

My Ticket to Ride



Jay Manor found his aviation niche with a sport pilot certificate and an Aeronca Chief 11AC that he restored to a beautiful flying condition.

An Aeronca Chief and a sport pilot certificate paved the way

Jay Manor, EAA 810143

When I was about 7 and playing outside of my southeastern Michigan home, the sudden roar of airplane engines startled me. I looked up and saw three open-cockpit airplanes flying above the bean field that abutted our backyard. The airplanes were just a few feet above the telephone lines. I can still remember looking one pilot in the eyes as he waved to me.

I watched in awe as they slowly disappeared to the west. From that moment on, I was hooked on low-and-slow flying, but it would be three decades before I would begin my own journey.

My first flying lesson was in a Cessna 172 followed by some time in a Cessna 150, but I didn't really enjoy flying until my first flight in a Taylorcraft BC-12D with a local tailwheel flight instructor, Jerry Zerbe. I logged 30 hours in the T-Craft with Jerry but never finished my training. Like most people my age, job and family responsibilities came first; flying would have to wait. Moreover, the syllabus for private pilot training never excited me. I wanted to fly only for the sheer joy of it—day, visual flight rules (VFR) was where I wanted to be. Because the private pilot practical test requirements mandated training with equipment the T-Craft lacked, I would need to transition to a more modern aircraft to earn a private pilot certificate.

But, the tricycle-gear, metal-covered “spam cans” flown at the local flying schools just did not have the cache of the tube-and-fabric aircraft of days gone by. The requirement to transition to such an airplane sapped my motivation. I lost my enthusiasm, and I let my dream of flying fade into the background.

Still, I continued to dabble in flying for almost 10 years, getting

a few hours of dual instruction each year with the local flying school, but it was always in metal aircraft and the only option was a private pilot certificate.

Then I read about a new program that fit my type of flying to a T—the sport pilot certificate. It was not in effect yet, but I understood it soon would be, and I knew that it was the ticket to my ticket. My wife, Susan, always a strong supporter of my dreams, encouraged me to pursue the certificate.

While I had been out of flying, I built a one-third scale, remote-control J-3 Cub. Jerry Zerbe saw it and said, “Jay, if you can build that, you can build the real thing.” With that in mind, I started to a hunt for a project to build. It didn't take long before a couple of old-timers at a grass strip told me about a gentleman who lived not far away and owned an Aeronca Chief 11AC that he might be interested in selling. Twenty minutes later, I was introduced to NC3685E. Wings off, fabric gone, melted windshield, and dirt so thick you could not see the interior; it was a basket case that I immediately fell

in love with. It had not flown for more than 29 years and had been sitting in the back of a barn for most of them. But I knew I could bring it back to life.

Prior to seeing this plane, I had never heard of an Aeronca. Fortunately, the aircraft met the requirements I had when I decided to look for a plane: a 1930s or 1940s era high-wing, fabric-covered, complete rebuild, inexpensive to own and operate, side-by-side seating, and it met the definition of a light-sport aircraft (LSA). My wife insisted on side-by-side seating because, she said, “I can't hold your hand if I'm sitting behind you.” Who could turn that down?

I was fortunate to have a friend, Paul Brent, who is an airframe and powerplant (A&P) mechanic with an inspection authorization. He went with me to look at the project a couple of days after my initial inspection and indicated it was a 100-percent rebuild, but the good news was that all the components were there. Many times rebuild projects are missing a number of hard-to-find cockpit items, but not in this

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case. What came out of the factory in 1947 was still there, including the logbooks, original engine, and original metal prop.

After verifying the 11AC fit within the LSA category, and after a brief negotiation with the owner—a negotiation the owner won—NC3685E was all mine and being trailered back to my home where I would begin a 21-month rebuild. The two of us would begin to get to know each other well.

I quickly realized I really didn't know what I was doing and, with my wife's encouragement, found a man who would be instrumental in the rebuild and become a good friend along the way. Paul Gould from Sardinia, Ohio, is a past Oshkosh grand champion winner for his rebuild of Aeronca 11AC, NC9526E, and he is one of the most patient people I have met. Paul inspired me to rebuild the Chief back to factory specifications. His passion and love for doing restoration work correctly is contagious. He's an encyclopedia of knowledge on the Chief and directed me to correct colors, rebuild techniques, and proper materials. Whenever I would express frustration at completing a task, Paul would say, "Jay, if it was easy, old ladies and little kids would be doing it."

