

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2015

Vintage Airplane



VAUGHN'S Vagabond



- Restoring a Howard DGA
- OTW Reborn
- D-18 Family Tradition



Al Meyers *and an* **OTW Reborn**

The
Herrmann family's biplane

BY BUDD DAVISSON

TYSON RININGER



The OTW owes its existence to the need for aerobatic trainers early in WWII.

TYSON RININGER

If you think about it, the 1930s was an incredibly contradictory time. On the one hand, soup kitchen lines stretched around the block and Mother Nature had the Midwest vise-gripped in a crippling drought. Times were tough. However, for totally illogical reasons, highly intelligent people like Walter Beech, Clyde Cessna, Al Mooney, Clarence and Gordon Taylor, William Piper and Al Meyers, among others, decided that, even though the country was starving, it would be a good time to build airplanes. And so they did. And

they succeeded. However, it could be argued that, in a strange sort of way, Al Meyers owed much of his success to Adolf Hitler.

Al Meyers: Kid Airplane Builder

Al turned 21 years old the same year the stock market tanked and a depression with a capital "D" clamped down on the country. However, by that time, the fascination he had for airplanes, which had apparently gripped him at an early age, had propelled him into aviation directly out of high school. Since the mid-1920s, he

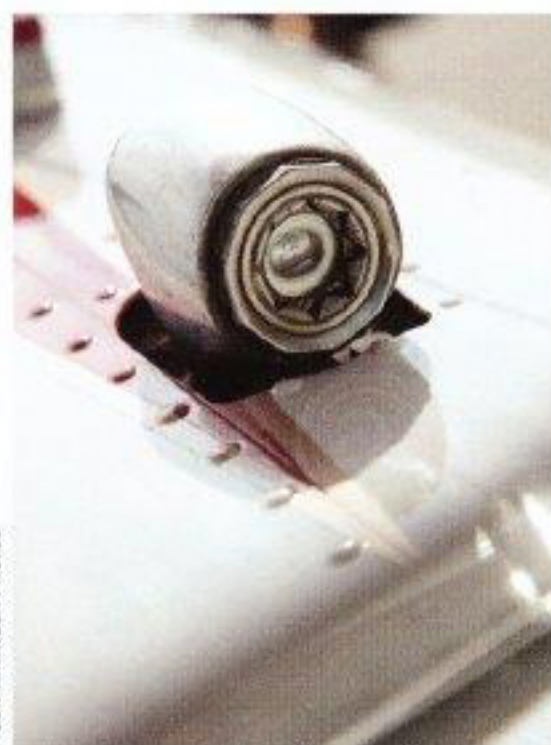
had been working for all of the major pioneer aviation companies like Glenn L. Martin, Stinson, and Chance Vought. He had been honing his skills in sheet metal work and gaining an understanding of aircraft design, engineering, and construction.

Even as he was getting his hands dirty, however, he was also learning to fly, soloing a Jenny on Long Island. As his flight time increased, he bought a Waco 10 in 1932 and continued flight instructing and barnstorming to build his flight time. A pivotal trip came when he went on the road barnstorming with a friend, Martin Jensen, in an aircraft Jensen had designed and built. It was unique for the time because it had an aluminum fuselage and fabric-covered, wood-structured wings. Al liked the combination, and while working for Stinson in Wayne, Michigan, he began designing and building an airplane of his own design that used the same combination. It's interesting to put efforts like his in context: He was probably making a minimal wage (as everyone was), the country around him was totally crushed by the Great Depression, and there he was, a young man in his 20s designing and building an airplane. An impossible dream was taking shape in the shadow of a national catastrophe. It seems the aviation disease first attacks that portion of the brain that sponsors common sense. It must also numb fears of starvation.

Al's new airplane flew for the first time at Wayne Country Air-



TYSON RIMINGER PHOTOS



The aluminum structure of the fuselage seems out of place with its otherwise traditional bi-plane details.



port in May of 1936. But, in looking around at the state of aviation, he must have known that he had designed and built an anachronism. The open-cockpit biplane, even with a metal fuselage, was totally out of vogue in the market place. 1930s "modern" aircraft design had the Beech Staggerwing and Spartan Executive at one end, and the new crop of small engine trainers and sports planes like the Taylors, Pipers, and Aeroncas at the other end. That's when, although it was certainly not their intention, Adolf Hitler and Hideki Tojo came to his aid.

