THE HOMEBUILT FROM HEAVEN

BY

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My friend Frank called me one afternoon and told me he was about to retire. He said he was going to build an airplane as soon as he could get clear of work and asked me if I'd be willing to do the test flying.

"How far along are you with the project?" I asked.

"I have the plans and have ordered the kit," he replied. "I can have the manual in your hands tomorrow."

"It's good that this guy is retiring," I thought but didn't say. "His mind is obviously going out on him."

"Okay," I said. "I'll be glad to give it a go," thinking to myself that, even if he were to complete the project in his lifetime, I'd probably be an old man with a long, grey beard before I heard anything more about the homebuilt he was proposing to build.

Next day FedEx, delivered a bulky package. It turned out to contain the owner's manual for a homebuilt airplane called an RV-3. To give an idea of how long ago this was, I'd never heard of an RV-anything at that time.

I leafed through the manual and set it aside. In a couple of days I had forgotten about the whole thing. I'd been hanging with airplane people for thirty-some years, and I had learned that they were often long on plans and short on action.

Two years later, almost to the day, my friend called me and told me the plane was ready to be flown. The FAA had signed it off for local flights, and he asked me if I could do the deed the next day.

I fumbled around a little bit while I struggled to recall what we were talking about. It came back to me in bits and pieces. In fact, the last bits and pieces finally fell into place after I hung up the phone, having agreed to show up at his T-hangar the next day.

I dug around in one of my piles and came up with the manual he'd sent me those two years ago. That evening I sat down and read it with some interest. It contained some comments from pilots who had flown the RV. They reported that it was easier to handle than a 172.

I used to instruct in a 172. I had several thousands of hours in a 172. I also had over a thousand hours instructing beginning students in a Luscombe. For any readers who don't know what a Luscombe is and are too lazy to Google the term, a Luscombe is a little 2-seater with somewhere between 65 and 100 horsepower, depending who did the last overhaul. It had a tailwheel, sticks, and one set of tiny heel brakes on the pilot's side. Don Luscombe, the designer of this machine, evidently didn't think it was necessary for the right-seat pilot to have brakes, although he did furnish that individual with all the other amenities of your average copilot/flight instructor. All in all, I'd class supervising a brand new student in a Luscombe from the brakeless right seat a little more challenging than flying a 172.

So I was encouraged by the optimism of the pilots who had written these opinions about the handling qualities of the little

homebuilt. It had only one seat, so any checking out would have to be done on the fly, to coin a phrase, by the checkee himself. What had I gotten myself into? Well, it's a guy thing. You just don't agree to something like this and then back out at the first sign of weirdness.

When I arrived the next day, I found the ship out on the ramp with a bunch of guys standing around it with their hands in their pockets. It was a teeny little thing with a bubble canopy and low wings. Actually it had pretty lines and an attractive paint job. The workmanship looked better than average.

Frank walked me around his creation and pointed out some of its features. It had a steerable tailwheel and a tiny stick in the diminutive cockpit. There was a throttle mounted on the left bulkhead, right where the military guys and the Champ pilots would expect to find the go-lever. It even had flaps. All in all, I thought it was a pretty neat little package.

Next thing I knew, I was being helped into a 4-point harness and instructed in how to manage the engine. Come to find out, he had taken the high time engine out of his Piper Warrior and installed it in the RV. This little 1100-pound beast was to be pulled into the air by 160 mighty horses, compliments of Mr. Lycoming.

The engine started easily and settled into a chugging idle. There was a little wooden prop on the front that looked like it had been pitched for speed. The controls were very smooth, sort of like those in a Stearman. I noticed that there was a fair amount of throw on the ailerons. I could see this easily, since the wingtips were so close I could almost reach out and touch them.

Taxiing out, I found it to be a mannerly little machine, obeying my rudder inputs promptly but smoothly. The radio worked just fine, and I soon found myself out on the runup pad. During the mag check I found that the brakes worked just fine, and that all systems seemed to be ***go***. In other words, I had been unsuccessful in finding a reason to call this flight off.

