

Aiming for the sky: Man builds his own plane



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Robert Federhofer has spent over five years building his Van's Aircraft RV-9A that he started in his garage, photographed at Waterloo Regional Airport Friday, June 29, 2012, in Waterloo, Iowa. (MATTHEW PUTNEY / Courier Photo Editor)

WATERLOO, Iowa --- The saying goes, good things come to those who wait.

Robert Federhofer hopes to enjoy the fruits of his long wait soon.

The 62-year-old Hudson man started building his first airplane back in the late 1970s, while he was

working as a flight surgeon for the U.S. Air Force. He finished it a few years later, only to quickly learn the design was flawed and the plane unstable when he first started flying it. He abandoned that plane and flew commercially built aircraft instead.

In the following decades, Federhofer knew he would someday build another. Designs over that time have become more precise and reliable. He started once again five years ago, working from a kit to build a Van's RV-9a, a two-passenger plane that Van's touts as designed for stability and economy.

"We put it in our garage so it was available every day. Every day we can go out for one or two hours, then on weekends hopefully a couple seven-, eight-hour days," Federhofer said.

Federhofer made sure to clear his wife's car of snow and ice in the winter to maintain goodwill regarding the building project, which took up the entire garage.

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Earlier this year, Federhofer moved the plane to a hangar at Livingston Aviation at the Waterloo Regional Airport. There he assembled the plane and worked on wiring and the electronics system.

Some of the kit comes pre-made --- for example, the spurs that form the wings. Others Federhofer and his wife took painstaking efforts to do themselves. It meets the 51 percent home-built standard to qualify as a home-built/amateur craft.

Federhofer has long built model airplanes and said that experience carries over well to building a plane, it's just on a much larger scale.

"It fits my obsessive-compulsive nature," Federhofer said.

But how about his wife? Does she have the patience for years of building as well? Federhofer said she's meticulous too, and that trait served her well as she ran the rivet gun for the many hundreds of rivets needed to assemble the plane.

That attention to detail may pay dividends now as he will soon have to have the Federal Aviation Administration approve the plane before he can fly it. Federhofer documented every part, keeping the original paperwork, protecting them in clear plastic covers and filing them in three-ring binders.

Once the plane is complete, it will be a while before the husband and wife team get to fly together. He will need to fly solo for the first 40 hours, per FAA requirements.

His own flying has taken a back seat in recent years as his spare time has gone to plane construction. But he is eager to reap the rewards of his efforts.

"If you have access to your own airplane you will do more flying," Federhofer said.

The finished RV-9a will be able to fly about 700 miles nonstop, at speeds of 170 to 180 mph and at altitudes up to 16,000 feet. Federhofer can do a lot of Midwestern sightseeing with those abilities.

As it stands now, the plane is still in its native aluminum sheet metal state. Once the initial test flights are complete he will have it painted.

Nationwide, more than 23,000 home-built aircraft are registered with the FAA. The Experimental Aircraft Association says the cost of such planes can range from \$5,000 to \$100,000. Federhofer's plane will come in near the top end of that range.

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