

## Jane Robens – A Flying History



I took my first flying lesson on July 20, 1954 at the Ithaca airport at the southern tip of Cayuga Lake which was long ago closed. My flying was in a J -3 Piper cub with neither a radio nor headphones for communicating with the instructor; I did solo on October 9, 1954. Neither were there any navigational aids except for sectional paper maps and the very distinguishable Finger Lakes which were very helpful in my long cross country to Buffalo in cold, cold February. After a total of 50 hours of flying, I earned my SEL rating on April 3, 1955. In mid-June I stopped flying.

In July 1964 I took up flying again in a Pa22-108 Colt at Suburban Airport in Laurel MD. It took a month of steady dual for me to solo again. There were still no TCAs and I remember flying over Baltimore at night and seeing the stream of car lights suddenly stop as the road went underground into the tunnel under the Harbor. In 1965 I had access to a friend's Cont. 85 Ercoupe which I flew for a year from Rose Valley Skyport near Clinton in Prince Georges Co. MD. I could sightsee over the Potomac River and most of Washington D.C. There were few restrictions and I could fly over both National Airport and Andrews AFB. Today

this airport is one of the Maryland 3 living under the very strict rules of the Washington Special Flight Rules Area.

In 1980 I was living in Bethesda MD and I joined the Inn Flying Club based at the Gaithersburg Airport (GAI). The Club had 3 airplanes, a Cessna 152, 172 and 182, and within a year with some extensive flying review, I was checked out in all 3. In August of 1981 I received my instrument rating, and in 1982 my commercial pilot rating. Soon after that I flew with Bud Brinkman at the Frederick FDK airport in an 8K-CAB Decathlon, and learned a great many basic aerobatic maneuvers.

Tom Sullivan was a friend and instructor, both single engine land and glider, from the Frederick area who had recently moved in Las Vegas NV where he flew and airplanes from Skyharbor airport, and gliders from the then very small Jean OL7 Nevada airports. Work travel took me fairly often to Las Vegas and when there, I flew with Tom in 1983 and later. He thought he could help me get my instructor's certificate with the Designated Examiner at the North Las Vegas Airport, and thus we flew together several times in a C-172 and he recommended me. Things did not go well; I failed the oral by not knowing such things, as what is wastegate. This was a complete unknown to me, as I had never flown turbo airplanes, and didn't consider it necessary for the SEL Instructor. But I then took much more dual instruction in Frederick and finally Annabel Fera passed me on June 15, 1984. I was now an Instructor SEL, and was able to recommend 2 students for the private exam. Both passed.

I also joined the Glider Club at FDK, called MASA, the Mid Atlantic Soaring Association, and took lessons in a Switzer SGS-2-33; and although I could handle flying the glider perfectly well and passed the flight test in September 1982, I never really learned thermaling sufficiently well, even in other more efficient gliders, to venture cross country. Centering quickly in a thermal and staying there always eluded me. I did later pass both my Glider Commercial and Instructor in September 1984 and July 1985, respectively in Jean NV with a different Designee, this one for Gliders. Then back in Frederick I bought a German K-14, a motorglider, N1289 in 1998 and a Standard Cirrus N33LC in 2002. The latter became N411 JR in 2003 when Lowes Corp. paid me \$5000 through a broker for the N number, 33LC. I did tow gliders for the Club with a Pa18-150 Super Cub, and later a Pa 25 Pawnee with its spraying equipment removed.

I loved the Decathlon but I wanted an aerobatic airplane of my own so I was lucky to find a Pitts S2-A at Lee Airport, ANP in Edgewater MD within commuting

distance of my home in Bethesda. I bought N20MC, MC was for Marion Cole of the Cole Brothers Flying Circus who was the first owner, and I never looked back. I loved my Pitts and I remembered enough of what I had learned in the Decathlon to fly the Sportsman routines. Although I did enter a few contests in VA, PA and NYS, I never did well because I didn't have the discipline to locate and work with a mentor who could critique my regular practice. I just loved playing at aerobatics over the farmland of the Eastern Shore of MD, and I gave rides to my glider club friends in Frederick.

