

I'M GOING TO BUILD PLANES TOO

If I had a dollar for every time somebody told me at an airshow “yea I got a buddy that’s going to start building Supercub fuselages soon” I would be sitting on a fair amount of money right now. I would just nod and tell them cool, knowing full well we probably won’t be hearing from his “buddy” anytime soon. I started building airplanes approximately 25 years ago, actually it was more like when I was 10 years old and my dad would always need a hand to tack up a tank or some other various part. At that time I was more interested cartoons and stuff so we’ll say my aviation career didn’t start until my early 20’s after the teenage partying and chasing girls years. I was doing a sheet metal apprenticeship which involved some schooling time at the local college. So to earn extra money I thought I would work on some plane stuff. My dad worked on planes part time and sheet metal part time. He had a pile of unfinished new gas tanks he had built, so I had the idea of advertising them , I would finish them and we would split the money. That went well and I ended up building a pile of PA-12 gas tanks. Between the poor material choice by Piper (Tin) and there advanced age, I don’t think there is an original tank that hasn’t been replaced or is in need of replacing due to leaks. I was very lucky to have him show me how to build the tanks. Even though I had sheet metal and welding experience I don’t think I could of built them on my own from scratch. I got a little slow on tanks and we had a basic jig for fixing piper fuselages. So me and my father decided to buy a locally damaged PA-12 and I would rebuild the frame. Man what a job. I think it took me a year to finish it. Between the steep learning curve and the amount of work involved it was quite an undertaking and I’m still not sure how I finished it, keeping in mind I was doing all this while I had a full time job as well. I must have liked doing it because I started taking on more fuselage rebuilds. They took quite a while to complete because I was still learning and only working on them part time. Eventually I got a little bit slow with the repairs, so I decided to build a



brand new supercub fuselage. Another large challenge that took me another year to complete. I didn't realize how hard the fittings were to make and all the stuff that went into one. It didn't look like that much just looking at an original Piper fuselage. This was at a time when there weren't a lot of CNC laser cutting machines around and the ones that were around wanted big orders. We actually had to drive 7 hours away to get someone to cut out our fittings. We actually made some of the easier ones by hand. We sold that plane to Larry Bauer of Grand Rapids Michigan about 15 years ago and he is still flying that plane today. Eventually we started making other parts learning along the way some of the intricacies of plane manufacturing. Finally we decided to go to a show to display our products. So off went 2 trucks to Lock Haven P.A. for the Sentimental Journey show about 14 hours away. One pulling an enclosed trailer my dad had just bought for the planes and one with a camper. The show was fun and we really enjoyed it. I don't think we sold anything but it was there that I realized how important shows we're to get out and meet people and tell them about your product. There isn't a better salesman than the guy who builds the parts themselves. This would lead us to going to 3 major shows a year eventually, Sun N Fun, Oshkosh and the Alaskan Airmen's Show. The time and cost to going to all these show is a lot more than I could have imagined starting out which is a reason we don't go to shows now. That cost has to be passed on to the customer and we prefer to keep our planes as affordable as possible so that is why we don't do the shows anymore and after all the planes we have built most people know us by now. After Lock Haven we added the wings to our kit and sold a plane to Andy Smirciach who was moving from New Mexico back up to AK. We we're missing a few parts to make up a complete kit, that we ended up sending soon after to Andy and he was really good about that. The tooling between forming parts and fixturing was a lot more than I ever could have imagined. Keep in mind I was still working full time and only doing this part time.



Eventually we had enough work for me to go full time into business with my dad. Talk about taking a pay cut. I was making a good living as a sheet metal worker and worked a fair amount of overtime and was making a little bit of money on the planes on the side. Once in business all the money went to inventory/machining/laser cutting /tooling/machinery/cnc tube cutter, etc and whatever was left over we paid our personal bills and groceries. It was tight for a few years. My wife went from a brand new Jeep Cherokee to driving my dad's old rusty truck. She wasn't quite as excited about this new venture as I was. I figured no problem, I'll be rich someday (it never happened by the way). Eventually things smoothed out and we even started adding employees. What an experience that was. Mostly not good. We lucked out and had some good people helping us on the wings eventually but the first guy we had helping was actually stealing from us



and selling our parts we found out later. It seemed like everybody else we hired were ding-a-lings. This was at a time when all the local factories were paying big bucks and we couldn't compete with that. We even had to go to court with one machine shop because they charged us 4x's the normal price for parts and that guy was a friend of my dad's. Let's just say there not friends now and I

always get quotes for parts being made from vendors. Our employees all figured we we're getting rich, meanwhile me and my dad we're working a 100 hours a week and quite often I would end up staying late to fix their mistakes and we only took the minimal amount of money needed. When we sold our Supercub business I said I would never get into a business with employees again and I've kept that promise. We have a few select people that work with us now and it has gone very well. Eventually we added the PA-18 wide body and the PA-12 super Cruiser to our kits due to demand. It got so crazy for a while that someone was calling every day for a plane, which is great but I felt kind of bad turning people away. We worked so hard to get orders and now we couldn't supply everybody that wanted one. We always wanted to add a 4 seat Bushmaster plane to our kit line, which we eventually did and a friend of mine built the fuselages and he did a great job

on them. Me and my dad we're pretty burned out between the employees and going to 3 major show's and at this time my dad delivered a lot of the planes himself. We'd go like like crazy building planes, take a couple days to load the trailer and he'd drive all over North America dropping planes off and meeting our new customers. I had small kids at home, so when one of our customers wanted to buy the business and ramp up production it seemed like a good idea. Unfortunately he ended up doing the opposite. I guess it was a little more to it than they thought. Now we are very happy doing our 12-14 planes a year along with our other services and I still have time to spend with my kids. So when you hear someone say they're going to get into the Aviation business I hope you remember this story, nod your head and say "cool".



