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## Hickey's project spreads wings

■ Montrose man working on second home-built airplane

Story

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**Working on Rebel**

Tim Hickey of Montrose is building a Murphy Rebel light sport aircraft in his garage. Hickey and his brother Mike began the project in 2007 and hope to have it finished by next summer.

Posted: Monday, December 24, 2012 11:30 am |  
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MONTROSE – While many men spend hours working in their garages under the hood of a car, Tim Hickey of Montrose is shaping sheet metal and following detailed instructions that came with

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the plans for his second home-built aircraft.

Hickey, the son of a pilot, developed an interest in aviation during plane rides with his father.

"In the 1950s, there were lots of aviation firsts – always somebody flying faster and higher," he said.

During a business trip to Oshkosh, Wis., in the late 1970s, Hickey learned about an air show held there that attracts thousands of aviation enthusiasts each year. At Airventure, formerly known as the Experimental Aircraft Association Convention, Hickey discovered that he could combine his love of airplanes with his affinity for building.

Hickey spent a few years weighing the risks and commitments involved in building his own aircraft, as well as deciding what kind of plane he wanted to build. In the early 1980s, Hickey purchased a kit for his first home-built aircraft – a three-seat Zenith CH-300.

Home-built aircraft, another term for experimental amateur-built aircraft, are constructed mainly for hobby-related reasons. Such terms "foster the concern that it's an untested, risky endeavor," Hickey said. "That's not the case."

According to the Experimental Aircraft Association, nearly 33,000 registered home-built aircraft exist in the U.S. alone, plus several thousand more internationally.

"The growth in the amateur-built community has been steady over the past two decades," according to the EAA website. "This total now represents more than 15 percent of the entire U.S. single-engine, piston-powered fleet. The amateur-built aircraft segment has also shown the most consistent growth of any aircraft category over the past two decades, flourishing even during the recessions of 1991 to 1993 and 2007 to 2011."

The Keokuk area has a small contingent of aviation enthusiasts including Dr. Tom Hakes, Jerry Saar and Bob McDowall.

Laws set by the Federal Aviation Administration regarding "amateur-built experimental aircraft" such as the Zenith mandate that home-builts only can be flown for sport or recreation purposes. In other words, Hickey can't charge passengers to ride.

During his first decade of flying the Zenith, he had each of his passengers sign a silk scarf that he now keeps tucked away at home. The scarf bears hundreds of names, the first of which was signed by his father-in-law, Leo Neyens.

For those toying with the idea of building a plane, Hickey warns that it's a "slow process." The Zenith took him about five years to build with the help of his wife Rita Hickey, brother Mike Hickey and Neyens.

"If you can read directions and have a little dexterity, anyone can do it," Tim Hickey said about building aircraft.

On Nov. 21, he marked the 25th anniversary of his first flight in the Zenith. He's taken the plane as far east as Washington, D.C. (before the 9/11 terrorist attacks resulted in tighter air security), as far north as Canada, as far west as Phoenix, Ariz., and as far south as Austin, Texas, and Biloxi, Miss. He and Rita have flown the Florida Keys about five times to visit friends.

Tim and Mike Hickey began assembling the kit for a Murphy Rebel in 2007. They hope to have it ready for take-off by next summer. The wings are finished, and they're currently working on the fuselage. The engine still needs to be mounted.

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The kit for the Rebel included many pre-formed, pre-punched parts, so "I anticipated things would go together quickly," Tim Hickey said. "I was wrong."

Although Tim Hickey gained more free time after retiring in 2001 from his job as a project engineer at Dial, his second home-built project has stalled a bit due to family situations and other commitments.

"It's a bigger commitment than most people think," Tim Hickey said. "A lot of half-finished kits get sold."

It also takes patience, he added.

"Prepare to make mistakes (while you're building), because you will make mistakes," Tim Hickey said.

Tim Hickey hopes to turn a grassy field in front of his house into an airstrip for the new plane. The Zenith, which requires a longer runway for take-offs and landings, will remain at Keokuk Municipal Airport.

The Zenith doesn't meet light sport aircraft regulations that were updated a couple of years ago regarding medical certification. Under the new regulations, all a pilot needs is a valid driver's license in his or her home state. That's one big reason Tim Hickey is building the Murphy Rebel – it meets the new regulations.

"Flying was risky at first," he said. "People believed you had to be in top form. Now, it's no more demanding than driving (a car)."



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