



Sport Aviation

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IN 2013, I came to Oshkosh with the goal of researching an “airplane” I could build myself. After wandering all the way down to the ultralight vendors, I came upon the aircraft of my dreams. To my surprise, it wasn’t an airplane at all. What I found was the Safari 400 helicopter. It had a nostalgic look that paid reverence to the old Bell 47, or as we all probably know it better, the *M*A*S*H* helicopter. I spoke for probably too long to the owner of Safari Helicopter, Delane Baker, and she couldn’t have been more supportive and informative. I took the specification sheet, signed the interest list, and began to dream of hovering.

I hadn’t flown a helicopter since 2009, when I was just weeks away from completing my add-on certificate in a Schweizer 300CBI. I became distracted when I purchased a Cirrus, and once I was ready to get back to training, the school had closed. Now, when I started to do the math of building and flying my own helicopter and disregarded what I knew my airplane friends would say, this building option made a lot of sense to me.

I spent the next several months taking advantage of EAA resources such as builder videos online, books from its catalog, and even completed EAA sheet metal and electrical workshops and a MIG welding class. All said and done, it took me almost 18 months to make the commitment to buy the kit, with my biggest fear being that I just spent a small fortune on a bunch of nuts, bolts, wire, and metal that would never form the shape of an aircraft.

Once I placed the order, I had several months before the kit’s first stage arrived, so I spent time researching a home workshop setup, from the floor material to the various tool and equipment stations. There is so much good advice out there, and I always felt I had resources to calm my insecurities.



Speaking of insecurities, if I'm being honest, the excitement I had on delivery day quickly turned into the sickening feeling I had made a horrible mistake. I'd never seen so many bags of parts and blank sheets of material. All I could think was, "What have I done?" Luckily, that feeling was only temporary, and soon I decided to view this not as "one" helicopter project, but as 300 small, manageable projects. I was going to eat this elephant one bite at a time!

I set up a builder blog on KitLog Pro and spent the next year and a half documenting every cardboard template made, every nut plate installed, and every electrical circuit ran. I was amazed when other builders began e-mailing me with questions and advice. Someone was actually reading these late-night ramblings and small victory reports? It was hard to imagine.

Something completely unexpected in the process was meeting someone who turned out to be my best friend. We met in an EAA electrical workshop at AirVenture 2015. Each student was asked to introduce themselves and state what they were building. What followed was, "RV-6, RV-8, RV-6, RV-10, RV-8," etc. I was the only odd one in the class building a helicopter, but then there was this grumpy guy from Pennsylvania two tables away also building a Safari. I cornered him on a break, we hit it off immediately and ended up hanging out together for the rest of the show, and we have talked pretty much every day since! I've flown to Pennsylvania to see him and his family on holidays, and he's flown to California a few times to help me buck some rivets and install the final components that required two people.

AIRCRAFT SUBMISSIONS

Share your craftsmanship with *EAA Sport Aviation* readers worldwide! Send us a photo and description of your project and we'll consider using it in "What Our Members Are Building/Restoring." Please include your name, address, and EAA number. We reserve the right to edit descriptions. For guidelines on how to get the best photo of aircraft, visit www.EAA.org/sportaviation.

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Tom completed his helicopter in time for AirVenture 2016 and won Grand Champion! This year, I drove my helicopter on a trailer from California to Oshkosh where I flew with Tom at the same field where I found this ship years before, and I won Grand Champion for 2017. Tom and I agreed that I had no choice but to win because if I didn't, he would never have let me hear the end of it!

It's difficult to summarize the personal significance of my building experience, but what I can say is that it's been one of the most rewarding challenges of my life. The sense of accomplishment is tremendous, and winning a Lindy along with the recognition from other homebuilders is more than I could've ever hoped for. All I can suggest to those thinking of starting an aircraft project is to simply take the first step and then just take it one day at a time. In this community, you're never alone.

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