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Flying priest pilots to land in Dubuque

BY OLIVIA GARRETT olivia.garrett@thmedia.com

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Phil Gibbs



The Hemann brothers: the Rev. John Hemann (from left), the Rev. Everett Hemann, and the Rev. Melvin Hemann.

When the Rev. Phil Gibbs was a boy, he'd admire the planes flying above.

"I'd look up into the summer air, and I'd see an airplane," said Gibbs, pastor of Church of the Resurrection in Dubuque. "I thought, what a wonderful way to be free."

Gibbs isn't the only one with an eye on the heavens in both a religious and physical sense. On Monday, July 12, Gibbs will welcome two dozen fellow priests who are also pilots to Dubuque for the annual meeting of the National Association of Priest Pilots.

Several "flying padres" intend to fly in on their personal aircraft, landing at Dubuque Regional Airport.

Iowa and Dubuque priests have been a part of NAPP since the beginning.

Gibbs learned to fly with the encouragement of his fellow priests in the Archdiocese of Dubuque, including Melvin, John and Everett Hemann. The brothers were all both priests and pilots.

When NAPP met for its first meeting in 1964, the Hemann brothers were there. Today, Monsignor John Hemann, 86, is the NAPP treasurer.

NAPP began when two priest pilots from Kentucky decided to fly together to California for a vacation in 1963, John Hemann said.

At each stop to refuel, the priests asked if anyone there knew a flying priest. Several times, the answer was yes. When they got back to Kentucky, the two men wrote letters to Flying Magazine and the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association magazine asking fellow priest pilots to connect with them.

Enough priests responded that they decided to plan a get-together in Carrolton, Ky., for 1964.

“We got to Kentucky and were surprised at how many actually showed up,” John Hemann said. “There were 86 at the first meeting.”

The priests invited record-setting pilot Max Conrad, who flew around the world in 1961, as a guest speaker. One parish priest brought Jerrie Mock, the first woman to fly solo around the world, as his guest.

John Hemann said he was the one who introduced the two at the meeting.

“I had the pleasure of introducing the two people in the world who have the two flying-around-the-world records,” he said.

Over the years, the Archdiocese of Dubuque remained a stronghold of priest pilots.

“At one time, the Archdiocese of Dubuque had the largest number of pilots of any diocese,” John Hemann said. “The Hemanns had something to do with it.”

Both Everett, who died in 2012, and Melvin Hemann were flying instructors who taught many to fly.

John Hemann sold his plane five years ago, though he’s still a regular at pilot gatherings in Clear Lake, Iowa, where he lives. He’ll be making his way to Dubuque this week.

Today, Gibbs is the only NAPP member in Dubuque. Many have retired, and there haven’t been as many new priest pilots.

“They’re hard to come by, young priests,” Gibbs said. “And then aspiring to fly, that’s a whole different story.”

Gibbs tries to get out to fly his plane and “stretch his wings” once every two weeks.

“It provides me a sense of escape and release,” Gibbs said. “It takes my mind off of all the other things.”