’s coffee table.

The success of the association, the museum and the annual Fly-In grew way beyond what anyone had envisioned back in 1953. Paul was astonished by the expansion in membership, the number of people who followed his example of building airplanes, and the phenomenal growth in activities, number of aircraft and the crowds who turned up at Oshkosh year after year. The idea that “others might follow” in homebuilding was incredibly prophetic and evolved into an industry.

Paul finally brought his focus in from the forest to the trees and came up with five names; people who had helped move the industry forward in a significant way. Audrey Poberezny, who shuns the spotlight, has been an unwavering source of support, encouragement and behind-the-scenes accomplishment. In her quiet, elegant manner, Audrey nurtured the organization through its first two decades, responding to countless letters, membership applications, correspondence with the FAA, and arrangements for the annual Fly-Ins at Timmerman and Rockford. She is EAA’s longest serving volunteer and has probably logged more hours in that role than anyone will ever be able to match. Paul never would have made it and the organization never would have grown without Audrey.

Ray Scholler was Paul’s Vice President for many years. Ray owns Times Printing and his company published Sport Aviation (and the division publications) for fifty years. There wasn’t much profit in it, but Ray had a sense of mission that was right up there with Paul’s. His generosity was an essential ingredient of EAA’s first half century of success.

Jack and Golda Cox took over the production of Sport Aviation in 1970. Jack was Editor in Chief and Golda typed up his articles, handled the display and classified ads and took care of the billings. Paul created the story of EAA and Jack reported that story. For thirty years, he interviewed designers and homebuilders about their projects and shared their discoveries with us. Nothing excited Jack as much as writing about new developments in homebuilding and there were a lot of them. Paul, who was always working on some kind of project in the shop, inspired tens of thousands of people to build an airplane. Jack reported on their progress, recognized their achievement and in turn, inspired thousands of others to pick up a torch or tin snips. There will never be another Paul, and there will never be another Jack.

Tom Poberezny took over the organization in 1989. Aside from the four years he spent at Northwestern University, Tom’s *entire* life, until he retired from the presidency last year, was dedicated to EAA. He took the organization to the next level, doubling the membership and opening the organization to new interests. Tom gained fame as a U.S. Aerobatic Champion, a member of the Red Devils formation team and then part of the Christen Eagles. It was he who made possible the stunning headquarters and museum facilities in Oshkosh. Tom nurtured new programs like the Young Eagles and the Air Academies. His management style was very different from Paul’s and though the two didn’t always see eye to eye, Tom’s professionalism, background, and visions

brought a new and elevated meaning to the concept of sport aviation. He turned it from a movement into a force.

Paul's Baby Ace project is another example of his undying commitment to inspire other people to build airplanes. "This Baby Ace is not an EAA project, it's ours, but maybe it can spark additional interest in homebuilding. We're off to a good start." He readily acknowledges that the cost of homebuilding has gone up exponentially, but he argues that wages have also gone up dramatically since the 60s, 70s and 80s. The days of picking up a used 65 hp Continental engine for \$25 or \$50 are gone.

Reflecting on the current status of EAA, Paul indicated that he would like to see more coverage of homebuilts in Sport Aviation magazine, but otherwise he's quite happy with the direction of the organization. He also indicated that he'd like to see some more original design work out there, reflecting on the days when each EAA convention would see anywhere from four to eight new designs on the flightline. Powerplant design is another area where Paul thinks there's room for advancement. "When you look at the auto racing industry and what they've done to engines and the technology they've developed, it's phenomenal. We've got to get some people in EAA thinking that way and move aircraft engines forward."

For future homebuilders, Paul suggests that they join EAA if they don't already belong. There are two people at EAA headquarters who devote all of their time to answering enquiries from builders, especially those who opt to take on a "scratchbuild" project, instead of ordering a complete kit. Most kit makers have people on their staff who will also answer builders' questions if they relate to their kits. Becoming part of a local EAA Chapter is another beneficial step. With 30,000 homebuilts out there, there's a pretty good chance that someone in a local chapter has already built a copy of the design that a new builder chooses and that person's experience can be invaluable.

Aviation to Paul is more than homebuilts, of course. He's been involved in all phases of it, and while he certainly shows a partiality toward



homebuilts, antiques, warbirds, ultralights and rotorcraft, he respects and admires all parts of General Aviation and the freedoms we all enjoy in being able to fly. He'd like to be remembered for his contributions to aviation, and for the fact "that I've loved people, and that has made me a millionaire because I've got a million friends". He admits that "I never looked at myself as anything more than a guy that likes to fly and had the privilege of being able to fly such a great variety of airplanes. I'm part of a big family of people who love airplanes and I'm glad to serve them."

As Shakespeare would say: "Well roared lion".

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Though Paul fabricated many airplanes over the years, he always preferred "scratchbuild" projects. He'd start out with a set of plans, order up the materials he needed and then start building. There was a time when the search for materials was very time consuming. It wasn't uncommon for someone to spend two or three hours looking for materials for every hour that went into building. But as companies like Aircraft Spruce have emerged, the searching process is reduced to looking through a catalog, picking up the phone and calling in an order. Today it's possible to order every part that's needed to complete an aircraft with just one call. That has made it much easier to pursue the kinds of projects that Paul spent his life working on.

So, go build something.