As an owner I learned for the first time what it is to take care of an airplane, remove the cowl and change the oil, remove and have the cracked exhaust system parts welded as necessary, and really examine the whole airframe to determine what the shop needed to look at, as well as keeping up on annual inspections. I was lucky when the oil pump stopped working in flight that I was close enough to the airport that I could continue running the airplane and land safely, albeit with an engine that needed to be completely rebuilt. Also when the steel straps holding the gas tank broke, that the fuselage braces caught the tank and I was able to fly home unscathed.

My Pitts had left Afton WY in 1973 so in 1989 it was 16 years old, and looked it. I decided it was time for recovering, and fortunately I found friends, including an A&P/AI who helped me take it all apart and transport it to and then into my house in Bethesda. There all 3 wings came off (the top wing was continuous across both sides) as well as the innumerable fairings, but the engine stayed in place. I removed all the fabric, and the paint from the many metal parts. I used Ray Stitts's dopes, paints and directions, all in my house. I quipped that I had the only airplane IN Bethesda. Finally, it was time to put the airplane back together and my friend Roland Shultze took it to his maintenance shop at GAI the Gaithersburg airport. I spent several months there doing much of the work under his supervision. The Christian Eagle directions for wing assembly on to the fuselage and subsequent wing rigging to achieve correct balance were superb.

I flew again in November 1991, nearly 2 years after taking the airplane apart in December 1989. What a learning experience! After the rebuild I took very good care of my Pitts, doing as much as I could by myself, but I only really played with aerobatics. Lee Airport was too close to the National Airport VOR and thus after Nine-Eleven in 2001, Flight Service and Baltimore Approach monitored all flights, but I learned to live with that also.

The Pitts was not a traveling airplane and I was losing my instrument competency – I needed a second airplane - so I bought a Maule M-5 235 N5636M in December 1987. I managed to travel to Logan Utah on business once – what on experience to be traveling west, + or – 3000 ft over mountains, and suddenly there is the airport more than a mile below. In July 1990 I took the trip of my life flying to Fairbanks and Anchorage Alaska and back via Oshkosh. My friend Theresa Kane went with me and I valued her sharp ears and eyes to help me stay on course. I had an early Loran which worked fairly well here in the East but which could not be counted on in North Dakota and further north and west. I logged nearly 70 hours of flight on that trip. Another lucky break in Fairbanks, after an oil and filter change by a local A&P, I took a short flight to the Fairbanks International Airport where I discovered that oil was leaking. No damage - and I flew back to Teena Marina where another filter was installed and we were on our way south to Anchorage,

Then I decided that the Maule did not have the any of the many aerodynamic design features as I wanted. I saw a Questair Venture and fell in love again. After my positive experience recovering my Pitts, I believed anything was possible – so, I bought a kit for building a Questair, a 200 Knot airplane. I proceeded to trim, assemble and rivet the 3 dimensional parts for the empennage and wings in my basement with some finishing help from Roger Bacon. But I could see that I was in over my head, and Roger agreed to finish the project at his shop in Monrovia IN. In actuality my Venture: Continental engine, and finished and non-finished airframe parts, had a long itinerary to various builders' shops across the country and was finally finished at Jim Cook's shop in 2009 in Palm Beach Florida. The Venture is a very fast, innovative and complicated, retractable gear airplane. I never soloed, although I flew it many times in Florida with a competent Venture pilot beside me. But finally, I decided to sell the airplane, because I knew it would be a constant large expense, and secondly, I didn't know if I could maintain my third class medical.

In 2003 I went ballooning locally many times with a friend in an Aerostar who taught much of what he knew. I loved it, although not the early 4AM rises that were often necessary unless one went in the evening. I learned enough that he signed me off for solo in a small, very quick responding ultralight balloon, appropriately named a Solo. After several tethering flights at Lee Airport, I made 3 cross country flights over the farmland of the Maryland Eastern Shore. On the third flight I caught a tree branch as I descended; although both myself and the

balloon were unscathed, Gordon would never help me transport and launch a balloon again. I sold the balloon in 2005.

In 2006 I learned that I had atrial fibrillation and knew that this precluded my continued flying, and thus I very reluctantly sold my beloved Pitts. I stopped flying for a while except when I could talk myself into a friend's airplane. In a year or so, after I knew what I was living with, I found a competent M.D. cardiologist who knew ropes of the FAA. He helped me obtain a Special Issuance for my Third Class Medical, and I could fly if I balanced my diet and my pills. But my Pitts was gone, so in 2008 I obtained an ASES Airplane Single Engine Sea rating at Jack Brown's Seaplane base in Winterhaven Florida. I wanted to buy an amphibian airplane but found I had waited too long in life for that. No insurance company would consider me.

