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Dr. Mitch Hargin of Clarinda, Iowa built his Canard Pusher E-Racer. Hargin had been a pilot for 30 years and has built or restored five planes.

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Published Friday September 2, 2011

Iowa pilot builds own aircraft

By Kent Dinnebier
WORLD-HERALD NEWS SERVICE

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CLARINDA, Iowa — Dr. Mitch Hargin has a better understanding than most pilots what it must have been like for brothers Orville and Wilbur Wright to make their historic airplane flight at Kitty Hawk, N.C., in 1903.

Like the Wrights, Hargin has built and then flown an aircraft.

"It gives you a real sense of satisfaction that you've accomplished something," he said.

Most recently, Hargin built a Canard Pusher E-Racer and flew it to Oshkosh, Wis., to attend AirVenture in July.

"AirVenture is the state fair of airplanes, so anyone that's excited about airplanes goes to Oshkosh. It's the mecca of homebuilt aircraft. If you want to show off your airplane, that's the place to go," Hargin said.

It took about seven years to get Hargin's Canard Pusher E-Racer from the drawing board to the runway at AirVenture.

Hargin bought the first materials in 2004 and had the plane certified in August 2010.

Although there were plenty of milestones during the construction process, Hargin admitted he hit his share of turbulence.

For example, Hargin said he had difficulty getting the \$25,000 motor in the plane to start.

"We were having a party at the hangar and I asked Milo Beery about it. He looked the motor over and pointed at the mixture control and said I had it on backward. I turned it around and it started right up," Hargin said.

Hargin also said getting the retractable landing gear to work properly also was an ordeal.

"Building the plane was actually easier than I thought, but it takes a lot of time," Hargin said.

After getting the airplane certified, Hargin had to complete 40 hours of test flights to ensure there were no mechanical problems and to confirm that it was safe for prolonged flights.

"After a plane is certified, you have to fly 40 hours within a 25-mile radius of where it's based. It took me about a year to fly those hours off," Hargin said.

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When the Wrights made their historic first flight they were airborne for just 12 seconds.

Although Hargin fared better than that, he only managed to shave about three minutes off of his 40 hours the first time the Canard Pusher E-Racer was airborne.

"It was scary. On the first flight I had no aileron control, which means you can't roll left or right. So I had to turn the plane with the rudder and make an emergency landing," he said.

Hargin said he had no idea the plane did not have aileron control when he took off. He estimated a month passed before he resolved that problem and was able to make another test flight.

"At first, every time I went up I had something to work on to get all the bugs out. It seemed like I would fly for an hour and then spend a month working on the plane," Hargin said.

Finally Hargin took off on July 30 with the hopes of attending AirVenture. He surpassed his 40-hour mark just within the 25-mile radius of the Clarinda airport and was able to proceed to Oshkosh.

Hargin said he wanted to attend AirVenture because Burt Rutan was being honored for his contributions to aviation. Rutan was the designer and inventor of Canard airplanes.

"A lot of people think they're flying backward when they look at them because the propellers are in the rear and push the plane," Hargin said.

Even though Canard airplanes were featured at AirVenture as part of the salute to Rutan, the Canard Pusher E-Racer turned plenty of heads.

The futuristic-looking airplane has side-by-side seating with center joystick control and is faster and more economical on fuel than a standard airplane.

"A lot of people asked what it was because there are only five of this particular design that are flying, and there is only one other one with the retractable landing gear configuration this one has," Hargin said.

Because it is so rare, Hargin said he plans to keep the airplane, but he has started construction of another one of the same type.

Hargin received his pilot license in 1982 and spent four years in the U.S. Marine Corp. He received his instrument license in 2008, his commercial license in 2009 and his ground instructor license in 2010.

Hargin is working on earning his flight instructor license.

"Being an instructor makes you a much better pilot. A good pilot never stops learning," Hargin said.

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