

Builder's reputation is flying high

BY JIM SWENSON JIM.SWENSON@THMEDIA.COM | Posted: Friday, September 11, 2015
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Lyle Hefel wouldn't be building his eighth airplane if it wasn't for Richard "Van" VanGrunsven.

Hefel, 79, is a longtime member of the tri-state area's Experimental Aircraft Association Chapter 327, which -- along with the Dubuque Regional Airport -- will host the 26th annual DBQ Airport Open House/EAA Fly-in/Drive-in breakfast on Sunday.

VanGrunsven is the master of homebuilt airplane designs, which are used worldwide. He founded Van's Aircraft Inc. in 1972 in Reedville, Ore., and began selling plans and a few parts for his RV-3 airplane. Today, more than 9,000 RV kits have been completed and flown.

"The performance was so outstanding, people flocked to it," Hefel said. "They are so good, people are willing to build something this complicated because the end result is worth it."

Hefel builds his RV planes inside a large shop on his property near Durango, Iowa. He often is assisted by another longtime EAA Chapter 327 member, Harry Styer, 87.

"I've always been building stuff," Hefel said. "You have to understand, guys like me and Harry grew up during World War II. Our heroes were fighter pilots."

Among them was Clarence Emil "Bud" Anderson, a retired officer in the United States Air Force and a "triple ace" in World War II. The plane Hefel built and is flying now is painted like Anderson's aircraft named "Old Crow."

Since Hefel started building and selling planes in the mid-1990s, he's become quite well known by others who build planes.

"Usually they contact him" about buying one of his planes, Styer said. "He has a good reputation. People get in line."

The most recent plane was sold to a buyer in New Jersey.

"It's flying up and down the Hudson River now," Hefel said.

Other Hefel-built planes have landed in places like Utah, Texas, Colorado and the Quad Cities. Styer



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Harry Styer (left), of Dubuque, and Lyle Hefel, of Durango, Iowa, work together on Hefel's Van's Aircraft RV8 last week.

has built two, with one flying on to South Carolina and the other to Vancouver, Canada.

"I think (Hefel's) addicted to building," said EAA Chapter 327 president Mike Hoffman, of Lancaster, Wis.. "He's built some beautiful airplanes."

Hefel and Styer used to work for John Deere, which helped instill an interest in building things.

"Metal working is kind of in our blood," Styer said.

They started out by flying model airplanes. The radio-controlled models were similar to flying the real thing, which Hefel eventually started doing in the early 1970s. He continues to fly almost every week while Styer no longer does.

Trips to Oshkosh, Wis., and its well-known fly-in events also inspired Hefel to start building planes.

"Another advantage in these homebuilts is, you don't have to pay somebody to do the annual inspection on them," Styer said. Builders can inspect their own planes.

Hefel's newest plane is an RV8. He and Styer still are working on the fuselage. It usually takes about three years to build one.

"They're really fast, cruising at 200 miles per hour with a top speed of 230," Hefel said. "They lend themselves to showing off and doing hazardous things."

Their planes sell for between \$80,000 and \$120,000.

"I like the challenge," of building them, Hefel said. "But it's fun, too."