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Wingspan

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As a young boy, Ken Boyd '61 fell in love with flying. Now retired, he's returned to the skies in his own hand-crafted plane.

As Ken Boyd approached the airplane he had built by hand, his nerves threatened to overcome his confidence.

Yet, as soon as he settled into the cockpit to take the aircraft for its first flight, a sense of calm washed over him. He had been imagining this experience, every single day, for more than four years.

While meticulously completing his preflight checklist, he thought back over the events that led to that moment.

While growing up in Streator, Ill., about 80 miles southwest of Chicago, Ken and his two younger siblings were exposed to aircraft from as early as they could remember. "Flying was the family hobby." His father owned a 1946 Aeronca Chief, a single-engine, two-seat, light aircraft.

"I think the fact that we had an airplane was very telling of how important flight was to my dad. We didn't have a lot of money," says Ken, who took a paper route to help his family. "We didn't take traditional family vacations or do other things so we could continue to fly."

The family's love of flying inspired his brother to become a United Airlines captain, but Ken found a new love as a student at Illinois Wesleyan, where he majored in history and sociology and met his future wife, Carol (Owen) '61, an English major.



Ken Boyd and his wife Carol — both Class of 1961 graduates — share a passion for aviation. A retired English professor, Carol is now taking lessons to learn to fly herself.

“The faculty and courses I was exposed to at IWU not only prepared me for my career,” says Ken, “but sparked my interest in exploring many of my future interests, such as world traveling and constructing an airplane.” Carol had a similar experience. “The most formative course I took at IWU was ‘Introduction to Western Civilization,’ the humanities course that provided the framework for my future travels,” she says. “And the professor that had the most impact on me was Elizabeth Oggel in the English literature courses I took from her.”

After graduation, Ken and Carol wed and moved to Michigan State University in East Lansing to earn master’s degrees: Ken in sociology and Carol in English (she later completed her Ph.D. at the University of Iowa).

Once out of grad school, Ken rekindled his passion for flying with the purchase of a 1961 two-seater Piper Colt. “I got the airplane before I had my license,” he says. “Actually, I bought it before I ever took a lesson. I just knew I wanted to fly and I was going to make it happen. The Colt was a good training airplane.” He completed all his instruction and licensing in the Colt and in a few years upgraded to a 1968 Piper Cherokee 140.

Carol had no qualms about soaring the skies with her pilot-husband. But flying gradually faded in importance for the couple, replaced by the challenges of their careers and raising two children. Carol went on to serve three decades as an English professor at Black Hawk College in Moline, Ill., while Ken became president and CEO of Family Resources in Davenport, Iowa.

“We had the whole range of services,” says Ken, “family therapy, mediation, employee services, foster care, adoption, group care, residential treatment for kids, education programs, victim services, etcetera. There were safe houses for domestic violence, group homes for young mothers with children, residential treatment options for people who were considered criminals, and more.” Though rewarding, it was also an “intense” and emotionally demanding job, and after 30 years Ken decided it was time to retire.

He and Carol moved from Rock Island to Door County, Wis., and in 2005 decided to set up a permanent winter home at the Shell Point Retirement Community in Fort Myers, Fla. They also made frequent trips to visit their children: Kate, a professor of piano studies at Butler University, and Doug, a software engineer who lives in Gosford, Australia, near Sydney.

Like his father and grandfather, Doug has become fascinated with aircrafts and flying. “It’s genetic, I understand that,” says Ken. “But when Doug told me that he was going to build his own airplane in Australia, I thought he was nuts!”

During a trip to Australia in 2003, Doug signed his parents up for a two-day aviation construction workshop. “We went out for a couple days and learned some basic skills involved in building an airplane,” says Ken. “We learned how to rivet and bend metal, and I realized I had the skills to do those things,” Ken says. “Plus, it was fun!”

Ken and his brother had already been regularly attending a fly-in and convention hosted by the Experimental Aircraft Association (EAA) at its headquarters in Oshkosh, Wis. Once Ken got the idea of building and piloting his own plane, he started looking for the perfect model at the EAA convention.

The kit he decided on was an S-19 Venterra, produced by RANS Designs in Hays, Kan. The aircraft weighs 817 pounds, burns about five gallons of fuel an hour and has a range of 500 miles, cruising at 130 m.p.h. Its registration number is N39KB, representing Ken’s initials and the year he was born.

He set up shop in his two-and-a-half-stall garage in Bailey’s Harbor, Wis. The parts were all delivered in flat boxes, and it was up to Ken to put it all together. “I spent several thousand dollars on special tools required for the project.”

