



**LAURAN PAINE JR.**

COMMENTARY / PLANE TALK

# The Science of Sitting

The Oregon Aero story

BY LAURAN PAINE JR.

**WE MET IN THE LOBBY** of the big hangar-type building that constitutes the business of Oregon Aero, located on the airport at Scappoose (KSPB), Oregon. You've probably heard of it: headset cushions, headset ear seals, helmet upgrades, aircraft seats and cushions, headset bags, ShockBlocker shoe inserts, and a myriad of other related civilian and military products. Some of it is stuff you may already have, plus other stuff you probably want. In aviation, the Oregon Aero logo speaks for itself in regard to quality.

The first things you notice in the lobby are several examples of aircraft seats. More on the "why" of that later. Also, on a high shelf that rings the room, there were, seemingly, a jillion aircraft models. More on that later, too.

It was in the lobby where we all met — Mike Dennis, founder and owner; his wife, Jude; and Gayle Crowder, his assistant. And it was there, with the receptionist's office phone ringing and people coming and going, where we all conversed for the next two hours. You see, Mike doesn't have a big, formal office; he's not a formal type guy. His "office" is the building we were in, plus the other adjacent buildings that constitute the whole of Oregon Aero. The business is his office. Here's the thing: His intellect and passion for what he does are the driving forces for the entire operation. I asked him about his education. He said, "I have a Ph.D. Translated that stands for 'Pig, Hoe, and Dig.'"

About the seats in the lobby — they are examples of what Oregon Aero does, but also are for what they call "seat school." I just happened to be sitting in one of the starter seats. It wasn't that comfortable. It was an example of a standard airline seat. It was then that Mike, slowly and subtly, started me into seat school. Next to the seat I was sitting in was Oregon Aero's improved version. I moved to that one. *Much* better! And then Mike talked of the technical reasons for that. We got into anatomy, posture, physics, spine compression, fatigue, material composition (a huge factor), and so on. Nonstop. The detail, thought, and science he puts into his products was fascinating. I sat on many a military cockpit seat over the years that was little more than some foam with fabric sewn around it. You make do, but boy howdy, what a little thought and applied science can do to make it better! And that's what Mike Dennis does. "Comfort and safety" is his daily motto. How's it working for him? The "jillion" models on the shelf that rings the lobby are all examples of airplanes that use his products.



Oregon Aero logo.



Mike Dennis, founder and owner of Oregon Aero.



Seats, specifically KC-135 and C-130.

TRIP TO OREGON AERO



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**Oregon Aero was born from a man with a passion imbued with the intellect and stamina to ensure success. It's a quality place. It's also a people place. I like that combination.**

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How did Mike get to where he is today? He slugged his way through the "stuff of life," the good, the bad, and the ugly. The kind of stuff that makes you or breaks you. It made Mike Dennis and instilled in him perspective and the strength to succeed. You can't beat him down with a problem; he *will* figure it out. That's who he is. And there is also a huge element of family intrigue that drives him to this day. I have to tell you about it.

Mike's father was James Dennis. James' father died of a heart attack at the age of 53 in 1941. His mother then left with her youngest son and moved from the Pacific Northwest to her family home in Norfolk, Virginia. James stayed behind. He was 14. In those days, 14 was old enough to work, so that's what he did. It didn't take long before he got into some trouble. The judge told him, "You can go to jail or to the Merchant Marine." James chose the Merchant Marine.

Not long into his Merchant Marine service, someone somehow singled out James, young and alone, and offered him a "job" to learn German. (He found out later that others with similar backgrounds were offered the same job. Hmm.) James was then sent to the Midwest to live with a German-speaking family. He learned German. Language finishing school was at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. There he learned different German dialects. After a couple more schools, he was smuggled into Berlin, Germany, by the French Resistance. There he lived in the home of a

baker who was an anti-Nazi spy. Hitler had a sweet tooth and had a standing order for pastries at Army headquarters. James delivered the pastries. They called him "The Doughnut Boy." He would hang around at headquarters and listen to what was being said, and then reported what he heard to the baker. He was a spy, at 17! It's kind of hard to wrap your head around.

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CNC parts.



