

"Father of Ultralights" Recalls First-Ever Oshkosh Flights

Countless examples of aviation firsts are on display every day at EAA's AirVenture Museum. Replicas of the 1903 Wright Brothers' Flyer, the Spirit of St. Louis, and the Rutans' Voyager, Don Taylor's actual Thorp T-18, the first homebuilt to fly around the world, to name a few. When visiting AirVenture Oshkosh 2001 this year, head over to AirVenture Museum to see another aircraft that, while not as famous, certainly had a huge impact on recreational aviation.

Hanging from the ceiling in the Cessna Aeronautical Restoration Center is an Easy Riser, a motorized Icarus II hang glider which is similar to the first motorized ultralight flown at an EAA Convention and Fly-in in 1976. (Nearby is a Solar Riser, the first solar-powered ultralight based on the same wing.) The pilot/creator of that is John Moody, whose introduction of powered ultralight flight to EAAs at Oshkosh earned him the nickname, "The Father of Ultralights."

It was a monumental **aviation first** that came very close to an aviation worst, as Moody recently recalled.

Then from Milwaukee, Moody called his strange-looking aircraft "the first registered, experimental, homebuilt, foot-launched, powered hang glider." The Icarus II hang glider was a swept-back, tail-less biwing, equipped with a two-cycle McCulloch 101 engine. Needless to say, it generated a lot of interest.



After several non-eventful flights during the first days of the convention, Moody set out on Tuesday morning, Aug. 3, to demonstrate his aircraft to a new group of curious onlookers.

"It was windy that morning," he said recently from his home in Brandon, Florida. "I wanted to show the people how maneuverable this new aircraft was." Moody then described attempting a move he compared to a hammerhead—slow down, pitch up and wing over—but before he knew it he was, hanging upside down at 400 feet!

"I didn't realize what I was doing," he said. "The aircraft did three and-a-half tumbles before I was able to regain control about 50 feet off the ground." Moody credits the airplane itself and God with saving his life. "I had nothing to do with it. I was only a passenger at that point in a truly remarkable and forgiving aircraft." Actually, calm and quick thinking led Moody to release the engine's kill switch that he held in his teeth, and the aircraft righted itself before descending to the ground.

Many people—including EAA Board members at the time—interpreted the impromptu aerobatics as showing off and Moody was immediately banned from flying the aircraft again on the convention grounds. But Moody said that simply was not the case. "I made a stupid mistake, and I did not want the aircraft to get a bad reputation from it," he said. "There are few pilots who cannot remember sometime in their flying career when they did something dumb and, by the grace of God, lived to tell the tale and become a better and much wiser pilot."

Several days later, Moody pleaded with the board to let him fly his ultralight again, not for his sake but for the airplane's. The board ultimately relented and the rest is history. The next year, six ultralights attended the convention. 25 more showed up the year after that. By 1979 there were more than 120 ultralights on the grounds, in the first official Ultralight Area. Moody and his employees from Ultralight Flying Machines of Wisconsin served as volunteer convention chairs. Nowadays approximately 400 ultralight aircraft attend AirVenture.

Moody went on to operate his ultralight aircraft business for eight years, "Three good ones and five not so good ones," he said. One of his first customers was Bill Lishman, current head of Operation Migration and subject of the movie, "Fly Away Home." Moody was a charter inductee to EAA's Ultralight Hall of Fame in 1999.

Today Moody is a mechanical engineer with PAE Systems, Tampa, manufacturer of full-flight simulators. He still flies, and has performed in the largest air show in Venezuela, a biannual affair, three times.

"I enjoyed it," said the Father of the Ultralights of his pioneering efforts. "I thank the Lord I'm still around. I guess I do have a spot in aviation history."