The Axis Effect

By 1937-38 it became blatantly

clear to American leadership that things were happening in Europe and China that appeared to be headed for critical mass in the not-too-distant future. Besides the overt, and sometimes brutal, political moves being made, Germany had established hyperactive, supposedly civilian, "flying clubs" that were training pilots at an accelerated rate, far greater than would be expected for purely civilian, sports use.

Visionaries in Washington took note of what was happening and decided it would be in America's best interest if they established some sort of program that taught lots of civilians how to fly. Robert Hinckley of the Civil Aeronautics Authority (CAA) was charged with

developing what would be known as the Civilian Pilot Training Program (CPTP) under which the government would pay for a 72-hour ground school and between 35 and 50 hours of flight training. The ground schools would be part of university and college programs, and the flight training would be conducted at civilian flying schools located near the schools.

What started initially at 11 colleges around the country was in the process of succeeding, when, on September 1, 1939, the Wehrmacht and Luftwaffe waded into Poland and things got very serious, very quickly. Accordingly, the CPTP was given emergency priority and was expanded to more than 1,100 educational locations and 1,400 flying schools. After Pearl Harbor, it was reorganized and renamed the War Training Service and functioned as a lead-in screening system for the military. When the program was phased out in mid-1944, more than 435,000 pilots had been created. Amazing!

As the CPTP began to be wildly expanded, a second tier of training

The Man Behind the Machine: Joey Sahakian

David Herrmann, OTW pilot/owner, will be the first to say that Joey Sahakian gets full credit for his airplane being what it is. And Joey is quick to say that one of the reasons he sold it to David was that he would continue to take care of it. "I made it so nice that the neat freak in me wouldn't let it get dirty. I'd fly for an hour, get some bugs on it, and spend seven hours cleaning it. Even though I'd put my heart and soul into restoring it, flying it bordered on being work. I really enjoyed it but I didn't enjoy it, if that makes any sense."

Joey is a second-generation auto-repair guy, having taken over the business from his father. But he's also a second-generation vintage airplane guy. "My dad had a bunch of old airplanes, including a Luscombe and a Stinson, which I eventually restored. I got my first airplane, a Piper J-5A, in the '80s. I flew that old airplane any and everywhere, before finally restoring it. I must have done it right because it won a lot of awards."

started putting the airplane back together. It was totally complete, just apart and dirty. It took us three weekends, but we got it back in the air and licensed. I jumped in, never having flown a big biplane before, and flew home with no problems. That says more about how nice the airplane flies than me, as a pilot."

He flew the airplane for nearly 10 years with it perpetually in "I'm going to restore it some day" mode. It wasn't in bad shape. He says "fair" would describe it. That, however, changed on a whim.

He remembers, "One day a bunch of my buddies and I were supposed to fly to a strip that's right on the beach, build a bonfire, and camp for a couple of days. But, the weather turned really sour and we were standing around the airplanes at the hangar watching gloomy skies. For whatever reason, with no

forethought whatsoever, I said, 'I have it! Let's take my airplane apart, and I'll restore it. Out came

the pocketknives and wrenches, and by nightfall, my airplane was totally naked and in a million pieces. At that point, I was pretty committed to restoring it."

As always, when an airplane comes apart there are surprises.

"The airplane had never really been restored, especially the wings, and we found a major crack in the rear spar of the center section. The rest of the wing wood was probably usable, but I decided I wanted a brand new biplane, so I replaced every piece of wood in the wings. All of it! My friend Ken Dodderer cut the raw stock for me. When I was done with the wing construction, the inspector looked at them and said, 'They look like furniture. It's a shame to cover them.' But I did cover them using the Stits process all the way through.

"The fuselage aluminum was actually in good shape, but a total cleaning was in order, inside and out. The cowl was rough so another friend, John Nielsen, English-wheeled new metal for it.

