

EarthRounders

Little airplanes
and a
great big world

BUDD DAVISSON

EAA AirVenture Museum's display of
Don Taylor's T-18, the first homebuilt to
to become an EarthRounder.

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EAA AirVenture Museum's display of Don Taylor's T-1B, the first homebuilt to become an EarthRounder.

t was 1989, and Gerard Moss had 200 hours in his logbook. His wife, Margi, in the other seat was, in her own words, "still waiting for the ink to dry on my license." As their grossly overweight Brazilian-built Piper Saratoga staggered into the air, leaving Brazil behind, its nose was pointed at South Africa, 12 hours and thousands of miles of open water away. It was the first leg of an odyssey that wouldn't see them return home for 32 months, during which time they would double their

flight time, visit 50 countries, become radar targets during the Gulf War, and generally pack several lifetimes of adventures into a few months.

Why did they do it?

Margi explains it succinctly: "We did it for the helluvit."

The Moss' are not wealthy people, and they are typical of most of those present at the EarthRounders encampment on AeroShell Square during AirVenture 2000. All of the EarthRounders are normal people seized by an abnormal dream—to circumvent the world in a little airplane. And they have all done just that.

Hans Gutmann, who, along with the Moss', helped orchestrate the EarthRounders' AirVenture gathering, left Austria in his Glasair IIS RG several days before AirVenture began and arrived as he normally does: with great enthusiasm and a quick smile. He passes off the trip as just another cross-country. "I punched the TO button on my GPS when I left Austria and arrived in Iceland 11 hours later. Then on to America," he laughs. "It was as simple as that."

Gutmann is an instructor in a wood furniture-making school and always knew he'd fly an airplane around the world. "I was 14 years old when I was confirmed to the church. Part of the traditional reward in my country for confirmation is a watch and a ride in an airplane. I saw the pilot moving the controls and immediately knew I wanted to learn to fly and then fly myself around the world."

More than 50 EarthRounders attended AirVenture, which is a substantial percentage of the estimated

120 pilots (there are no official records) who have made the trip around the globe in light aircraft, going all the way back to flights like that of the Graf Zeppelin of 1929.

Some of the flights were part of some larger commercial promotion, but most of the EarthRounders pointed their noses at the horizon for the same basic reason Gutmann and the Moss' did: It just seemed like it was something that needed doing at that particular point in their lives. Obviously, some folks take the challenge differently, as witnessed by Brian Milton, who made the trip in an ultralight trike.

Americans have made nearly 50 percent of the recorded flights, but that doesn't take into account that the vast majority of the world's light aircraft live in America. Taken in that light, it means many small

countries, where aviation barely has a toehold (there are only 25 homebuilts in Gutmann's native Austria), have fielded far more than their share of EarthRounders.

In case you're wondering, the Raytheon/Beech Bonanza is the most popular aircraft for circular adventures, with approximately 26 having made the trip so far. Several of the globe-girdling Bonanzas were parked by the EarthRounders on AeroShell Square, most of them sporting huge tip tanks and maps recording their journeys painted on their fuselages.

Nine pilots have circumvented the globe in homebuilt airplanes, beginning in 1976 with Bob Taylor in his Thorp T-18. Jon Johanssen of Australia has done it more recently, and he's flown his RV-4 to Oshkosh so often it's become something of a routine for him. By trade, Jon is an emergency room nurse, and when he talks about the risks and problems associated with his obviously long trips, he usually hones in on the bureaucratic problems first.

A resounding sentiment among all of the EarthRounders seems to be that once they are in the cockpits and airborne, most of their major problems are behind them. In the air they can plan for emergencies and



Gerald and Margi Moss circled the globe in their Piper Saratoga, packing several lifetimes of adventure into a journey they began just "for the helluvit."

work their way through and around weather, which is much easier, they say, than tackling a local bureaucrat who isn't necessarily there to help. Universally, EarthRounders point to various governmental agencies in several countries as being major obstacles to flying around the world.

Johanssen bristles when he talks about trying to fly out of Hawaii, "They acted as if they were going to send fighters out after me because they claimed I hadn't paid an agricultural inspection fee, which I had, but then didn't take off that day because of weather. The next day they wanted another fee, even though I'd paid it the day before. The airplane hadn't moved an inch, but they said not leaving negated the fee, and I had to pay it again. Many harsh words were exchanged and I took off."

