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Engaging With You...

Recharges my aviation batteries

Throughout the year, I'm invited to speak at numerous events across the country, ranging from EAA chapter activities to gatherings of members and aviation enthusiasts at airports large and small. It's a great opportunity to engage with the aviation community outside of Oshkosh. While EAA AirVenture Oshkosh gives me a chance to talk with members from every corner of the globe, it isn't the same as meeting members in the field, at their home airports or chapter buildings.

Recently my wife, Sharon, and I traveled to California to participate in the EAA Chapter 1 Open House at Flabob Airport. On the way to Flabob, we visited the open house at Aircraft Spruce & Specialty. I remember when the company was started in Fullerton, California, by the late Bob and Flo Irwin. The company is now guided by their son, Jim, his wife, Nancy, and the Irwin family. They are great supporters of EAA and active leaders in the aviation community.

During the open house I went on a tour with Desiree Czaplinski of Aircraft Spruce. A number of vendors, such as Bose and Garmin, were on hand. While talking with these vendors, I learned that people are still making purchases that allow them to keep flying, retrofit their airplanes, or maintain them safely, but the economy is having an impact. Affordable flying opportunities are becoming a bigger priority. But one thing's for certain, the passion for flying is still there.

After I left Aircraft Spruce, I stopped at the Corona Municipal Airport. It's an active airport with many vintage and homebuilt aircraft. As I was driving around I saw a Pietenpol, Fly Baby, and a Luscombe sitting outside between a row of T-hangars. I stopped and sat down at a picnic table with six or seven pilots who had just been out flying and were now "hangar flying." We talked briefly about EAA and flying and, most importantly, about their airplanes. It reinforced to me the importance of aviation friendships, which are the core of EAA's culture.

Many times Sharon and I have said that our best friends

are those we've made as a result of aviation, even though they are located all around the United States and throughout the world. Though aviation brings us together, we find that we share many common interests outside of aviation.


As I left the hangars and drove past the fuel pumps, I saw a small porch with a couple of benches called "Barney's Bench." It was a Saturday afternoon, and about six or seven people were sitting together watching airplanes take off and land...enjoying the atmosphere and conversation that comes from a day at the airport.

On to Flabob Airport, which has been around for more than 60 years. The airport was almost lost to developers, but fortunately, EAAer Tom Wathen purchased it and has since expanded the facilities and developed an aviation charter high school.

I have been asked why Chapter 1 is in Riverside, California, not Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where EAA was founded. It's because EAA member and Riverside resident Ray Stits conceived of the chapter program, which has become one of the most important aspects of EAA with

almost 1,000 chapters worldwide. Chapter 1 is one of our most active EAA chapters, having flown more than 12,000 Young Eagles. Its members are active builders, restorers, and designers. Flabob Airport is a revered location because of the unique businesses and hangars that tell a story that are part of aviation's lore.

I addressed an afternoon audience and shared the podium that evening with Burt Rutan. Between programs, Burt and I toured Flabob and had a chance to reminisce about the last 40 to 50 years of homebuilt aircraft design and development. His fertile mind continues to visualize an exciting future.

The trip recharged my aviation batteries, talking with members who enjoy the essence of aviation—flying, building, restoring, and most importantly, conversation and community. These EAA basics never go out of style. Airplanes bring us together, but the real story of EAA is the people. 

It reinforced to me the importance of relationships, which are the core of EAA's culture.