

I'm writing this from the dubious comfort of an airline seat, heading home to Florida after selling my baby. That is, my beautiful RV-8, N118KB. I received a fair price and the plane is going to a nice guy who has promised (in writing, even) to give me first dibs on buying it back at the same price when it comes time for him to sell. You might think I'd be pleased to be pocketing such a good amount of money, which funds I need for a down payment on our new house, and even I anticipated just such a feeling, but you'd be wrong. In fact, I feel decidedly conflicted.

I feel, mostly, as though I just had to shoot Old Yeller. I feel as though I've betrayed a loyal friend and, while the necessity of the sale was unquestionable, the aftertaste is decidedly unpleasant. Nearly everyone who owns an airplane will eventually sell it. For some, that day will be one of relief and even joy, to varying degrees. Homebuilders, however, are largely a different breed. Perhaps a certain amount of sentimentality is understandable, considering our very intimate involvement with the creation of our airplanes. We spend years nurturing our projects in the shop during their sometimes difficult gestations, and just as much time (if not more) dreaming of the adventures we'll have together when the new addition finally joins the family.

An airplane project truly becomes a member of the family during the years of its construction. Parts and completed assemblies are as much residents of a homebuilder's house as its human inhabitants. Every available space is fair game for storage. In my case, one entire spare bedroom was devoted to the project. All the empennage pieces were laid out on the floor, as well as the flaps, ailerons, pushrods, and electrical supplies. The wings were stored up against one wall of our living room, the prop lived behind the couch, the completed canopy resided in my office, and the kitchen table was entirely given over to the instrument panel and all its components for over a year. Yes, my wife is a saint: just ask her!

Needless to say, our garage didn't house our cars. It was entirely given over to aircraft production since before the empennage kit arrived in early December, 1999 until the completed airplane went to the airport in April, 2002. During those nearly 2.5 years, I learned a lot, both about metal airplane construction and about myself. I learned that I had the resourcefulness and grit to manage the logistical demands of an involved project, to tough out the difficult spots in the construction process, and to see my vision of the perfect sportplane through to fruition.

I was fortunate enough to realize many of my dreams for our RV. In N118KB I made several round trips between Massachusetts and Florida, one eventful trip to Oregon and a less stressful return home. I attended many regional breakfasts and flyins in and around New England and made many new friends, both in person and online in the thriving RV community to be found in cyberspace. In our RV-8, my wife Jean finally learned to relax in a small airplane, slowly evolving from her earlier tearful, white-knuckled terror to an amiable accommodation with GA flying. She participated, and took nearly as much pride and pleasure as did I, in twice showing our airplane at Sun-n-Fun. She should have been proud: she bucked every rivet on that RV which I couldn't reach myself and was as much its rightful owner as I could claim to be.

Some of my dreams for the RV went unrealized. We never made it to Oshkosh together, we never attended Van's Homecoming, we didn't make it to Key West or to the Bahamas, and we never won an airshow award. That's all okay, though, because the most important goal of all was fully realized: We flew together safely from beginning to end. I never hurt her and she never hurt me. She was lively, dependable, and true. What more could one ask from an airplane?

Now we'll move on to the next phase of our lives. A new house, which with Jean's touch will become our new home. A new oversized three-car garage in which to putter. A garage which will seldom house our cars, but which will shelter and witness the birth of our next airplane project, a Pitts Model 12. Somewhere out there, our RV-8 will take to the skies with a new owner at the controls, but we'll always love her and I, for one, believe she knows it.

They say that all things must pass, and that even the most treasured relationship will end, in one fashion or another. They say that, but they don't know how it feels to take a pile of inanimate parts and to create with them a living thing, a miraculous aeronautical steed, a friend. We know. We know in our hearts that the relationship between a homebuilder and the airplane he crafted, the product of his dreams and imagination, will never, can never, end. Legal ownership can be transferred, yes, even bought and sold, but the bond between a homebuilder and his airplane is forever.