

Aircraft pioneers know

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Howards come from taking risks

“Is there anybody here who thinks I can talk you into killing yourself?” Dave Ronneberg asks.

It's an interesting enough question for a Saturday morning gathering at the Museum of Flying in Santa Monica.

I look around at the rest of the audience to see if I accidentally wandered into a meeting of Suicides Anonymous.

There are no hands waving in the air. What a relief.

Noting the audience response, Ronneberg continues: “In two years, I'm convinced someone will sue me, saying I talked someone into killing himself.”

Ronneberg is discussing the growing sport of flying home-built airplanes and the liability and legal problems that are plaguing private aviation. He is in the business of supplying parts to pilots who build their own planes. And like almost anyone in business, he has had experience with nuisance lawsuits. He realizes that even talking about home-built aircraft may make him the target of a suit.

And he is frustrated because the great American lawsuit game is threatening to cripple industries like private aviation.



Rich
Seeley

In the current climate, the companies that traditionally built private airplanes are limited to conservative technology which is 40 years out of date. You can't advance aviation design without taking risks and in the current legal climate manufacturers' hands are tied.

Fortunately, not everyone is knuckling under. Advances in private aviation are being made in the garages of pilots who build their own planes from scratch using the latest technology and design.

Santa Monica Airport is a center for the wing nationwide trend in what the Federal Aviation Administration labels experimental aircraft.

On Saturday, the Santa Monica chapter of the Experimental Aircraft Association showed off some of leading edge designs in private planes.

It was a great opportunity for curious sightseers like me to talk with the serious builders like Stan Shniderman.

Stan, who is chapter president, even let me climb into the cockpit of his plane, which took him more than three years to build.

His aircraft is called a Long-EZ, a popular favorite among home-builts. The Long-EZ is an advanced technology version of the Cessna Pusher, a plane with the engine and propeller mounted in the rear. The original Wright Brothers' plane was a Pusher. Today's version, built of the lightweight but sturdy space age materials — fiberglass, resins, poly-carbonate and carbon fiber — features a sleek body and the pointed nose of a jet fighter.

Compared to standard two-seater private planes, the Long-EZ is tiny.

As I climbed up over the wing and slid into the narrow cockpit of Stan's plane, I felt like I was slipping into the barrel of a torpedo with wings. It's what a tailor would call a snug fit.

It took me a minute or two to grasp how sophisticated this home-built plane really is. Despite their size and humble origin, home-built planes use aeronautical designs borrowed from the space program and can travel 1,500 miles

non-stop, reaching 270 m.p.h.

Stan's instrument panel was not the fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants affair I expected either. It was crowded with dials, gauges, an auto pilot, an on-board computer and a navigational system that takes readings from orbiting satellites.

This is not a plane built by a suicidal daredevil.

Stan has flown it safely across country and it is certified by the FAA. The only standard it doesn't meet is the one set by the modern American mania for risk-free living.

But since I do not believe in risk-free living, I was glad to meet Stan and the other pilots of home-built airplanes.

They are upholding the traditions of the aviation pioneers honored by the Museum of Flying. They are the old-fashioned Americans, who do the work, take the risks, make the advances, and enjoy the rewards.

By comparison, advocates of risk-free living would do well to stay indoors and eat a nice safe diet of vegetables, which they will eventually come to resemble.

OUTLOOK EDITION

Airplane builders defend against ban on their crafts

By Jennifer Lewis
STAFF WRITER

Worried about criticism of experimental aircraft flights from Santa Monica Airport after several crashes, pilots banded together this weekend in an attempt to quiet fears about homebuilt airplanes.

As part of a campaign to reassure the public, the Museum of Flying at Santa Monica Airport was host for a show Saturday which featured an exhibit of contemporary sport and homebuilt airplanes and a display of the techniques and materials used in building planes. Several speakers were also on hand.

Santa Monica Airport officials are scrambling to lease some vacant hangars and offices on a proposed office project site./A3

Organizers said they hoped neighbors of the airport would come to the show, see the aircraft and talk to the pilots about their concerns.