"The wheelpants are fiberglass and originally for a Waco, so they aren't original. I opted to go for an air show look, rather than the original, military scheme: bare metal fuselage, yellow wings. Same thing inside: It had leather seats, nice panel, etc. It may not have been original, but it looked great and was fun to fly. However, it was time for someone else to enjoy it, so I sold it to David. Now I'm helping a friend with his 1929 Fleet 2 and am looking for a project for myself. I'd like something a little unusual like a Porterfield, Interstate Cadet, or maybe a PA-12 Super Cruiser. A guy's got to keep busy, right?"



Joey has it better than most nonprofessional airplane restorers. His auto shop was originally a body shop so it has a big spray booth in the back. Joey says, "I'll put an airplane in there, and when things get slow in the shop or I want a break, I just walk back there and bang on an airplane for a little while."

"I sold my J-5 when I got married, and a few months later we were having a backyard barbecue and I kept looking up at the airplanes flying over. That went on for several hours, and my wife finally cornered me and said, 'Go buy an airplane. You're driving me nuts!'"

And that's how the OTW came to be.

When he started his search for another airplane, he heard about an old biplane, an OTW, that had been taken apart and had been sitting in a hangar for five years. The owner was in a hurry to sell, and Joey was in no hurry to buy, so he negotiated until the price was right and then pulled the trigger.

"I got my airplane buddies together, and we



TYSON RININGER PHOTOS

Many of the airframe features surrounding the 160 hp Kinner show that restorer Joey Sahakian was going for an airshow appearance, rather than an original military look.

temporary factory in September of 1939. Although the aircraft wasn't certificated yet, the government had already issued a Group 2 approval back in August that technically allowed the company to begin building. The pressure to get airplanes into the flying schools was so fierce that a lot of governmental winks and nods resulted in around 30 Meyers biplanes already having been built by the time the paperwork for the type certificate was approved.

CPTP Provides a Market, a Factory, and David Herrmann's Airplane

With government orders in his pocket, Al Meyers suddenly found that funding and adequate facilities were no longer a problem. He was being courted by a number of communities to locate on their airport, and the small town of Tecumseh, Michigan, offered him a tax and facility package he couldn't turn down. So, Meyers Aircraft Co. (it had already existed in his mind and on paper for many years) officially located onto what is now

known as the Al Meyers Airport.

Al's nameless biplane became the OTW (Out To Win) as soon as it was selected as one of the CPTP's aerobatic trainers. One hundred two aircraft were rolled out of the small plant, with production coming to a halt in 1943, probably because the government decided to begin standardizing flight training with the Stearman. The war ended with the OTW having the enviable record of never having a student fatality occur in the airplane.

It was toward the end of production, in 1943, to be exact, OTW serial No. 95 was built. Seventy-one years later, wearing N34351 registration, July 2014 found S/N 95 parked on the grounds of EAA AirVenture Oshkosh under the tutelage of a proud new owner, David Herrmann of Two Rivers, Wisconsin. His aviation heritage runs deep, with the OTW being his latest love.

David says, "My dad talked about his uncle Otto who was a navigator on a B-24 named *Tommy Thumper*. He said when he was home he would get in his

Piper Cub and fly around the farm having all kinds of fun. That kind of stuck in my head and then, in the early '80s, going to EAA Oshkosh really got my interests piqued.

"My dad and I kicked around building a Sonerai, and at some point my dad said, 'You didn't want to do college, so what do you want?' and I answered that I'd like to get my pilot's license so, that's what I did."

His flying hit a lull when the family business, suffering from high interest rates and competition, went under, and for nearly 10 years he was pretty much ground-bound.

He says, "I got back into flying when I was about 28, and I got my PPL glider. I did a lot of soaring and even bought a motorglider, a Fournier RF5B. Then I bought a newly restored L-3B Aeronca in California, but I couldn't fly it home because I didn't have a power PPL. A friend flew it back. Then my CFI, Jim Wheeler, and I flew to AirVenture '03, where it was runner-up in class."

As David was getting back into flying, his business life was getting busier as he went to work for a Harley dealer, taking care of many departments in a growing business.

"One of our service techs and I built a RV-7 in my garage over four winters that I flew for years before selling it to Steve Morse, guitarist for Deep Purple. Then I bought an RV-8A, but I didn't like the nose wheel so got rid of that in favor of a straight RV-8 and then an RV-3. That was replaced by an RV-4 and a Cub that I re-covered. And that's when the OTW joined the fold."

