

The Mystery of the OX-9 (by John F. D. Peterson)

When I was young I used to ride around in the pickup truck with my Dad on Saturday mornings while he checked on his various construction jobs. He was a building contractor working hard to grow his business in 1950's Florida. I will never forget those days in the truck with my Dad, and the stories he told me of his childhood growing up in Wisconsin, and his time in the Army Air Corps during WWII.

One of those stories came to mind about 15 years ago when I began my association with the OX-5 Aviation Pioneers Club during Sun and Fun. I was not a member in those days since the thrill of flying behind an OX-5 was something I did only in my imagination. Nevertheless, in the company of a good friend, Byron Covey, my college roommate, and his son-in-law, Eric, we began to volunteer some time and before long our beloved Wayne Gordon, the President of the OX-5 West Florida Wing, invited us to join...even without the previously required OX-5 time. For the club to prosper, the membership needed to expand. Pretty soon, listening to the Club's old-timers, I began to get a better understanding of the OX-5, and recalled that particular story my Dad had told.

It had to do with a wrecked airplane he remembered as being an "OX-9." This all began in 1938 when Dad was finishing his senior year at Wisconsin Rapids High School. He and a friend, Jimmy Stark, pooled their money and bought the wrecked aircraft from someone at the local airport. The upper wing of the biplane was destroyed as were the outboard portions of the lower wing, but the fuselage and engine appeared to be in pretty good shape. Their plan was to build an ice racer out of the remains, sharpening their design skills in the process. These contraptions were getting popular in those days and were raced during the winter season on frozen lakes and rivers by people who (apparently) had more mechanical aptitude than good sense. Dad and Jimmy had no plans to install a braking system. Who needed that? After all, the goal was to go faster...not slower. Both young men had mechanical aptitude aplenty, and Dad began his freshman year at the University of Wisconsin that fall in Mechanical Engineering. A paper route had earned him enough for the first semester.

For that semester, and two more, he supplemented the savings by washing dishes, caning chairs, and during summer, cutting lawns. By early 1940 though, he was out of money and worked in Wisconsin Rapids to save up some more. But he never returned to the University to finish up his degree. Instead, in September of 1940, he gave his half of the ice racer project to Jimmy and joined the Army Air Corps. Turns out Jimmy joined up shortly thereafter. I recall Dad saying that abandoning that project probably saved their lives.

The curious thing about the story I remembered is that nobody in the OX-5 Aviation Pioneers, even the old-timers, had ever heard of an OX-9. Internet searches proved useless. I despaired, eventually almost giving up on ever discovering a trail leading to the mysterious OX-9. I was convinced that somewhere, in a history book, or even in an obscure aviation museum somewhere, the answer to my OX-9 puzzle awaited discovery.

I don't know what Uncle Sam and World War II had in store for Jimmy Stark after the ice racer project was abandoned. I wish I knew. Dad was ordered to East St. Louis for basic training, then Chanute Field to become an aviation mechanic. He was assigned to the 20th Pursuit

Group eventually becoming a crew chief on a P-40. This outfit was flying submarine patrols in San Francisco during the fall of 1941. A pilot encouraged Dad to take the Cadet Exam which he completed and passed just before the attack on Pearl Harbor. A few weeks later he became part of the first wartime Cadet Class at Santa Anna, California, graduating in the spring of '42, and later completed celestial navigation training at Sacramento. There is an interesting story there for another time but I will say that by fall, 1942, he was in St. Joe, Missouri, crew training in B-25s as preparation for an assignment in the ATC (Air Transport Command).

He survived 96 Atlantic crossings as a celestial navigator in WWII and returned to Wisconsin in the fall of 1946 to resume civilian life. But on New Year's Eve he got a call from his best friend, ATC pilot Dave Putnam, and at his invitation left Wisconsin for Florida the very next morning. There, a few months later, he met and eventually married a young war widow who was to become my mother.

Thus, I eventually began to collect the stories of flying spun by Dad and "Uncle Dave" as they would sometimes reminisce about their time together in the ATC. Now many years later I realize I wouldn't even be here if Uncle Dave had not invited Dad to Florida for what at the time was planned to be a two-week vacation. I also imagine I might not be here if that ice racer project had worked out.

This year at Sun N Fun, at the OX-5 clubhouse one day about mid-week, I overheard a conversation about a WACO 9 restoration going on at a club member's hangar. Its OX-5 engine is being rebuilt as well, so a truly genuine aircraft of the 1930's is going to come to life again. It took a day or so of mulling over this conversation, but suddenly, as if Orville came up and hit me on the head with a Curtiss Pusher aileron, it all fell into place. So now, for all you aviators sitting on the edge of your seats, here is the solution to the mystery of the OX-9: My Dad, at an early age, exhibited mild dyslexia, and even in old age sometimes misspelled or mispronounced a word, or otherwise got something a little backwards. The "OX-9" that I heard about as a youngster, was, I do believe, a WACO 9 with an OX-5 on the nose. Thus, Dad's mixing up the airplane and the engine designations resulted in the hybrid name "OX-9." This explains a lot, particularly, why I was never able to find any information in the history books for an aircraft (or engine, for that matter) named the "OX-9."

I was a very fortunate son to have a Dad like mine. He truly was, and always will be, my life's hero. He flew west in 2019, just 5 weeks short of his 101st birthday, but in those last years we still enjoyed each other's company, and I still loved hearing the familiar details of his lifetime of adventure. Since becoming a club member though, I wish I had a nickel for every time I asked, "Dad, are you sure it wasn't an OX-5?"

John F. D. Peterson
OX-5 Member 23212, West Florida Wing
EAA Member 47427, Chapter 244