James eventually came home to the United States, but the experiences and a lot of the trauma stayed with him forever. He seldom spoke of it, and when he did, he never fully answered questions. Mike only got bits and pieces over the years, which always created yet more questions. So, the story has always held Mike at arm's length. James passed away in 1977, a retired VA chaplain. Why is all this important? Because it gave Mike a journey he had to complete. He needed to know some of the "why" of who he is. He began researching. Hint: When someone is a spy, their official records are never about who the person really is; they're a paper trail to nowhere. Undaunted, Mike and Gayle did the research and wrote a book about James. It's aptly titled *The Doughnut Boy*. It's captivating!

Back to the rest of Mike's story. He learned to fly. His mentor and CFI was Irv Allen, whom Mike to this day waxes poetic about. An aviation mentor is a good thing in life. Mike also journeyed to Longview, Texas, and earned his A&P certificate at LeTourneau University. He said, "Those two pieces of plastic in my pocket that say 'pilot' and 'mechanic' represent a whole lot of who I am." He also endured a wife abandoning him and their three children. And he had an irrigation sprinkler-head repair business he wasn't enthralled with but learned a lot from. And then he met and married Jude. She had motorcycled from Pennsylvania to Oregon in her mid-20s. Life began to get sweeter for Mike Dennis.

All of the above leads to an Ercoupe flight Mike and Jude took from Oregon to Pennsylvania for a visit. Jude said, "I like the flying, but this headset hurts my head. Can you fix it?" As a born tinkerer and fixer, he was up to the task. His first idea was padding, but not just more rubber. He went with leather and sheepskin — soft and natural. And he made it large enough to "spread the pressure." Jude liked it. It wasn't very aesthetically pleasing at first, but Jude wore it nonetheless.

On a cross-country stop, a fellow noticed Jude's headset and asked, "What is that?"

"A cushion," Mike said.

The guy said, "I'll give ya 50 bucks for it."

Two other pilots walked up, and one of them said, "You owe it to the world to make that." Mike thought, I've had a business; not sure I want to get into that again.

However, Mike started a hobby at home, cutting and assembling sheepskin and leather on the kitchen table. He took the cushions to fly-ins, and they sold. Then he hired neighbor kids to cut pieces for "the fuzzy thing." All of this was in 1989. That project graduated to headset ear seals; so many of the early ear seals were seriously substandard and didn't fit all ears. So, get this: Mike put on a white coat and went to a mall and told passers-by that he was doing a study of ear sizes for industrial ear protection. He successfully measured 250 ears before security threw him out. He then made improved ear seals. People liked those, too.

One who liked them was an Oregon Air National Guard pilot. That pilot showed the new ear seals to his Air National Guard commander, saying, "We need these." The commander called Mike in and asked, "Are you going to make these?" Mike said, "I can't. I need a \$10,000 custom sewing machine. I have three kids and can't afford it."





Erin cutting foam.



Kim at the "static table."

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The commander then wrote a note, handed it to Mike, and said, "Will this help?" The note read, "The Oregon National Guard is ordering \$100,000.00 worth of headset ear seals." It was on letterhead stationery, and the commander's signature was at the bottom of the note. A business was born.

The next order of business on my visit was to tour the other large buildings where the production magic happens. There is foam everywhere, all manner of foam of various types, plus seats, upholstery, CNC machines, material testing machines, and so on. There are approximately 60 employees.

I met Kim at the "static table" where fabric is cut; Erin, who was cutting foam (cutting foam accurately is an art); Alice, a 21-year employee, building seats; and Rose, who was proud and excited that she had successfully sewn a difficult pattern at a customer's request.

**Mike started a hobby at home, cutting and assembling sheepskin and leather on the kitchen table. He took the cushions to fly-ins, and they sold.**

Mike knew all their names and something about them. That speaks volumes to me. He has a good cadre of employees, and he's proud of them.

I could go on, but you get it. Oregon Aero was born from a man with a passion imbued with the intellect and stamina to ensure success. It's a quality place. It's also a people place. I like that combination. **EAA**

**Lauran Paine Jr.**, EAA 582274, is a retired military pilot and retired airline pilot. He built an RV-8 and has owned a Stearman and a Champ. Learn more about Lauran at his website, [www.ThunderBumper.com](http://www.ThunderBumper.com).