Accidental Biplane Purchase

"I went looking for an OTW partially because I accidentally sold my last RV at almost exactly the same time that I discovered OTWs. I'd never seen one until I ran into a local pilot who had one, and it intrigued me. I heard that little voice in my head saying, 'Hey! I think I'd like to own one of those.' And I listened to it. Just then a guy looking at my RV asked me if it was for sale. It wasn't, but I tossed a silly number at him expecting him to stomp off, but he smiled, and just that quickly, I needed another airplane. I had just looked at the local OTW, but it wasn't for sale. Then I peeked at Barnstormers and there it was...an OTW! I called the guy, he still had it, and I told him to hold it for me. This all happened on the same day, as if it was foreordained that I was to own an OTW or something."

was added. Besides simply teaching them to fly, it was decided that student pilots would all be given aerobatic training, and that's where Al Meyers' future immediately changed. Aerobatics in those days automatically meant tandem, open-cockpit biplanes, and Waco couldn't build enough UPF-7s to meet the demand, so Al was tapped to build his out-of-date biplane to be the aerobatics trainer for flight schools. There was only one glitch: The airplane had to be certificated to be accepted into the program. A second Meyers airplane had been built in the company's



Mess Free!

Your Next Oil Change Just Got Easier

\$328

List: \$450
Limited Time and Quantity



BC700-1 (STC/PMA)
O-235 thru IO-720
3-D Machined Billet Aluminum


123 E. 4th Street • Newton, KS 67114
316-283-8000 • BandC.info/VA

INTERACTIVE | EDUCATIONAL | MOBILE

EAA Webinars


What would you like to learn?


EAA offers a series of **free** live webinars moderated and presented by aviation experts on a variety of topics.



Register today!

EAA.org/webinars



EAA Webinars are supported by 



The OTW's long-strong landing gear makes smooth landings easy.

TYSON RININGER

The OTW he'd never seen but was about to buy had been restored by Joey Sahakian in Fresno, California. In the pictures it looked perfect. When David finally saw it in real life, it looked the same way. (See the sidebar for Joey's side of the OTW story.)

"I did some research through the OTW club and biplane forum, looking for someone to ferry the airplane home and check me out, and Clay Hammond appeared to be the perfect person. I expected the check-out to be a big deal, because, among other things, the OTW tail wheel is totally free-swiveling. It doesn't steer and it doesn't lock. It was like nothing I'd ever flown before, and I expected it to be squirrely. But, it definitely wasn't. We did five take-offs and landings to a full stop, as required by the insurance, and I was done. And the insurance premium is exactly the same as I was paying for my RV. This is because the OTW has such a good safety record."

A Gentleman's Flying Machine

"The landing gear is so wide and the rudder so effective," he says, "you don't even miss the tail-wheel steering. The main gear also has a huge amount of well-damped travel so it's really hard to bounce it on landing. Whether three-point or wheeling it on, it just settles on and sticks."

David says, "Takeoff is leisurely and super easy to keep straight. It just sort of floats off at 65 mph. You climb at 70 and generally cruise in the 95-100 mph range, burning about 10 gallons per hour. You fly the pattern at 80 mph and just aim the nose at the numbers. I usually wheel it on because it's so easy and you can see what you're doing."

Cruising around at less than 100 mph takes a lot longer, and he says the RVs have spoiled him in that regard. But watching the sunset is so much more fun at OTW speeds.

"The first time I brought my wife,

Donna, out to see it, she wouldn't even get out of the Jeep. She just watched me fly. The second time, she let me put her in it, but she wasn't about to go flying. The third time, I had her in the cockpit and she says, 'Can we go flying now?' She really likes it!"

So, inasmuch as David changes airplanes the way most people change T-shirts, how soon before something new catches his eye?

He says, "This airplane is a big bucket list item for me. I've always wanted an open-cockpit biplane with a round motor. Always! So, it may be a while before I part with this one."

"Lastly, I'd like to thank my parents for the start of my aviation adventure, EAA for making sure my aviation interests were kept alive, and a few local mentors, namely Jim Wheeler, Don Gruett, Gregg Goins, Ray Roethle, and Don Kiel. Also, I definitely need to thank the most important person of all, my wife, Donna." 