

[Wings 'n' Things/Aviation...Wings.411...June 19, 2006]



FIRST STEP IN BUILDING A HOMEBUILT AIRPLANE IS GETTING IT

There are many ways to acquire an airplane, building an experimental being one of them. There are also many reasons why pilots build airplanes. For Tom Smith, who splits his time between Love's Landing and Crystal River, getting back into general aviation after a nine-year hiatus was the incentive. Moving to Florida brought many diversions, but eventually he knew he wanted to get back into flying, wanted the most efficiency received for the dollars invested, and wanted a project. Formerly an instrument rated pilot with his Cessna 182 on his own strip in Indiana, he had flown whenever and wherever he wanted to go. Van's Aircraft's RV-9 seemed the best choice to help him regain all of his aviation goals.

An RV-9 can cruise close to 200 miles per hour, yet has a startlingly low stall speed, and is docile, agile, and balanced in its handling characteristics. It has 700 pounds of useful load, a relatively large baggage compartment, and operates easily off short grass strips. Smith liked the fact that Van's advertises that their simple efficient airframe means low maintenance and reasonable operating costs. Also important to him is that it will comfortably accommodate his tall frame. Never having built an airplane before, it was important to him that this kit comes from a company with a strong and proven reputation for quality, performance and customer service. Amazingly, Van's Aircraft, Inc. has been around for 30 years!

He opted for the quick-build version of the builder's package in order to get into the air as quickly as possible, while still having the creative and regulatory advantages of home-building an airplane. He practiced on the tail feathers while waiting for his kit to be ready. This is the way Van's has builders introduced to the process on a relative small scale, which Smith felt was a good idea. "I learned a lot," he said.

All hardware, cowls, the engine mount, etc., are included, so there are no surprises on major purchases necessary along the way. The quick-build kits are assembled in the Philippines, then shipped across the Pacific and arrived in a container truck at the Van's factory in Aurora, OR, just south of Portland. The wing and fuselage structures are put together, with all rivet and screw holes pre-punched for a perfect fit. Van's advertises that you just pull the pieces out of the box and start building. There is no forming, welding or jiggling required. But there is still a lot to do for sure!

When Smith learned that to have the quick-build fuselage and wings delivered from the Van's Aircraft home base in Aurora, OR to Florida would cost almost \$4000 he got creative. (Isn't this what makes some people build experimental airplanes in the first place)? He found someone in Austin, TX who was building an RV-8 and was also unhappy about the delivery charge. Smith arranged to go pick up both airplanes, deliver one to Texas and bring his back home, all for a considerable amount of money saved. Plus the trip would be an adventure!

A lot of planning went into preparing for the trip. Smith's son, who lives in Louisville, KY, had a 20-foot box trailer he could make available. Plenty of thought, figuring, measuring, and scheming went into just how to make things fit. A visit with his son and family while picking up the trailer and preparing it for airplane moving was a pleasure as well as hard work. He built two shelves high in the box extending side to side. This gave him 93 inches of total width, allowing him to carry four wings. He carpeted the shelves and the floor to protect the aluminum parts as much as possible.

He figured that he could arrange the fuselages for the RV-9 and the Texan's RV-8 to face in opposite directions, and planned to screw them to the floor. The area where the wing spar fits into the fuselage comes temporarily filled with a piece of wood; this allowed him to screw the bodies to the floor to keep them from shifting while on the long trip home.

Smith figured that once he was finally in Oregon and could visit the Van's Aircraft facility he could actually see the parts he'd be picking up. Then he would be able to make some final measurements and install wooden strips along the sides of the trailer at appropriate heights and locations to allow putting in tie-down hooks once the parts were in place. Van's personnel had told him that most of the rest of the parts would be packed into the fuselages, or would be loose in relatively small boxes. He also knew that between the two planes he'd only be bringing back one large Plexiglas canopy and one metal slider frame and one motor mount, all of which he computed into his spacing planning.

Van's had said bring plenty of blankets for protective packing; they recommended 25 blankets per plane. This acquisition project began early, with several trips to Goodwill stores and requests for old unused blankets and quilts from family and friends amassing quite a pile. Finally he was ready to go. With his pickup truck already loaded with lumber, tools and lots of blankets he headed for Louisville. Stay tuned for the continuation of Smith's story.