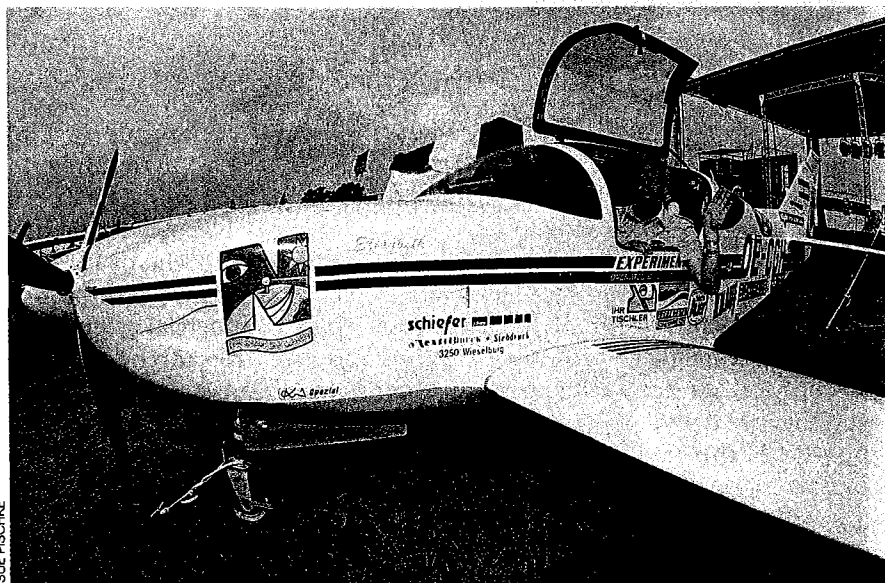
Obviously, no fighters came after him. Besides, just finding the tiny speck of the RV-4 over the Pacific Ocean would have been an interesting intercept problem.

But even as Johanssen fumes about the problems of bureaucracy, he neglects to mention other, more serious moments, such as being over the Himalayas on oxygen only to find the outside air temperature, which was predicted to be around zero, was actually nearly 30 below zero. His body slowly began to succumb to hypothermia. When he got to his destination, he wasn't certain he'd be able to land the airplane.

Jon's RV is fairly typical of the globe-circling homebuilts. It carries a total of 246 liters of fuel, which, combined with his navigation and survival gear, puts the airplane just short of being 50 percent over maximum gross weight on take off. "Even then," he says, "it was still climbing 600-700 feet on takeoff."

This is in direct comparison to the Moss' Saratoga that wouldn't climb over 5,000 feet on their first takeoff until they burned off fuel. Jon's aircraft is outfitted with a high frequency radio that uses a 100-foot-long antenna that reels out behind him. He also installed a lightning

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Extra fuel is a primary requirement for EarthRounders. With capacity of 160 gallons of precious petrol and a range of about 3,000 miles, Austrian Hans Gutmann girdled the globe in his Glasair IIS.

detector (StrikeFinder), two GPSs, and a wing leveler. Comfort, however, he says is one of the more important factors.

"I wouldn't consider such a trip without the Velo seat I installed," Jon says. Velo is an Australian-built vehicle seat that Jon claims is not only more comfortable but also lighter than the original seat.

Hans Gutmann spent six years and 5,000 hours building his RG Glasair IIS, and its 160 gallons of fuel give it a maximum range of about 3,000 miles. "I have an S-Tec auto pilot, but the CG is so far back when the airplane is loaded that the autopilot can't fly it until I've burned off four or five hours of fuel."

When speaking with any of the EarthRounders, one of the first questions people usually ask is about engine reliability. Engines do quit. Does that worry them?

The EarthRounders say they are concerned with engine failures, but

they don't worry about it—because none of them are worriers. What they are, instead, are planners. They plan every aspect of their trip, and much of that planning involves preparing themselves and their machines as well as possible. Johanssen says, "Once you've done everything that can be done to guarantee the success of your crossing, there is nothing to be done but fly. Worry doesn't help. If you are a worrier, you wouldn't be making these kinds of flights."

Planning and preparation seem to be a major part of the attraction to many EarthRounders. They lay out the route, envision and investigate the obstacles, weigh the risks, and then develop a plan. For some it's a plan that lets them cover the most amount of distance in the least amount of time. For others, Margi and Gerard Moss being among them, the trip is the attraction, not the concept of circling the globe.