Cleared for takeoff, I taxied into position and carefully lined up on the centerline. I added throttle, finding it quite easy to keep it moving straight. I looked out at the wings, wondering how anybody thought such tiny appendages could ever create enough lift to get us off the ground.

When I looked back at the panel about three seconds later, I observed that while I had been admiring the airfoils, we had climbed upward of 1500 feet. No muss, no fuss, no bother. And we were only about half-way down the runway.

I told the tower I'd like to climb up to 3000 feet and circle the field a few times, just in case something abnormal should occur. They approved it and I made a few circuits, but nothing out of the ordinary happened. The controls were extremely light, but not by any means touchy. All gauges stayed comfortably in the green.

While I was doing my circuits, Frank and some of his buds had fired up his Warrior (with the new engine) and we all decided to go out to the practice area where he could get some pictures of the first flight. I had to throttle back considerably for the Warrior to keep up. The RV was not advertised as a racing plane, but it sure got up and went when you poured the coals to it. I estimated that it climbed around 3000 feet per minute, although later I came to believe that this was just a bit

optimistic. It was certainly the fastest-climbing machine I had ever flown.

As I have mentioned, this was the first flight. Everyone said you should taxi a new plane around for about a month, then do high-speed taxiing, then fly it an inch off the ground and land it, before you really tried to make it fly. But this little critter didn't seem to want to be held back. I had been up about half an hour, and it had spent the whole time begging me to do some stuff.

Resisting a request from such a machine was as futile as trying to deny food to a hungry cat. I tried an aileron roll. The maneuver was done before I had had a chance to put much throw into the stick. A loop happened just as effortlessly. The little bird totally loved to play. Anywhere I wanted to go, all I had to do was nudge the stick in that direction and that's where we went.

After a little over an hour, we flew back to the airport and landed. Once again, no sweat, no fret, no bother. It handled just like it knew what it was doing.

Luckily for me, Frank had never had any training in tailwheel airplanes. So it fell my lot to put the first ten hours on the bird. I looked forward to these flights with gleeful anticipation, even as I realized that I would soon have to turn her over to her daddy's care and feeding. She rolled a little bit to the right when we really got hooked up and moving, but that was the only discrepancy I noted. Oh yeah, and the trim control tended to slip back toward neutral, just like the ones in Champs.

We had quite a search for a machine with conventional landing gear that we could use to check Frank out for his tailwheel endorsement. We finally got hold of a Cessna 170 at a nearby airport. This plane was about as different from an RV as you can imagine. Flying it was like wading through mush. But it did have that tendency to swerve on the ground that we needed to train Frank's feet.

My friend picked up the necessary skills promptly, and I signed him off to fly taildraggers. We decided that he should have a large runway from which to launch his first outing in the RV. So I flew over to Stennis International Airport while Frank followed in the Warrior. Stennis has a runway that is 8500 feet long and about as wide as a football field, so Frank would have considerable room to swerve around without leaving the pavement.

The wind was blowing right briskly from the south. The taxiway giving ingress to the north-south runway was up toward the north end of the strip, probably around1500-2000 feet from the north end. Frank taxied out, checked the mags and wiggled the flippers. Then he moved on out to the runway and hung a right. We all figured he was going to taxi down to the north end of the runway for his takeoff. Imagine our surprise when he goosed the throttle, going downwind.

"Looks like he's gonna try some high-speed taxiing before he departs," commented one of the observers.

Andy, the airport manager, was one of those good ole boys from rural Mississippi. "Man, I bet you couldn't drive a nail up his ass with a sledge hammer right now," he commented.

Next thing you know, Frank was in the air and climbing strongly. None of this high speed taxiing foolishness for him. I guess he was anxious to get it over with, one way or the other. He turned downwind, which was actually upwind, and was soon lost to view. The die was cast, and we all hoped that he'd come to his senses and land into the wind when he returned.

To make a long story short, nothing went wrong. Frank took charge of his creation and I never got the fly it again. But I'll always remember the RV fondly. It was a fine little machine that repaid its creator many times over for two years of intensive labor.