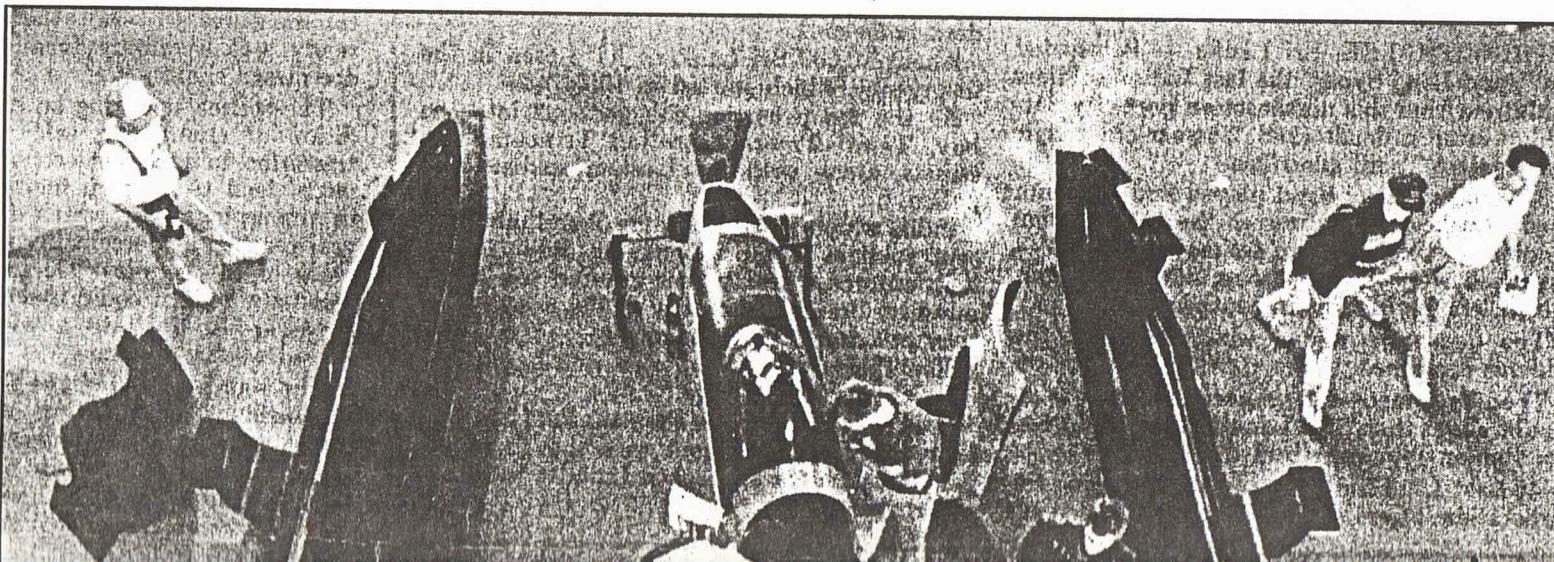
"In the past six months, several tragic accidents have occurred in this area involving homebuilt planes, and the subject of sport aviation is becoming con-

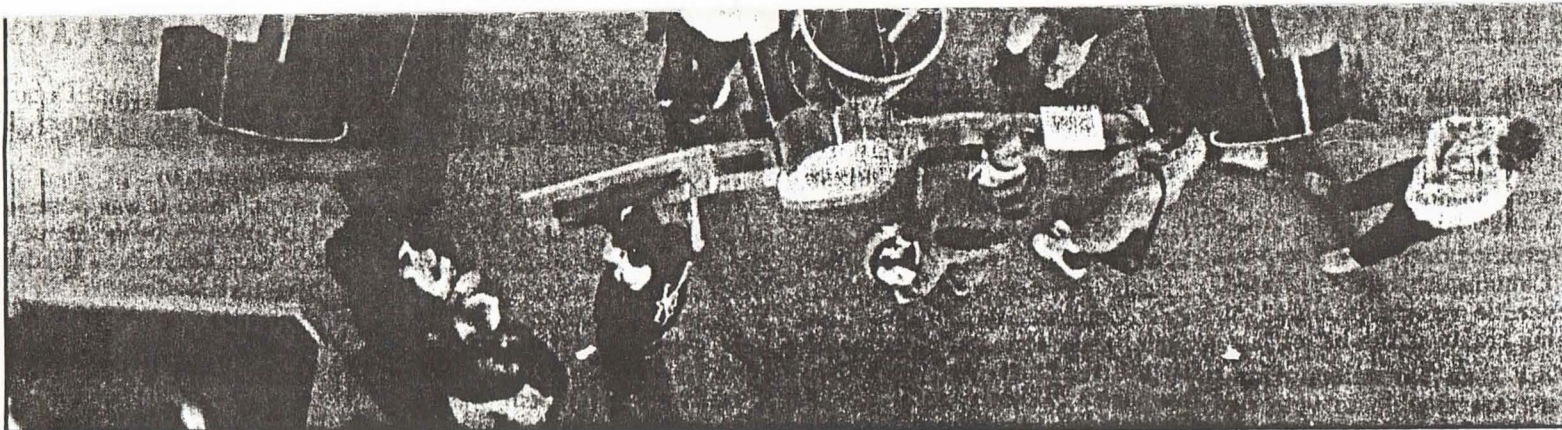
BUILDERS/A3



RICHARD HARTOG/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

The Long E-Z experimental aircraft attracts a crowd at the Museum of Flying at Santa Monica Airport.