For the Mosses the trip was going to be a once in a lifetime experience they would always look back upon with pleasure, and they weren't about to rush it. Considering that you could drive around the globe

faster than they flew around it (32 months), it's obvious the Mosses didn't rush it. For instance, they took six months to cross Asia and four to do Australia. If it looked interesting, they stopped. If they liked

it, they stayed. They were in no hurry. They didn't need to hurry because part of their planning had been to rid themselves of most of the impediments that make people rush. They both quit their jobs and

EarthRounders To Be World Flight 2000

For the Gen-X crew of an aging Aero Commander 560E, parking their bird on AeroShell Square during AirVenture was a thrill in itself. But being surrounded by, and rubbing shoulders with, dozens of other EarthRounders—pilots who share the common bond of circumnavigating the globe—was almost more than the World Flight 2000 crew could stand. "Being able to talk to Dick Rutan and ask the advice of Steve Fossett—what an awesome opportunity," says Dan Dominguez. "It's great to be motivated and inspired by people who have actually done it."

Dan and partner Chris Wall are not yet

EarthRounders, but their pre-trip preparations have nonetheless sparked the imagination of dreamers and school children nationwide, and no doubt the envy and awe of many young adults with a passion for adventure.

With a departure that was scheduled for early September, World Flight 2000 will be connected live to the Internet via satellite to bring together classrooms from around the globe. Students created and run the nonprofit venture, a project of the Global Advancement Foundation, which is dedicated to promoting education with lesson plans and high-tech teacher/student involvement.

World Flight 2000 isn't out to set records. In just under four months, Chris and Dan will round the great pyramids of Egypt, cross the deserts of Arabia, fly over the majestic Himalayas, visit the holy temples of Southeast Asia and the remote islands of the Pacific, and connect with students around the world.

The pair got their first taste of adventure while still in high school. "We flew from El Paso, Texas, to Ketchikan, Alaska, in a Cessna 172," says Chris. "All



World Flight 2000 crew, from left, pilots Dan Dominguez and Chris Wall, backup pilot Matt Stevens, and kneeling, photographer/sponsorship coordinator Jesse Weisz.

we brought was our mountain bikes, a cooler, a shotgun, a change of clothes, and sleeping bags. For four-and-a-half weeks we flew around and met lots of interesting people. We had a great time."

Both college students are instrument-rated pilots. Chris is an airframe and powerplant mechanic, and Dan is a CFI. When they purchased a beat-up, worn-out Aero Commander for \$15,000 with a dream of flying it around the world, many of their contemporaries scoffed. After 20 months of 14-hour days, the pair had completely stripped down and overhauled the airplane, inspecting every nut and bolt and replacing every O-ring, hydraulic hose, and fitting.

"Paint stripping was absolutely the worst job," says Chris. "But whether you build an airplane yourself or have gone through as thorough a restoration as we have on the Aero Commander, you feel like we know the airplane inside and out."

The crew, which will include photographer and sponsorship coordinator Jesse Weisz at times, has complete confidence in its craft. On the longer, over-water legs, Jesse will fly commercial and carry much of the heavy computer, photography, and cinematography equipment. This will enable Dan and Chris to fill the Commander's 275-gallon auxiliary fuel tank for extra range and a margin of safety.

World Flight 2000 is asking students to be virtual copilots on the trip and to vicariously live beyond their borders. "By doing this we are trying to show kids to live out their dreams," Chris says. "No matter how big or small. We invite them to dare to dream and have the courage to follow those dreams."

You can follow the progress of the World Flight 2000 crew on the web by logging on to www.worldflight2000.org.—Michael DiFrisco

EAA AirVenture 2000 was an opportunity for EarthRounders of all nations to revel in their unique accomplishments. Don Taylor, center, was the first homebuilder to fly around the world in his celebrated Thorp T-18. Others followed suit, including Jon Johanssen of Australia, right, who has circled the globe in his RV-4, and Hans Gutmann, of Austria, who became an EarthRounder in his Glasair IIS.



then sold everything they owned, except their house. There was no reason to rush home.

Even on their last leg, which was a huge leg from Australia to Chile, in which there was only one tiny speck of land anywhere, Easter Island, they managed to find a reason to stay a while. Why rush a good thing?

Of course not every EarthRounder plan goes as expected. Take the case of Horst Ellenberger of Nuremberg, Germany. Horst and his V35 Bo-

nanza were part of a three-ship, all-German V35 flight that rendezvoused in Chino, California, before relocating to Santa Barbara, where the pilots prepared for the 2,200-nautical-mile leg to Honolulu. The trip didn't have an auspicious start. They arrived at the airport in the early morning to find it locked up tight, and they had to climb over the fence just to get to their airplanes. Was this an omen?

