



# Full circle with Dick Willetts and his Comedy Cub Capers

By Sparky Barnes · March 21, 2022 · 4 Comments



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Lifting off the runway and making history all over again!

Dick Willetts of Albia, Iowa, is an integral part of air show history, performing his Comedy Cub Capers for 50 years.

And just last year, he celebrated the restoration of his beloved Cub at Antique Airfield ([IA27](#)) during the 2021 [Antique Airplane Association](#) annual fly-in.

Now 94, Dick says he latched on to aviation “the first time I heard about an airplane.”

“I couldn’t think of anything else. I don’t know why, but that’s the way it was,” he says, recalling his first flight as a teenager.

While waiting to be called to service in World War II, he was able to take a few flight lessons.

That was put on hold when he entered the service in 1944. He was sent to Germany, where he was a crew chief on a P-51 Mustang, but he didn’t get a chance to fly while he was in the Army Air Corps.



Dick Willetts with his Comedy Capers Cub in the background.

After the war, he returned to Iowa, where he had a long career working with the Railway Mail Service. A few years after he returned to Iowa, he earned his private pilot certificate. He enjoyed flying so much that he went on to earn other ratings, including his commercial certificate, instrument ratings, and more.

At various times Dick owned a Globe Swift, Christen Eagle, and a Cessna 172. But nearest and dearest to his heart and humor was NC88567, a 1946 Piper J-3 Cub, which he purchased in 1958.

With that Cub, Dick developed his own air show routines, dressing like a hillbilly and clowning around, then flying fun aerobatics using his talented and elegant piloting skills.



Dick Willetts did a comedy air show act for 50 years with this Cub. (Photo Courtesy Antique Airplane Association Archives)

Dick flew his comedy routine at various locations for 50 years, delighting crowds and inspiring other pilots, including fellow Iowan air show pilot Erik Edgren. Edgren, who for many years has enjoyed “Twistin’ it Old School!” in his T-Clips (clipped wing Taylorcraft), often paid tribute to Dick Willetts during his aerobatic comedy routines.

“I do a maneuver he taught me and I named after him — the Willetts Whifferdill, which is basically a ‘buried’ vertical snap,” said Erik.



In volume three of her “Iowa Takes to the Air” trilogy, Ann Holtgren Pellegrino wrote: “He performed a Crazy Cub act — barely taking off, flying crookedly, dipping up and down, and disappearing behind a hill if one was nearby. In Iowa and surrounding states, he has entertained thousands of spectators at flight breakfasts, airport dedications, and air shows.”

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Just a few posters from airshows Dick has performed in.

When asked what he enjoyed the most about his comedy routine, Dick chuckled and gave a lighthearted response: “Oh, getting by with it and not being arrested!”

“I used to get grass stains on my wingtips pretty regular, and I wouldn’t like to do that in anything but a Cub,” he recalls. “I played made-up characters — Zeke Gulliwater and Harvey Klutzworth — and they got into whatever mischief came into my head — just whatever I felt like doing at the time. I was lucky to get away with it.”



Dick Willetts commonly had grass stains on his wingtips after a show. (Photo Courtesy Antique Airplane Association Archives)

Besides his piloting skills, Dick's play acting was astounding, according to Harve Applegate of Queen City, Missouri, who grew up watching Dick flying in air shows.

"I've known Dick my whole life and have always admired him," he says. "As I got older, we visited more and got to be good friends. Dick didn't live too far away from me, and we'd go out for supper occasionally. And of course we always had our kids along as they came up, so we were family friends."

That's why it made perfect sense that when it was time for Dick to relinquish his beloved Cub, he wanted Harve and Carolyn Applegate to be its new caretakers, on behalf of their aviation-aficionado, special-needs son, Matt, with whom Dick had bonded through the decades.





Dick Willetts and Matt Applegate are happy to see the old Cub restored.

“It wasn’t really hard to let the Cub go,” said Dick. “I had a pretty good run with it.”

It was the day after Christmas in 2020 when the Applegates got a phone call from Dave Coop, Dick’s close friend. He told them, “the weather’s good this afternoon so I can fly it down to you.”



“That turned out to be the last good flying day that whole winter,” Harve remembers. “I didn’t even have a hangar for it at the time, but my friend and mechanic Leo Fox made a place for it in his maintenance hangar for a few weeks, until I had space in mine.”



Harve Applegate restored the Cub in 90 days. (And no, the fictitious character “Harvey Klutzworth” isn’t named after Harve!)