Over time, the plane slowly began to take shape. When he outgrew the garage, he bought a heavy outdoor shelter. Eventually, he began storing parts throughout the house. “I actually had parts under our bed at certain points,” he says. “Carol was very supportive. And when I assured her that the next plane would be built much faster, she just laughed and said, ‘I’m sure your next wife will enjoy that!’”



Boyd’s RANS S-19 Venterra took to the air “after four and a half years of building time, all with the support of my wonderful wife, Carol,” he says. “When he told her his next plane will be built much faster, she laughed and said, ‘I’m sure your next wife will enjoy that!’”

From May through October each year, Ken spent every day working on the plane. “It was my life.” He soon discovered it wasn’t the physical aspect but the mental demands of the work that proved most taxing. “I had to do a lot of reading, and I went to a number of schools to learn. I went to electronic school sponsored by EAA. I also went to engine school.”

As a result of his ongoing education, Ken received a repairman’s certificate that allows him to complete all of his own inspections and maintenance on his airplane. “I am a licensed mechanic for this aircraft. I know more about this airplane than anybody else.”

During the final stages of production, Ken loaded the fuselage onto a trailer and transported it to a hangar at the Ephraim-Gibraltar Airport in Fish Creek, Wis. It was there that he added the major components, such as the wings, tail, and control surfaces.



Boyd attended engine school and received a repairman’s certificate that allows him to do all of his own inspections and maintenance on the airplane. After addressing a few “squawks,” it now flies perfectly, he says.

“There were thousands of individual parts and probably about 2,000 hours of work,” says Ken. For example, each section of the plane required four coats of special paint applied 10 minutes apart. “I also had to complete all of the rigging to ensure that the plane would fly correctly. There were a lot of little details of connecting wiring and lighting. None of the wiring came with the plane; I had to design all of that myself.”

“There were times when I got tired, but giving up was never an option,” says Ken, adding that patience was key in completing his plane. “I just said, ‘It will be done when it’s done.’ I never got anxious about the timing.”

With the end in sight, the time came for Ken to renew his pilot’s license. “That’s an experience in itself,” he says. “The fact that you haven’t flown in 40 years gives one pause. Flying has never been hard for me, but I thought it would be hard for an older person to get back up to speed. But once I got back in the cockpit, it was like I had never stopped flying.”

On Oct. 26, 2012, the day finally arrived for Ken to take his custom aircraft to the skies. By law, he was only allowed to go up by himself. But Carol captured the moment, and she proudly snapped photos from the ground. The flight lasted about 30 minutes.

“It was the most incredible experience; there aren’t words to explain it. To think that you actually flew a machine that you assembled yourself.”

During the maiden voyage, Ken gazed with wonder through the fresh windshield — at least until he noticed a few “squawks,” which in aviation terms means problems that require repair or attention. “At first I had a heavy left wing, and I noticed that the passenger seat needed adjusting.” Once those were addressed, the plane performed perfectly during the 40-hour test period required to receive its airworthy certificate and is now being enjoyed by the Boyds.

“I now have 120 hours on it,” says Ken, “and Carol and I have taken one overnight trip, from Door County to Moline Ill., where we used to live. I have flown it on several day trips around northern Wisconsin and Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, including a trip last year to Mackinac Island, which turned what would have been a seven-hour driving trip into an 80-minute flight.” Ken has also taken Carol and “many friends up for sightseeing around Door County, which is a gorgeous place to fly, what with being surrounded by water and having all of the neat little farm fields below.”

For her part, Carol says she especially enjoys picking out landmarks she can recognize from her bicycling and camping experiences in the Door County area. She is also learning to fly herself, having taken five lessons “so that I would understand more about how the plane operates and be of assistance, should a medical emergency arise while Ken is flying.”

Now that their Venterra plane is safely stored away for the season, you might expect to find Ken and Carol enjoying a quiet winter in Florida. In fact, they are in Australia on a cross-country driving trip from Adelaide to Perth across the Nullabor Plain. It is a flat, almost treeless desert and one of the least populated areas in Australia, with no towns, a single road, and a handful of settlements that provide services to motorists bold enough to drive it.

“Hardly anyone does it,” Carol said the day before her and Ken’s departure, “including the Australians!”

By airplane or auto, Ken and Carol Boyd are still piling up the mileage and the adventures.

This story is adapted from one written by Rochelle Cherniawski that appeared in Shell Point Life magazine and was used by permission. Photos were also provided by Shell Point Life and by the Boyds.