The trip to Honolulu was un-

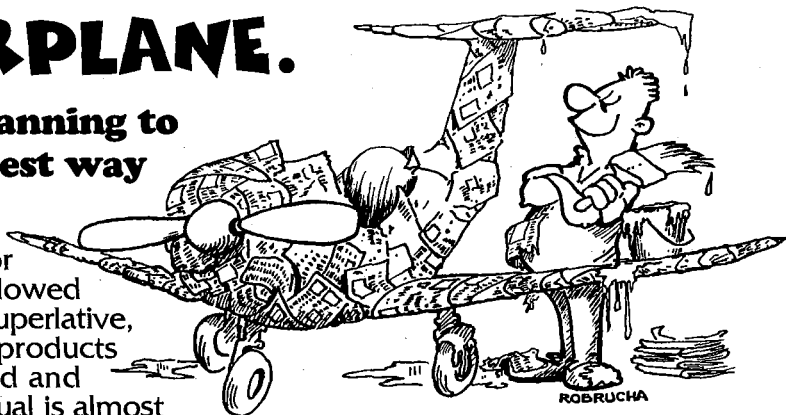
eventful, except that for nearly half of it the GPS kept flashing "not enough fuel to reach destination." They had been told the winds would switch around before they reached the go/no-go point, but it was a relief, nonetheless, when the winds began pushing them and the electronic message said they'd make it. Which they obviously did.

From Hawaii their next stop was Tarawa, a strip of sand in the Solomon Islands where U.S. Marines

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fiercely fought—and died—during World War II. The distance—2,070 nautical miles. The weather wasn't cooperating, so they were picking their way through heavy clouds at 10,000 feet, using weather radar to avoid the heavy stuff. When they were 220 miles from their destination, Horst smelled something in the cockpit that was scorching. First he thought it was electrical in nature. That was until there was a distinct "clunk" from under the cowl and black smoke boiled into the cockpit. Then the engine quit. He was living every EarthRounder's nightmare.

He got the engine restarted, more or less, but it was only running on the right cylinder bank and, besides threatening to rip itself out of its mounts, it was developing virtually no power. From that point on, every direction was down. Quickly putting his life raft and emergency GPS beacon in the right seat, he began giving his GPS position to his flying companions and anyone who would listen.

Dropping clear of the clouds at 1,000 feet, he was happy to see that at least the ocean was cooperating as it was dead calm. Dropping the flaps, he made an icy smooth landing.


As it slowed, the airplane caught a wingtip, which ripped off a tip tank and cartwheeled the machine around. As soon as it stopped moving Horst scrambled out of the cockpit, dragging his life raft with him. The raft was equipped with a survival kit, emergency communications for land and sea, as well as another GPS unit. Unfortunately, his automatic GPS beacon got caught in the airplane, and he had to let it go.

Once in the raft, he was able to relay his situation to Honolulu via the other airplanes, but he was told it would be 10 hours before a ship from Taro could reach him. That would make it about 3 a.m. How would they find him? The answer is, they didn't. He spent a long night calling out Maydays every hour on his radio's sea and air frequencies, but he received no replies. He was a

lonesome airman floating on a cold, empty sea.

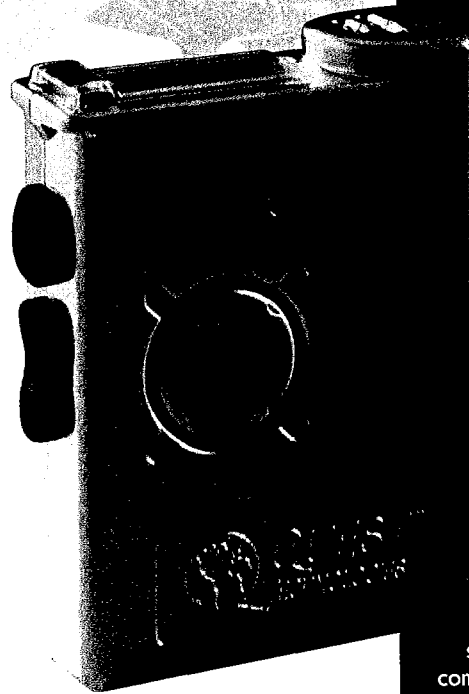
The afternoon of the second day an Australian P-3 Orion, which was on a measurement flight and didn't know Horst was out there, flew over him and he yelled an excited "Mayday" on 121.50 MHz. When the P-3 crew rogered his transmission, Horst was ecstatic. The crew hadn't seen him, but he could see them. So by giving them both GPS location and vectors, they finally located him. Still, it took most of the night

before a patrol boat, the RMIS *Lo-mar*, picked him up. He was cold and exhausted but happy and alive. He turned down the gracious offer to continue the trip with the other two Bonanzas and took the first flight home.

So, who flies little airplanes around the world? It seems there is no stereotypical EarthRounder. They are a cross section of the population with one exception: They act on their dreams. If they decide to do something, they usually do. 

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