An airplane is shown as it looks before it is fully assembled. A plane can take three or more years to build from a kit.

Builders

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troversial," said Jan Mohlman, who coordinated the event for the museum. "We wanted to give airplane builders and pilots a chance to have a positive atmosphere in which to share and talk about their craft."

Mohlman said pilots want residents to learn about their hobby directly from the experts.

"The progress of aviation will be thwarted if misinformation is given to the public," she said. Pilots fear a ban on experimental craft would set back scientific advancement in private flying, as well as put a crimp in their hobby.

On Feb. 26, veteran pilot William Wallace Reid, 73, died when his Long E-Z airplane plunged into the ocean off Santa Monica Pier.

The cause of the accident is under investigation by the Federal Aviation Association, but Reid's last conversation to the tower at Santa Monica Airport indicated he was having trouble finding his way in the fog.

On Oct. 26, pilot Gary Mavrovic and

his passenger were injured when their prototype Wheeler Express burst into flames after slamming into three West Los Angeles homes. No one on the ground was hurt. An FAA investigation is also still pending, but officials believe the plane may have had engine trouble.

Following the October crash, Hank Dittmar, the then Santa Monica Airport director, asked the FAA to prohibit experimental craft from operating at the airport. But FAA officials replied there could be no discrimination among types of aircraft that operate at Santa Monica Airport.

Homeowners have pointed to the crashes as an indication that experimental craft may not be safe to fly in residential areas.

"I'm still leery about homemade airplanes," said Greg Thomas, president of a Mar Vista homeowners group, who wants to ban homemade and vintage planes from Santa Monica Airport. "We must have machines that are mechanically sound."

But pilots say the crashes were not due to faulty aircraft design.

Despite their name, homebuilt planes are not really "homemade," pilots point out. Most of them are assembled from

kits, using commercially manufactured parts and engines. The designs are approved by the FAA, and individual aircraft must be certified as airworthy before they can be flown.

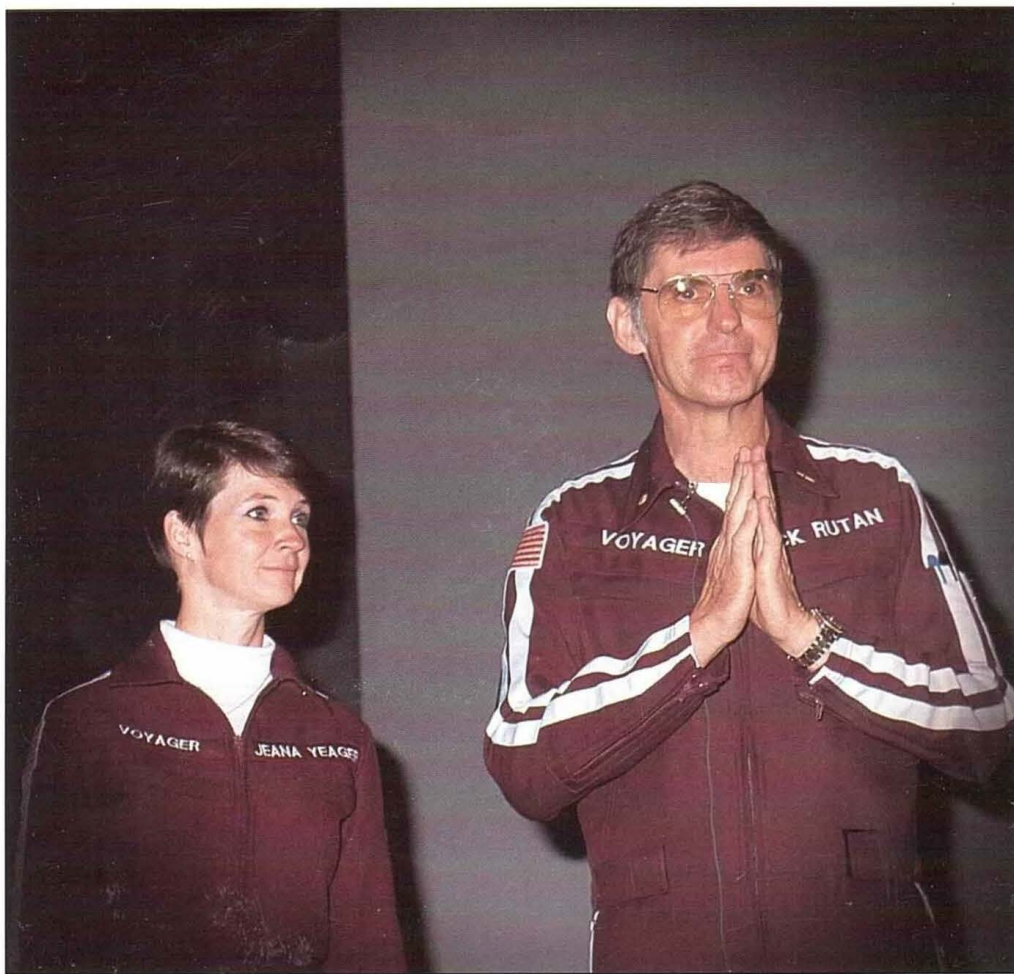
Advocates, lauding the sophisticated technology and design of homemade planes, say the crafts are safer than conventional planes.