Flying finally ground to a halt for a time as I dealt with the death of a close friend in 2008 following his fall in my family house in Piseco NY, and the complete destruction of the house by fire the next year in 2009. I rebuilt, and since I had finally retired from my job at the USDA in Beltsville MD, I made Piseco my home. I found a new MD cardiologist, restarted the pill regime, and then discovered Light Sport airplanes.

I bought a Remos N206GX in 2011 with folding wings and removable horizontal flying tail, and had a wonderful summer flying in the mountains. In the fall my friend Tom Judkins then flew it back to the Frederick MD area to perform the Annual Inspection and store it for the winter since I had no hanger yet in Piseco K09. The day he was to deliver it back to me the following spring, I received a call from my insurance company that there had been a terrible accident in Westminster MD EMI resulting in Tom's death and the total destruction of my Remos. The company said they would continue to insure my flying, but they had stopped insuring the new factory built Light Sport airplanes. However, they would insure the early, 1940s airplanes that met the weight and other requirements for Light Sport. That is how I came to buy a 65 HP Taylorcraft N43893 and learn about 68 year old airplanes. It spent a great deal of time in a repair shop and I spent a great deal of time relearning to fly an airplane like the Piper Cub of 60 years ago. With long wings and a small engine, the Taylorcraft was definitely not like my Pitts S2A.

In a couple of years I learned that my insurance company would insure Experimental Light Sport airplanes, and I found a Vans RV-12, N588DB, built in

MD and only 3 years old. It was quickly mine. The controls of the RV-12 are wonderfully light and well balanced, and the 100 HP Rotax engine performed well. I gave my Taylorcraft to the AOPA. Additionally, I had a friend only 40 miles away at Fulton Co airport NY0 who had built his own RV-12, and he helped me immeasurably with both flying and maintenance work. I got my Repairman's certificate and had the joy of signing off my own condition inspection.

But I still wasn't satisfied - the Piseco airport K09 is located in the Adirondack mountains, and flying from there can be challenging for very light aircraft in particular. In addition Basic Med had come along so first I got my Third Class Medical reinstated with all of the FAA Medical Certification Branch caveats. The anticoagulant pills were easier this time as a new generation was available that was not so dependent on diet and did not require monthly blood tests for compliance. After that I switched to the less expensive and easier to maintain Basic Med.

Now I was ready for the faster, heavier RV-7 N818PA that wouldn't be quite so susceptible to the gusty Adirondack environment. This ten year old airplane is a little hefty with its large load of avionics and cockpit interiors plus a 'smoke' generator which I have not used, but it is still fast. I did not have a pre-buy inspection which was suggested to me, but after nearly two years after purchase I don't believe such an inspection would have found anything significant. I do, however, continue to deal with a myriad of small needed upgrades like lengthening the wires to each of the avionic units so they can be more easily removed when necessary, adding an engine heater for cold weather starts, and filling the gaps between the sliding canopy and the airframe for flying in cold weather. It is also important to have the airplane fit me, as I do not have long legs and trunk like Dick Van Grunsven, the designer, and the Georgia builder must both have. This required moving the rudder and brake assembly rearward and adding the maximum padding to the right seat from which this airplane is built to be flown.

Mastering the multiple avionics units in the RV-7 is a real task, much more difficult than the instruments available when I got my 'instrument ticket' in 1981. ADS-B promises a lot regarding weather when it is finally installed - but I need it in upstate NY, in the lee of Lake Ontario. Winter here poses a real challenge as the runway at K09 is either unusable or inaccessible or both - about 4 months of the year. I am now retired so I can more often pick the opportunities to fly in good weather.

Now still another challenge has come before me. Gyroplanes like the German Autogyro intrigued me because of their simplicity, maneuverability, relatively low cost, ability to handle gusty winds and small storage requirements compared to fixed wing airplanes. I am currently pursuing a light sport gyroplane add-on to my Single Engine Land rating with Ron Menzie in Searcy, Arkansas. I wish I had not waited so long in life to do so.