

AirVenture pays tribute to Burt Rutan

Written by

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Two wings. One fuselage. Propeller in front. Tail at back. I was content with my presumptions about airplanes in the 1970s, until Burt Rutan began messing with my head in Oshkosh.

The newly retired California designer of eye-widening and award-winning aircraft earns a day of tribute July 28 at the annual Experimental Aircraft Association's AirVenture.

Some of the 500,000 who attend AirVenture — the world's biggest gathering of aviation enthusiasts — arrive in the 10,000 planes that temporarily turn Wittman Regional Airport into the world's busiest, based on the number of takeoffs and landings. Many are homebuilt planes, constructed by average people.

Rutan made some of this possible while challenging conventional thinking, although another dimension of his work is beyond the average pilot's reach. Consider the two-passenger SpaceShipOne, a 2004 design that earned Rutan the \$10 million "X Prize" and someday may launch private-pay passengers into outer space. The

technology is licensed to Virgin Atlantic's Richard Branson, the British entrepreneur who is selling \$200,000 tickets to ride another Rutan version of the spacecraft, now undergoing test flights.

So the world of flight remains ever changing, even as federal dollars for space exploration dwindle. One reason people attend the EAA AirVenture is to marvel at the miraculous possibilities.

For five years, I'd cover the annual EAA fly-in and see Rutan show up with something new and strange that seemed to break the rules.

The aerospace engineer's single-seat Quickie, galactic in tone but sporty in size, flies with a rear-end propeller and was born shortly after the 1977 "Star Wars" movie release. The sassy little plane, big enough for just a pilot (who is no larger than 6-foot-6 or 215 pounds), earned the EAA's Outstanding New Design Award one year later.

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Rutan would win the award three times before the decade ended.

His Quickie was a condensed version of the two-person VariEze ("very easy"), which was missing the traditional tail but had four wings — one set long and v-shaped, the other short, straight and piercing the airplane's nose.

Both planes were sleeker relatives of the VariViggen, whose stocky body and thick, flipped up rear wings seemed itchin' for a fight. None provided as much room, fuel or payload as the subsequent Long-EZ.

"EAA has been a critical component of my career since 1972," Rutan says, in press materials. "Our annual trips to Oshkosh were the highlight of our business year," and opportunities to meet and guide aircraft homebuilders "were critical to the success of the builders and me personally."

The annual fly-in began in 1953 as a way for pilots to network, **socialize** and learn from each other. Volunteers (about 5,000 this year) are crucial to the event's success.

No alcohol is sold on the convention grounds.

Some components don't change. That includes the diversity of what flies: screeching military fighters and hefty bombers to delicate ultralights and nimble aerobatic designs.

Almost 1,000 AirVenture events — workshops, concerts, book signings —

engage pilots and the public. Most popular are the afternoon and at-dark air shows, where pilots deliberately stall engines, spin and roll. Teams of planes perform an aerial ballet of dips, swoops and twirls. Others re-enact historical military battles with a fierceness of precision and power.

Speed matters, sometimes. Other times it's all about grace and synchronicity. Few know this better than Bob Hoover, an air racer, World War II pilot and a pioneer in aerobatic performance. The Nashville native gets his day of honor July 26 at the AirVenture.

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