"They are the most survivable airplanes in existence," said pilot Mark Bender, who belongs to the Santa Monica chapter of the Experimental Aircraft Association. "The materials are extremely reliable."

Bender said he has built a variation of the Long E-Z, the type of aircraft Reid was flying, and found it safe and dependable. When pilots build their own airplanes, he noted, they are inclined to take extreme care.

"It's a very serious long-term commitment," Bender said. "The average construction time is three to seven years."

Among the aircraft displayed Saturday were a Christian Eagle, a high-performance acrobatic biplane; a Lancarr, described as the most popular kit plane currently on the market; and a scale-model of the Voyager aircraft which flew around the world without refueling.



'Plane' spoken: Aviators Jeana Yeager and Dick Rutan describe their pioneering flight.

enter a decade of full competition, he emphasized.

"We expect that there is going to be the entry of new and powerful competitors into a business that was once our exclusive domain. And some of these competitors are going to be powerful companies that previously really weren't identified with the traditional areas of telephone and telecommunications.

"So I think your meeting theme, America's Best, sums up our conclusion that GTE can't afford to be anything less than the best. And

with the help of achievers like you, that's exactly what we intend to be," Jim told the audience.

"What in essence I'm really saying is that the Winning Connection is working, actions are under-way to meet the goals that we have set, but there's an awful lot left to be done," he said. One of the most crucial of TELOPS' goals is GTEDS' development of high-quality, uniform, core information services for the TELCOs, Jim added.

"I can tell you that your

achievements are a point of pride, not only in GTEDS, but in TELOPS as a whole," he told the Personal Best recipients. "And I think what you've done is evidence that you have that quality — that you care about the customer. And the type of individual excellence that you represent is the key to success in any business."

High-Flying Dreams

Dick Rutan, Jeana Yeager, Charles Kuralt and Cathy Rigby all talked about the importance of setting goals and solving problems.

Dick and Jeana dreamed of flying nonstop around the world without refueling. And through their own perseverance, they made their dream a reality.

"I like to tell people that when you set a goal for yourself, a lot of people underestimate their own personal capabilities. What you are actually capable of is far greater than what you ever imagined or ever dreamed," Dick told the Personal Best audience.

"From what I understand, this is a very select group of people, and a group of people that knows exactly what it means to work hard and enjoy the success of hard work. But something that is even more important than that is the reward you get for something that you have accomplished personally — to set a goal and accomplish it."

In 1981, Dick, his brother, Burt Rutan, and Jeana formulated their

plan to fly around the world without landing or refueling in midair, a trip no one had attempted before.

They faced many obstacles before their epic flight in 1986, but they overcame them all, the most crucial of which was staying alive in a cramped cockpit no bigger than a telephone booth.

“What you can achieve — no matter who you are or what walk of life you’re in — what you can achieve is only limited by what you can dream,” Dick concluded.

American Problem-Solvers

Like Dick Rutan and Jeana Yeager, veteran CBS newsman Charles Kuralt believes America is a nation of problem-solvers.

“You know you wouldn’t be here, gathered together, if you were not problem-solvers yourself,” he told the Personal Best Award winners.

“When I think of Americans, I think of problem-solvers. It amazes me that even in a big, complex,