



Virginia Aviation History Project Report

Norm Crabill



Well, I've done it again. More stories about Tidewater airports and people. Buz Rich flies out of Williamsburg-Jamestown (JGG), and the Grows and Corbett flew out of the old airport at Gloucester. But their stories offer a view of "flying-for-fun" that seems to be disappearing as we move into a world of glass cockpits and computers. When was the last time you "flew-for-fun"? Write in and tell me about it and I'll publish it, especially if it was west of RIC and certainly if it was west of ROA.



Buz Helps Others Fly High

By Sharon D. Dillon, Reporter

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FRANKLIN — This guy started it all. The Franklin Chapter of the Experimental Aircraft Association (EAA) became the dynamic group it is because of this man. This and many other aviation achievements over the years made Claude "Buz" Rich one of the men of the year at the 2004 EAA AirVenture in Oshkosh, WI. He was one of 10 aviators worldwide to receive the coveted Major Achievement Award.

This award recognizes EAA members who have contributed significantly to their local aviation communities. AirVenture is a weeklong event that attracts more than 12,000 aircraft and their owners each summer as well as thousands of aviation enthusiasts.



photo Buz Rich

Buz Rich in his Pitt's Special S-1S. Buz built this, and has been flying it for 27 years.

“I grew up wanting to fly,” said Rich as he talked about a life so full that this article can only describe a few of his achievements. Rich said that as a child he built models and was occasionally treated to a flight in his uncle’s aircraft.

From there he graduated from the Air Force Academy in 1966 and served 28 years as a fighter pilot, retiring as a Colonel in 1994. At that time Rich’s wife recently had died of breast cancer and he decided a stable home life for his three daughters was more important than continuing his Air Force career.

During his Air Force career Rich flew the F-4 Phantom II and logged 351 combat missions. In his free time he built a Pitts Special (a biplane) from scratch then flew it in aerobatic competitions for a number of years. Despite his Air Force and family duties Rich built the Pitts in only two and a half years. He flew it in aerobatic competitions until he was again assigned to Europe.

Then his focus temporarily changed. Rich explained, “At Hahn Air Force Base in Germany we had a lot of standby time. So many of us began to build model aircraft during our waiting time. Soon we were building and flying radio controlled craft.”

After retiring from the Air Force Rich and his daughters moved to Williamsburg where he became active with the Williamsburg EAA Chapter and started restoring classic aircraft. Since then he has restored a 1954 Cessna 170B, a 1960 Beech Bonanza and finished restoring a 1940 Piper J-3 Cub. At one point he sold the Cessna to finance the work on the Bonanza. He regularly flies all three of his aircraft.

Then he decided to build his own house. He said, “I went to the library and got a book on how to frame a house and started work. Mostly I just worked with a small crew. But I needed some professional help with parts of the roof where there are complicated peaks.” He and his daughters moved into the house in 2000. The floors are made from hickory he cut in West Virginia specially to fit.

Asked why he has tackled so many diverse projects Rich said, “Everyone has a to-do list. Mine included restoring a Corvette and running the 1993 New York City marathon.”

Along the way Rich started the Williamsburg Scout Aviation Explorer post, serves as judge for the National Intercollegiate Flying Award competition and is a founding member of the Williamsburg Chapter of the Virginia Aeronautical Historical Society the largest chapter in Virginia.

He speaks to local groups and does what he can to ensure that free EAA Young Eagle Flights are available to any youngster aged 8-17 who would like to try taking a turn in the cockpit. So far Rich has personally flown 133 youngsters and made sure many others had rides with his flying friends. The Young Eagles program was started in 1993 to provide one million student flights before the 100th anniversary of flight, Dec. 17, 2003. The program was so successful that the EAA is continuing the flights. Rich added, “We also offer ‘Old Buzzard’ flights for adults.” Rich also contributes to the Aviation-Space Camp held at the Wakefield 4-H Center each year. He hopes to see more activities in the schools and at local airports.

This is just the tip of the iceberg of Rich’s achievements. But he declined to elaborate on the details. He said, “I’d rather you tell the readers about the great aviation events that are coming up and let them



Buz Rich proudly stands next to a picture of an F-4 Phantom he flew in the Air Force

know that they don't have to be pilots to join an EAA chapter. We are just as happy to see aviation enthusiasts as pilots."

He then added that the Franklin chapter, though only a year old, has more than 70 members and has many activities planned. Rich said that the Franklin EAA chapter meets on the third Saturday of each month at 10:30 a.m. in the Franklin terminal building. The Williamsburg Chapter meets at the Williamsburg terminal building at 7:30 p.m. on the third Tuesday of each month.

Some upcoming events include the Virginia State EAA Fly-in at the Petersburg Airport on Sep. 18; a Franklin-Williamsburg-Chesapeake fly-in at the Franklin Airport on Oct 16 and a Women Air Service Pilots (WASP) reunion in late October. WASPs were the women who flew transport and training aircraft during World War II.

On Oct. 29-31 a B-17 will be offered flights at the Newport News Airport at the Mercury Aviation hangar. The B-17 tour is a special program offered by the EAA to introduce people to the aircraft of WWII. These flights are very expensive, \$395, because the EAA relies on the ticket sales to keep the aircraft flying. In fact the EAA's "Aluminum Overcast" had to be grounded in July. At the last minute they found and prepared a substitute aircraft and are using a borrowed B-17, "Fuddy Duddy" in its place.

How did he come by the nickname, "Buz?" Not the way you probably think. When Rich was at the Academy he ran track and cross-country. His team members said he buzzed past the finish line and started calling him Buzzer. Over time that was shortened to Buz, but he continued to use Buzzer as his call sign when in the air. Needless to say, Rich is still buzzing.



Gloucester Airport - "W-57"

by David Grow

The *Evans Airport* in Gloucester County, Virginia was opened in 1947 by Al Evans, who operated *Evans Clearing Corporation* in a plant at the south end of the airport. The company made stump pullers and heavy duty winches for logging and military trucks. Later it was purchased by Fred Ames, local lawyer and non-pilot. In 1965 the airport was bought by Art Lazero, Horace Gray, Earl Robbins, Clyde Royals, Dr. Bill Brown, and Frances Mellar, who formed *Gloucester Air*, changed the name to *Gloucester County Airport* and hired W. J. Colby as manager, with Mellar later purchasing the entire company.



photo from David Grow

David Grow's Stearman N79M