## Recovered in Record Time

Harve’s winter months provide a brief respite from his full-time farming schedule, and he’s often used that time to maintain and restore vintage airplanes. He knew Dick’s faithful old Cub needed recovering, and though he had just finished restoring a Verner-powered 1937 Rearwin 9000 Sportster a few months earlier and was ready for a break from the shop, he wasted no time. As soon as he brought NC88567 over to his own hangar, he started disassembling it.

“That was in January 2021, and Dick wasn’t doing very well health-wise at that time, so I wanted to finish the Cub so he could see it all redone,” Harve says.

Working under the supervision of IA Leo Fox, Harve plunged into the project at warp intensity and finished recovering the Cub in 90 days.



The Cub at Antique Airfield.

“The airframe was in good shape,” he says. “Brent Taylor had recovered it around the early 1990s, and his work was good. But it was time to recover it.”

“The wood spars and aluminum ribs were in good shape and the birdcage needed just a little bit of welding,” he continues.

The firewall was good, but a new boot cowl was needed. Harve was going to order one from Univair, but they were on back order. Since he was on a tight deadline, he went up to sheet metal craftsman Brian Stansbury in Iowa, and Brian made a new boot cowling. Harve used Ceconite and applied Randolph coatings on NC88567 with a compressed air system and a high volume, low pressure paint cup.

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Harve followed his sentimental instincts when he decided against sprucing up the Cub's front floorboard.

“I did not touch that front floorboard other than just to clean it a little. Everybody knew that when Dick flew his comedy act, and even if he was just going out for a local flight around the airport, he always flew in the front seat. The paint was worn off the front floorboard when I got the Cub, but they look brand new in the back. I left them like that — that's part of Dick Willetts that stays with this airplane, along with the front seat cushions he sat in.”



Tracks from the past: The well-worn floorboard remains intact as a tribute to Dick Willetts and his half-century of comedy Cub flying.

Harve finished the Cub in early April 2021, and flew the short hop to Albia to show it to Dick. It was an emotional reunion for Dick.

“He was in tears, but he was happy and excited, and told me I surely brightened up his day,” recalls Harve. “I tried to get him to go flying that day, but he didn’t feel up to it.”



Dick and Harve relaxing with the Cub during the Antique Airplane Association fly-in in September 2021.

Fortunately, Dick was feeling better by Labor Day, and Dave Coop brought him to Antique Airfield for an afternoon during the annual fly-in. After a bit of reminiscing by the Cub, Harve asked Dick whether he’d like to go for a flight.

At 94, Dick made history yet again in NC88567, when he sat in the front seat, his feet sliding across the floorboard in his own well-worn, scuffed tracks.

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“That was the highlight of my year, actually having him fly the Cub,” Harve says. “When we got up to 300 feet or so, I said, ‘it’s all yours, Dick.’ He started doing some dutch rolls and he did fine. He played with it for about 10 minutes out there.”



Harve and Dick taxi out for a flight at Antique Airfield.

“It all came back to him,” he continues. “He’s the oldest guy I’ve ever flown with. And it really was good just having him out here during the fly-in, where he could be with us and visit. It couldn’t have worked out any better.”



Harve Applegate lands the Cub as Dick Willetts strikes a relaxed pose and glances over at the crowd at Antique Airfield. Note Dick's autograph on the open Cub door. (Photo by Eric Ruediger, all other photos by Sparky Barnes unless otherwise noted)

Sitting by the nose of NC88567, Dick's fun-loving spirit emanated in a mischievous glint in his eyes and a smile when he shared, "I'd been flying for 70 years, and that's not very usual. It's been a pretty good run!"

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## Comments

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Phil Dacy says

March 22, 2022 at 3:25 pm

We had the absolute pleasure of working with Dick at countless Airshows throughout the years-he was an incredible showman and an even better guy. That mule ride from Arkansas must have given him time to rest his voice, because he could always be heard clearly yelling from the Cub!

[Reply](#)

Forrest D Seale says

March 22, 2022 at 8:03 am

Love that he still can grab the stick for a while. Gives me hope that I can still do the same 17 short years from now!

[Reply](#)

SHARON TINKLER says

March 22, 2022 at 7:34 am

I didn't know Dick personally, but did see him perform in the late nineties when I was learning to fly. He remained my favorite airshow act to this day because he flew the wing, and not the engine. The Applegates are dear friends, so the depth of love of Harve for the restoration is known to be in his character. Sparky captures that love so well without being "smarmy" – is that a word? Another Sparky masterpiece.

Reply

JS says

March 22, 2022 at 4:38 am

Dick Willetts, an old dear friend that has been one of my mentors in aviation for nearly 50 years now. I have had the privilege of calling Dick my friend for most of my life, have flown with him, and next to him many times over the years. It's great to see the Cub restored and I was pleased to see that Dick got to go play with it again after it's restoration.

Reply

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