When Paul did not have a particular answer, he was not shy in referring me to his circle of friends. That's how I met Bill Pancake from Keyser, West Virginia. Bill, like Paul, is a past Oshkosh grand champion winner and is known within the Aeronca world as an expert in all things Aeronca. Bill built a 7AC completely from factory drawings and, like Paul, is a gentleman and as patient as a saint. Without these two men and Paul Brent, the plane would still be sitting in my garage. Bill's knowledge of wings and engines is second to none. Both Paul Gould and Bill patiently took hundreds of calls from me. I cannot thank both of these gentlemen enough.

The most satisfying part of a rebuild, I discovered, is the people you meet along the way and the friendships you develop. The aviation community reminds me of my days in military service in the aspect that everyone in the community shares a common bond. Once they see that you wear the same uniform, they're willing to lend a hand.



Aeronca Chief NC3685E hadn't flown for 29 years and spent most of that time stored in a barn when Jay discovered it.

With the help of Paul Gould, who's restored an Aeronca Chief to grand champion status, and others, Jay did a complete rebuild to factory specifications.



Jay restored the panel to its original configuration, with the original knobs and plates, and added a handheld GPS and radio to the panel to accommodate flying in today's world.

Through the FAA I ordered the complete history of NC3685E and discovered that after being test-flown on March 30, 1947, it sat for nearly nine months and was then sold for \$1 to the Aeronca Flying Club in Middleton, Ohio. Very few hours were put on the plane over the next two years before it was sold to a dealer in South Dakota, who promptly sold it to the first of five owners. Over the next 28 years, it remained in South Dakota. I have been fortunate to be able to talk to all of the owners, including the original owner's grandson (the original owner having passed away before my time with the plane). I enjoyed hearing the many stories they each shared with me about their experiences, and I even received some early pictures and maintenance invoices of the plane. It was obvious to me they all loved their time with NC3685E.

Twenty-one months and countless hours of labor after bringing the plane home, it was time for its second maiden flight. This is where Jerry Zerbe re-entered the picture. I now live one and a half hours from

An Affordable LSA Option. . .

Jay Manor said, "If you want something bad enough and have some basic skills, you can make it happen." That's his take on finding an affordable sport pilot-eligible aircraft.

He purchased his Aeronca Chief 11AC for \$7,500 and put approximately another \$23,000 into the restoration. That includes an engine overhaul, new spars, struts, rudder horn, upholstery fabric, cables, pulleys, hardware, glass, rubber, paint, one wheel, and a prop overhaul... "and 21 months of my labor, with help from friends."

Jay added, "You can purchase a flying Aeronca Chief from between \$15,000 to \$35,000, but unless you rebuild an older airplane like my Chief from the ground up, you're never quite sure what you have."

For those folks distressed about the current cost of new, ready-to-fly LSA, Jay suggests they consider restoring a classic like his Chief.



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Off to the airport the 11A goes to have its wings fitted.

The entire Manor family gets involved with washing the airplane after a day of flying.

Jay's wife, Susan, made only one request of his aircraft—she wanted it to have side-by-side seating. "Otherwise, how will I be able to hold your hand?" she asked. "Who could resist that," Jay said.

The restored airplane sits alongside a taxiway at Dalton Airport in Flushing, Michigan.






Jerry, but I knew all along he was the only tailwheel instructor I trusted to help me obtain my sport pilot certificate. Jerry met me at my local airport on July 13, 2006, to be my test pilot. Shortly after he arrived, he was in the air in my creation for a 40-minute flight over the airport.

It is hard to put into words the pride I felt seeing the old Aeronca back in the air. I wondered if anyone around the airport might be looking up at the plane, and if so, did they have any idea they were looking at a classic piece of aviation experiencing wind under its wings for the first time in 32 years?

The plane checked out well with the usual first flight issues of wing heaviness and excess yawing; however, the engine performed well, and we were soon in the air for the trip to Jerry's home airport for what would turn out to be about five weeks of training for my certificate.

Jerry soloed me in 10 hours and had me ready for my checkride 18.2 hours beyond the solo. The checkride was thorough, but I felt ready and confident. On the rollout of my soft-field landing, the examiner said, "You did well; you passed."

It has now been more than a year since the Aeronca returned to the air, and I have logged nearly 60 hours with it. We are still getting to know each other, but I think it will be a long friendship.

If not for the sport pilot certificate, I would still be on the ground wishing I were in the air. For those of us who desire to fly by ourselves or with a spouse or close friend just to enjoy the scenery or make short trips, sport pilot is the perfect ticket. It's inexpensive and fun. I have no need for anything else. 

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